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## The Forum

# How Trump Drove Coverage to the Nomination: Hybrid Media Campaigning

CHRIS WELLS, DHAVAN V. SHAH, JON C. PEVEHOUSE,  
JUNGHWAN YANG, AYELETT PELLÉD, FREDERICK BOEHM,  
JOSEPHINE LUKITO, SHREENITA GHOSH, and JESSICA L.  
SCHMIDT

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Writing in summer 2016 about Donald Trump and political communication is a fraught task. One is tempted to proclaim something dramatic: the end of an era, the beginning of one, or some kind of apotheosis. But we argue that this is not necessary in the pages of *Political Communication*: Our field can take genuine pride in having recognized several elements of the media system that contributed to Trump’s rise.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, we would like to trace these strands before offering an analysis of the factors driving news attention to Trump during the pre-primary and primary period.

Blumler and Kavanagh’s assertion of a “third age” of political communication (1999) certainly wears well on application to Trump. He embodies the inversion of the modern-era distinction between politics and entertainment (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), transforming notoriety, a brand name, and pop-culture persona into populist hero (Scammell, 2014). Trump’s instincts were honed not in the bush leagues of a political party, but by decades in the public eye, meticulously drawing media attention from tabloid journalism (Fisher & Hobson, 2016) and reality television (Franko, 2006). His primary campaign fused the celebrity culture imperatives of “mediation, visibility, and attention” (Marwick, 2013, p. 14) with

Chris Wells is Associate Professor in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication, Dhavan V. Shah is Louis A. & Mary E. Maier-Bascom Professor in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication and the Departments of Industrial and Systems Engineering, Jon C. Pevehouse is Vilas Distinguished Achievement Professor in the Department of Political Science, JungHwan Yang is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication, Ayellet Pelled is a Ph.D. student in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication, Frederick Boehm is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Statistics, Josephine Lukito is a Ph.D. student in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication, Shreenita Ghosh is a Ph.D. student in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication, and Jessica L. Schmidt is a Masters student in the School of Journalism & Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Address correspondence to Chris Wells, School of Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Wisconsin–Madison, 821 University Avenue, 5th Floor, Madison, WI 53706, USA. E-mail: [cfwells@wisc.edu](mailto:cfwells@wisc.edu)

vernacular renditions of contemporary anxieties over economics, immigration, terrorism, global politics, social fragmentation, and White working-class stagnation (Cramer, 2016).

Running against the third age framework and all recent presidential campaigns, Trump eschewed professionalization in nearly all aspects of his apparatus, from message crafting to data management; instead, he favored courting controversy through provocative pronouncements, attributed comments, distorted facts, and an off-the-cuff (“politically incorrect”) speaking style. These strategies cultivated the impression of bare-knuckle authenticity—“a blue-collar billionaire”—that communication scholars have long argued is lacking in modern politics, and appeals to disaffected voters (Gurevitch, Coleman, & Blumler, 2009).

Above all, Trump proved himself uniquely able to satisfy the imperative of “dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle... and repeatedly re-entering it, with stories and initiatives so that subsequent news coverage is set on your terms” (Gould, 1998, p. 294, in Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999). The news media’s self-reflection on its role in Trump’s electoral success has only just begun (see Rosen, 2016). Patterson (2016) contends that the voluminous, and largely non-negative, media attention Trump attracted early in his campaign could only be justified by soft news values (e.g., name recognition and web traffic) since his poll standing was still relatively weak.

In the weeks that followed, to journalists’ surprise, the conflagration of Trump turned out to be not only resistant to the bright light of publicity but burned all the hotter for it. Decades of falling public confidence in the press and the low regard in which the populist right holds it (Ladd, 2011; Lee, 2010; Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014) surely played some part in protecting Trump against criticism: For Trump’s publics, critique in the news was a badge of honor, support for their dissociation from the version of reality presented in mainstream news (Hwang, Schmierbach, Paek, Gil de Zuniga, & Shah, 2006). In addition, Trump made himself more available to the press than his key rivals, staging rallies, hosting press conferences, accepting interview requests, and calling into news programs and talk radio with considerable frequency (Borchers, 2016). And Trump stories proved to be fertile sources of clicks, the new metrics guiding news production (Karpf, 2016). Thus, despite increasingly negative coverage, he generated an estimated \$2 billion in “earned media” over the first nine months of his campaign (Confessore & Yourish, 2016; Stein, 2016).

