

May the Best Tweeter Win: The *Twitter* Strategies of Key Campaign Accounts in the 2012 US Election

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Introduction

The increasingly widespread use of *Twitter* as a medium for political announcements and commentary has accompanied social media's integration into election campaigns, as candidates, political parties, advocacy groups, and voters alike publish their thoughts and interact around electoral issues. The growing presence of social media within such campaigns is a global trend, and visible within national, regional, local, and international elections as Websites such as *Twitter* are adopted as additional campaigning tools.

Studies of the role of *Twitter* within election campaigns around the world have investigated different aspects of social media's place within election campaigns, including the use of *Twitter* by candidates and political parties (Bruns & Highfield, 2013; Christensen, 2013; Graham, Broersma, Hazelhoff, & van 't Haar, 2013), election coverage around particular events, such as debates (Elmer, 2013), and election coverage based on one or more key hashtags or keywords (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Dang-Xuan, Stieglitz, Wladarsch, & Neuberger, 2013; Larsson & Moe, 2012). In this study, the use of *Twitter* by candidates is of particular interest. Research into the tweeting strategies of candidates has found a number of different approaches employed, and general variations on a national level. Broersma and Graham (2012), for example, compared Dutch and British politicians and candidates on *Twitter*, finding that while British accounts tended towards treating *Twitter* as a broadcast medium – sharing messages without responding to others – their Dutch counterparts were more likely to interact with other *Twitter* users. Similarly, during the 2012 election in the Australian state of Queensland, the two major parties employed different approaches to *Twitter*, from widespread interactions with other users and engaging with opposition candidates, to broadcasting announcements and conversing with fellow party members (Bruns & Highfield, 2013). However, it should be noted that even among these different national examples, individual politicians might employ their own approaches, whether broadcasting, interacting, or using an alternative strategy, and other factors will have some bearing on tweeting, including the electoral context of each campaign, the parties involved, and the candidate's previous use of *Twitter* and other social media platforms.

In the US, the 2012 presidential election marked *Twitter*'s first use as a mainstream electoral campaigning tool. Although an active social media platform in 2008, used for live coverage of key events, including debates (Carpenter, 2010), candidates did not employ it to the same extent as social networking sites such as *MySpace* or *Facebook* (compare Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2012; Smith & Rainie, 2008). As Karpf (2012) notes, though, the Internet for each election is different, due to the development of new functionalities, accessibility, platforms, and uses; the moniker of the first 'Internet election' has followed previous campaigns, from the 2004 presidential election, which saw Howard Dean's online fundraising (Hindman, 2009; Meraz,

2007) and the rise of the political blogosphere (Adamic & Glance, 2005), to 2008 and the Obama campaign's adoption of Websites such as *Facebook* and *YouTube*, drawing on online social networks to spread messages and attract donations (Perlmutter, 2008; Smith & Rainie, 2008; Vaccari, 2010).

In this study, we focus on the accounts belonging to, and associated with, the Democrat and Republican presidential candidates; while U.S. politics is dominated by these two parties, such that the winning candidate will either be Republican or Democrat, third-party candidates do still contest the election, and the use of *Twitter* by four of these candidates within the 2012 campaign is studied by Christensen (2013). Our analysis of the main Obama and Romney accounts provides new information into how the major candidates and their campaigns use social media, taking in their styles of tweeting, interactions or acknowledgement of their opposition, links to other sources and content, and the use of promotion tweets for campaign advertising. The analysis of these tweeting strategies also allows us to identify which approaches may be most successful, in terms of effective use of social media, in future campaigns.

Methodology

This study utilises the open source *Twitter* tracking tool *yourTwrapperkeeper* (2013), which connects to the *Twitter* API to track specific keywords or hashtags as selected by its operator (see Bruns & Liang, 2012 for more details). In *yourTwrapperkeeper*, it is possible to use the *Twitter* handles of known accounts as search terms, resulting in datasets which contain all tweets from as well as referring to those users; since a *Twitter* API change in the first half of 2012, this also includes retweets of these users' messages which were made using *Twitter*'s 'retweet button', as well as @mentions and manual retweets. For the purposes of the present study, we tracked a number of accounts belonging to the Democrat and Republican presidential campaigns in the 2012 US election; these included the accounts of the presidential and vice-presidential candidates (@BarackObama, @MittRomney, @JoeBiden, and @PaulRyanVP) as well as the central campaign accounts (@Obama2012 and @TeamRomney).¹