Trump also embraced social media, a tool that proved a powerful counterpart to press attention. Even before declaring his candidacy, Trump was an avid Twitter user with a following that dwarfed all other candidates except Hillary Clinton, whom he has since eclipsed (Tsur, Ognyanova, & Lazer, 2016). In his hands, unfiltered by campaign managers, Twitter became “a tool of political promotion, distraction, score-settling and attack” (Barbaro, 2015). Many of his most incendiary remarks were given voice or channeled through his account, to a cadre of followers who vocally amplified and defended him online (Confessore, 2016; Shah, Culver, Hanna, Macafee, & Yang, 2015). This constant churn meant that something about Trump was regularly trending, offering countless hooks for journalists trolling for stories (Broersma & Graham, 2012).

This illustrates Trump’s strength in the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013): He inserts himself into the conventional media through classic public relations tactics—notably the information subsidies (Gandy, 1982) of rallies, press conferences, interviews and a Trump specialty, uninvited call-ins to radio and television programs; but he also unleashes “tweetstorms” that encourage supporters to extend his narratives and create *new* stories about what is happening in social media. Though challenging to disentangle

empirically, our data suggest that Trump's hybrid media campaigning was successful, as each of these processes independently contributed to Trump's prominence in the pre-primary and primary news cycles.

To explore these issues, we built a longitudinal data set of the period of the Republican nomination campaign, from the time Trump announced his candidacy on June 16, 2015, to the date that his last opponent, John Kasich, left the race, on May 4, 2016. For every day of that campaign, we coded for the presence of, or created counts of, the following:

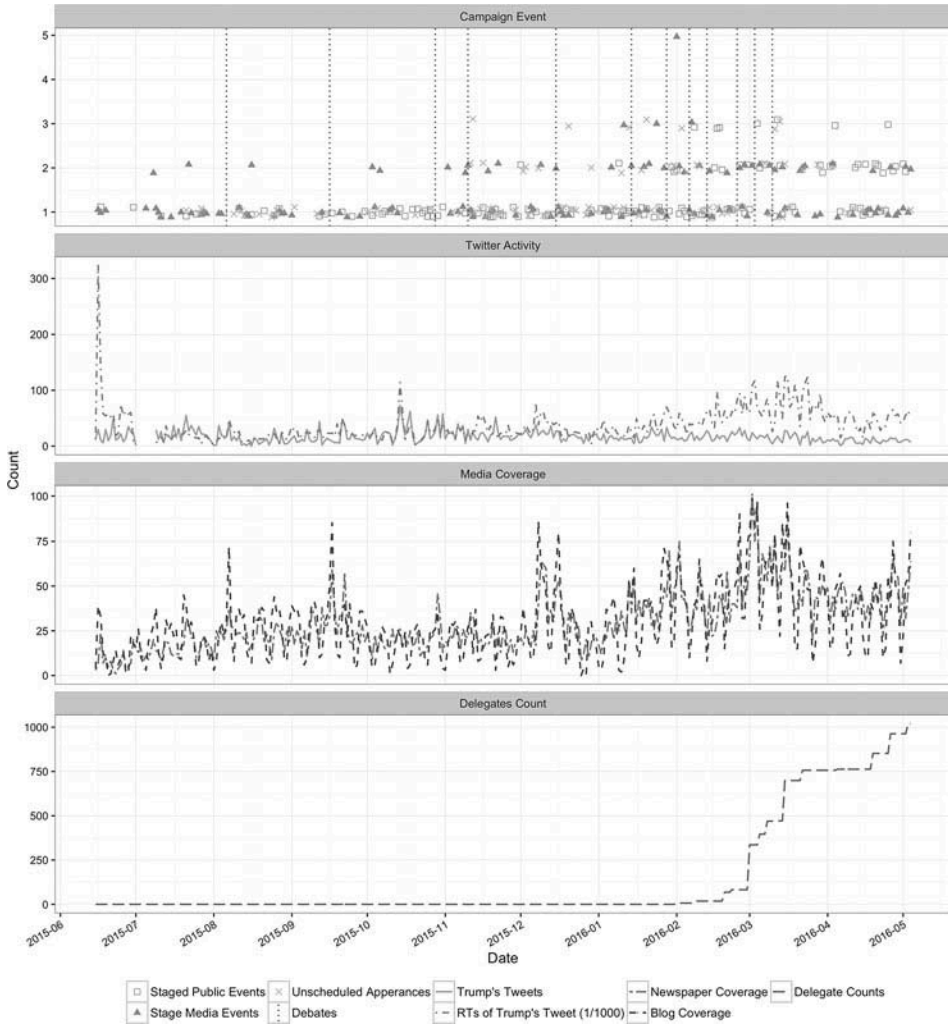
- Republican primary debates
- Staged public events (i.e., campaign rallies and town-hall meetings)
- Staged media events (i.e., press conferences and scheduled interviews)
- Unscheduled media appearances (e.g., call-ins to radio and television shows)
- Trump's own tweets, including his retweets of others' posts
- A 1% sample of retweets of Trump's posts, @mentions of his handle, and any mentions of the word "Trump," all accessed from an archive of Twitter's Streaming application programming interface (API)
- News stories mentioning Trump at least twice in the Associated Press, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post*, drawn from LexisNexis
- Posts mentioning Trump at least twice on *New York Times* and *Washington Post* blogs, drawn from LexisNexis
- Trump's delegate count, states won, and withdrawn primary candidates

Full details on the collection, coding, and validation of these data are contained in an online appendix (<http://www.journalism.wisc.edu/~dshah/PC2016-Trump.pdf>).

Analysis of these data advanced in three stages: First, we visualized our data and examined bivariate correlations among our core variables. Two sets of issues were immediately discovered: (a) Delegate count, states won, and withdrawn primary opponents were highly collinear, with a mean inter-item correlation of .89; given the more precise nature of the measure, we retained delegate count in our analysis; (a) retweets of Trump's posts, @mentions of his handle, and any mentions of the word "Trump," were also highly collinear, with a mean inter-item correlation of .86; given our interest in the amplification of Trump's message by his followers, we retained the retweet count in our analysis.

We visualize the data retained for modeling in Figure 1. The top panel plots campaign events, including staged public events, staged media events, unscheduled appearances, and Republican primary debates. The second panel features Twitter activity, both the volume of Trump's tweets and his followers' retweets of these messages (scaled at 1/1000). The third panel charts the volume of news articles and blog posts. The final panel plots the delegate count for Trump.

Prior to running our focal analysis, we ran a series of Granger causality tests among core variables to better understand how to structure our models. While accounting for debate dates, the count of public events, media events, and unscheduled appearances by Trump (as exogenous covariates), we examined four key variables along a three-day lag: Trump's tweets, retweets of Trump's posts, newspaper stories, and blog posts. We found that none of the factors predicted Trump's own Twitter volume, suggesting it is truly exogenous. Trump's tweet count did predict the volume of Trump retweets (not surprising given that the former is a necessary condition for the latter). More important, lagged counts of news stories and blog posts did not predict retweeting of Trump's posts, while both forms of news production were explained by lagged retweet volume—suggesting that his followers' vocal support indeed drew media attention. Furthermore, lagged counts of



**Figure 1.** Visualization of key variables between June 16, 2015, and May 4, 2016.

news stories did predict blog posts, and vice versa, indicating a reciprocal relationship among these different journalistic outlets.

Based on these results, we estimated time-series regression models (using Prais-Winsten estimation) that account for the autocorrelated nature of these data (see Wells et al., 2016, for similar analysis). We predicted both news story and blog post count on a concurrent basis and with a one-day lag, distinguishing between the pre-primary period (June 16, 2015–January 31, 2016) and the primary period (February 1, 2016–May 4, 2016). All eight regression models are presented in Table 1.