This approach introduces a number of unavoidable limitations which must be noted here. In the absence of the substantial funding required to access the full *Twitter* 'firehose' of all tweets, our *yourTwrapperkeeper* installation connected to the standard, free *Twitter* streaming API; data delivery through this API is mandatorily throttled to a maximum of one per cent of the total current throughput of tweets being made globally (Morstatter, Pfeffer, Liu, & Carley, 2013; Twitter, 2012). For our study, which deals with a significant global event which would have generated a substantial number of tweets especially at key moments during the campaign (such as the televised debates or election night itself), this means that our dataset will be incomplete especially during such moments of heightened activity; further, there is no reliable information available which would identify how many tweets we may have missed. However, such throttling is likely to occur only at the key moments of the campaign, while the central focus of this chapter is to examine the overall strategies of tweeting activity by the campaign accounts, and the resonance these activities had amongst *Twitter* users. Further, this throttling is systematic and indiscriminate, thus affecting all accounts tracked by this study to equal extent; while the exact volume of tweets we captured will be less than that which may have been observed by users at the time, the overall patterns in activity and the relative differences in tweeting style between the accounts will have remained the same. Importantly, such limitations are not specific to our study: they apply to most *Twitter* research projects, the vast majority of which similarly draw on the open *Twitter* API without being able to afford paid access to the firehose. Further, in addition to this systematic limitation, our server underwent maintenance during 11 and 12 October 2012, meaning that only a fraction of relevant tweets were captured during that timeframe.

Using a range of methods and metrics described by Bruns and Stieglitz (2013a, 2013b), we processed these datasets, in the first place to distinguish between the tweeting activities of the campaign accounts and the

¹ At the time of the election, the @BarackObama account was still run by Obama's campaign staff; however, in January 2013 the account and other campaign-related Web-based material were handed over to the non-profit group Organizing for Action, although the account still appeared as @BarackObama (Bump, 2013).

references (including @mentions and manual as well as button retweets) received by these accounts. Such activities can be divided into a number of subsets, in the first place by distinguishing types of tweets (original tweets which are neither @mention nor retweet; as well as genuine @mentions and retweets); from the metadata provided by the *Twitter* API, we are also able to determine the facility through which tweets were sent (such as the standard *Twitter* Web interface, third-party clients, or the ‘promoted tweets’ advertising scheme provided by Twitter, Inc.). Further, we are able to extract the *Twitter* accounts mentioned as well as the URLs referenced in tweets, in order to establish for each of the campaign accounts the network of other users it engages with, and the range of information sources it most frequently refers to.

Analysis

In the present article, we focus on the final two months of the long 2012 primary and presidential campaign cycle: we examine a period from 9 September to 11 November 2012 – that is, from just after the Democratic National Convention on 3-6 September which nominated President Obama as the Democrats’ candidate (the Republican National Convention had taken place earlier, on 27-30 August) to just after election day on 6 November 2012. (In the analysis below, all dates and times are taken to be US Eastern Time.)

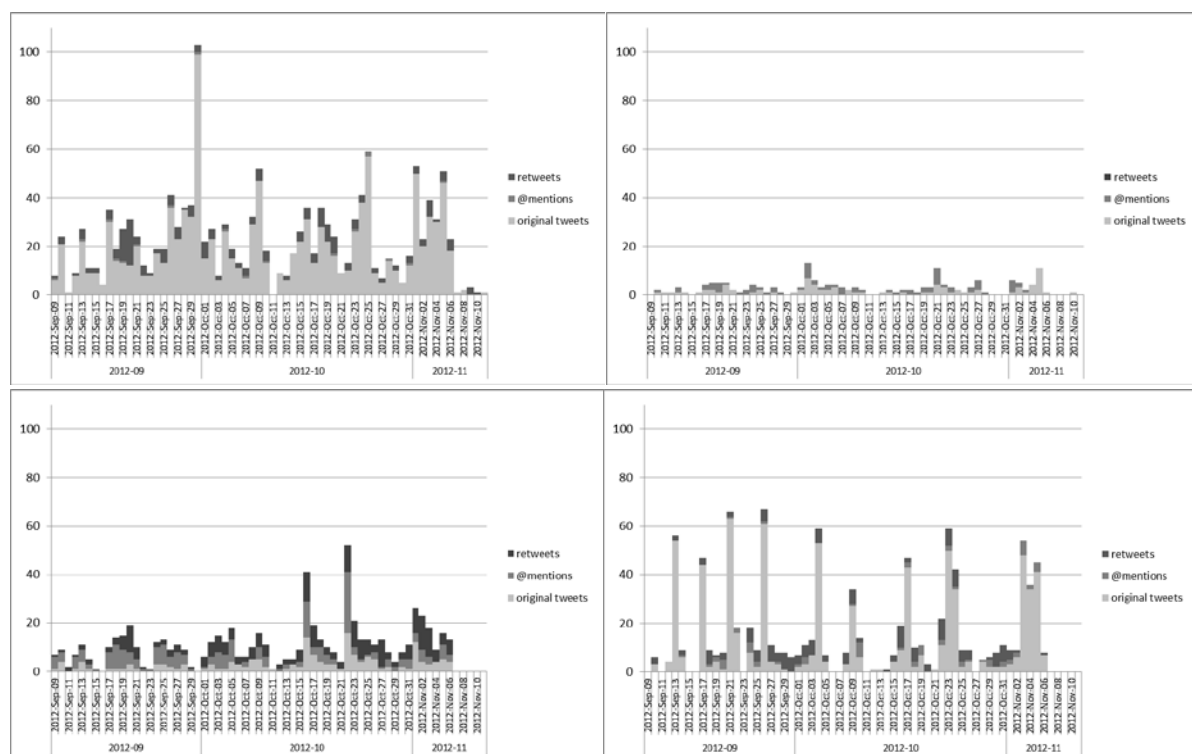


Fig. 1: tweets by key accounts: @BarackObama (top left), @MittRomney (top right), @Obama2012 (bottom left), @TeamRomney (bottom right)

In the first place, it is useful to establish the overall activity patterns of the four key campaign accounts. Fig. 1 compares the tweeting activities by @BarackObama, @MittRomney, @Obama2012, and @TeamRomney, and breaks down their tweets into original tweets, @mentions, and retweets. From this comparison, it is immediately obvious that the four key accounts adopted some very different strategies for their activities, with the overall volume of tweeting as well as the moments of greatest activity differing considerably. The difference between @BarackObama and @MittRomney is especially striking: Obama and his media team sent some 1421 tweets over the two months covered here, while Romney managed only 166 during the same timeframe. The campaign accounts are more closely matched: we captured 944 @Obama2012 tweets, compared to 661 tweets from @TeamRomney.

These differing levels of activity clearly reflect the different positioning of *Twitter* as a campaigning tool, an observation which we will return to repeatedly during the further analysis which follows. The highly limited activity of Romney’s ‘personal’ account is especially striking in this context: while the @BarackObama account was used very intensively to portray a specific, electorally attractive persona, his challenger used his *Twitter* account in a very different fashion. This is also evident from an analysis of the other *Twitter* users referenced in @mentions and retweets by these accounts, as fig. 2 demonstrates.