The results indicate that retweets of Trump’s posts are a significant positive predictor of news stories and blog posts in six of eight tests. Trump’s tweet volume is a negative predictor of concurrent news coverage in two of four tests, which may imply that he unleashes “tweet-storms” when his coverage is low. Staged media events predict concurrent news story

**Table 1**

Concurrent and lagged time series regression models predicting Trump coverage during the pre-primary and primary periods—Prais-Winsten estimation

	Trump Pre-primary Coverage		Trump Primary Coverage	
	<i>News Stories</i>	<i>News Stories<sub>t+1</sub></i>	<i>News Stories</i>	<i>News Stories<sub>t+1</sub></i>
Retweets of Trump	-0.00166 (0.00264)	0.00675*** (0.00235)	0.0309*** (0.00949)	0.0181* (0.00941)
Trump Tweets	0.0272 (0.0514)	0.00540 (0.0458)	-0.953*** (0.342)	-0.116 (0.342)
Staged Public Events	-0.703 (1.089)	3.910*** (0.969)	-1.796 (1.500)	-0.771 (1.490)
Staged Media Events	3.183*** (0.862)	-2.084*** (0.768)	2.919** (1.464)	1.738 (1.472)
Unscheduled Appearances	1.824** (0.876)	1.530* (0.780)	0.662 (1.693)	1.034 (1.698)
Debate	-8.399*** (3.056)	22.40*** (2.721)	-13.54** (6.029)	21.53*** (6.002)
Delegate Count			-0.00672 (0.00717)	0.00580 (0.00699)
Constant	21.93*** (2.031)	19.92*** (1.807)	45.39*** (6.384)	33.33*** (6.277)
R-squared	0.086	0.282	0.215	0.262

*(Continued)*

**Table 1**  
(Continued)

	Trump Pre-primary Coverage		Trump Primary Coverage	
	<i>Blog Posts</i>	<i>Blog Posts<sub>t+1</sub></i>	<i>Blog Posts</i>	<i>Blog Posts<sub>t+1</sub></i>
Retweets of Trump	0.00906** (0.00410)	0.00318 (0.00371)	0.0376*** (0.0139)	0.0265* (0.0138)
Trump Tweets	-0.0431 (0.0810)	-0.0202 (0.0730)	-1.342*** (0.497)	-0.567 (0.490)
Staged Public Events	2.342 (1.717)	0.799 (1.548)	3.168 (2.176)	-3.705* (2.117)
Staged Media Events	0.105 (1.362)	1.818 (1.228)	2.983 (2.125)	4.349** (2.093)
Unscheduled Appearances	2.253 (1.382)	3.613*** (1.246)	1.078 (2.447)	3.805 (2.392)
Debate	0.940 (4.876)	30.39*** (4.387)	-11.56 (8.716)	24.87*** (8.446)
Delegate Count			-0.0159 (0.0107)	-0.00264 (0.0109)
Constant	20.22*** (2.631)	20.48*** (2.427)	44.48*** (9.401)	36.51*** (9.343)
R-squared	0.042	0.226	0.188	0.234
Observations	224	224	94	93

Note. Standard errors in parentheses.  
\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ . \*\*  $p < 0.05$ . \*  $p < 0.1$ .

coverage during both the pre-primary and primary periods, but have less sway on blog posts. Trump's unscheduled media appearances also drove coverage, but only during the pre-primary period, yielding significant relationships in three of four tests. Notably, Trump generated considerable coverage on days following debates, especially when contrasted against his coverage leading up to the events. Equally important, in the primary period, Trump's delegate count does not explain his coverage, suggesting his attention was not a function of his electoral success. Overall, this shows Trump's efforts to court media attention, through staged events, unscheduled interactions, *and* social media activity, were largely successful.

This sketch of the data does not allow us the space to explore these results more deeply, or to consider whether these patterns are driven by certain kinds of Trump tweets, specific utterances during media events, or particular outlets favored for unscheduled appearances. Nor does it consider what his opponents were doing, the nature of the coverage Trump generated, or even whether his campaign or his Twitter activity was the focus of the coverage. Our future work will examine these questions, along with the role of public opinion and broadcast media in these dynamics, and differences between media in their attention to Trump's candidacy. What we can say with some certainty, and without being overly dramatic, is that Trump's use of conventional information subsidies in the form of press conferences and scheduled interviews and his triggering of social media activity in the form of retweets of his messages, were key factors in explaining his coverage in leading print news outlets and online blog posts at legacy media. His mastery of conventional and digital media—hybrid campaigning—helped drive his coverage to the nomination. Journalists should reflect on what prompts their attention to Trump as we head into the general election and beyond.

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## Note

1. This is easiest retrospectively, of course.

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