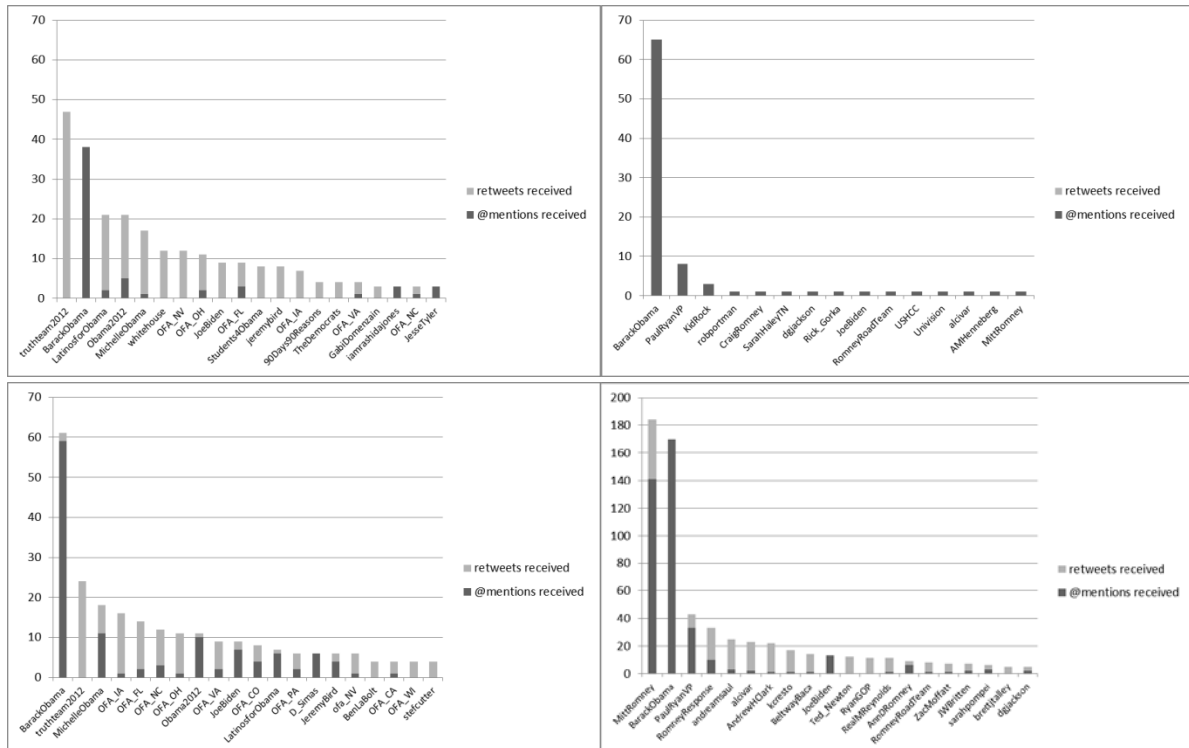


Fig. 2: users referred to in tweets by the key accounts: @BarackObama (top left), @MittRomney (top right), @Obama2012 (bottom left), @TeamRomney (bottom right). Note the use of a different vertical scale for @TeamRomney due to its extensive @mentioning of @MittRomney and @BarackObama.

Both the @BarackObama and the @Obama2012 account mainly reference ‘friendly’ *Twitter* users in their tweets – focussing especially on the other *Twitter* accounts operated by the larger Obama campaign machine, such as @truthteam2012, @LatinosforObama, or the First Lady’s @MichelleObama account. Also prominent are the various state-based accounts of the Obama for America (OFA) campaign organisation, such as @OFA_NV (Nevada) or @OFA_IA (Indiana) – and it is notable that the four states with the closest margins between the two presidential contenders (Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia) are represented amongst the most @referenced state organisations for both @BarackObama and @Obama2012.

While the majority of references to other accounts take the form of retweets, both accounts also frequently @mention each other, and themselves (notably, @BarackObama is the second most prominent account referred to in tweets by the @BarackObama account). Such self-reflexive @mentioning is due to the accounts’ common practice of retweeting messages by celebrities and other key *Twitter* users which @mention them, as in @BarackObama’s 14 September retweet of Olympic champion Michael Phelps’s tweet:

RT @MichaelPhelps: Thank you to Mr. President @BarackObama for having us all at the #whitehouse today!!!

Such retweeting, especially by the @BarackObama account, also results in a comparatively wide range of other accounts being referenced: over the course of the two months, the tweets captured from @BarackObama referred to a total of 89 unique users; @Obama2012 references 28 other users.

The Romney campaign's focus is markedly different from these patterns. @mentions made by the @MittRomney account are almost entirely fixated on @BarackObama, with 65 of the 88 total @mentions we recorded referring to the President's account – including statements such as the 17 October tweet:

.@BarackObama's policies have exploded the debt & another term will only bring more of the same.²

Romney running mate Paul Ryan, using the somewhat presumptive *Twitter* handle @PaulRyanVP, is a distant second, followed perhaps unexpectedly by musician @KidRock, who was a prominent supporter of the Romney/Ryan campaign. In total, the @MittRomney account @mentioned only 15 unique users during our two-month timeframe. Also notable in this context is that our dataset does not contain a single *retweet* made by the @MittRomney account – not even of messages posted by the other Romney/Ryan campaign accounts: Romney and his personal media team concentrated exclusively on posting original messages and @replies (or for the most part, @mentions of other users, such as those of @BarackObama, without seeking to engage in a genuine conversation with them).

The @TeamRomney account, on the other hand, shows the most active referencing patterns of the four key accounts examined here, driven largely by its intensive retweeting and @mentioning of @MittRomney (183 @mentions) and its almost equally active @mentioning of @BarackObama (170 @mentions), a trait which it shares with Romney's 'personal' account. Conversely, the @TeamRomney account also engaged in the widespread retweeting of messages which expressed sentiments of support for the Romney/Ryan campaign; as a result, it @mentions the widest range of unique users amongst the four campaign accounts studied here, referring to 177 different *Twitter* accounts in total.

² Note that the '@user' syntax at the beginning of the tweet is used to ensure that the message is visible to all *Twitter* users; tweets starting with '@user' can be seen only by other *Twitter* users who follow both the sender and receiver of the @mention. The Romney campaign's knowledge of this difference, which many ordinary users may be unaware of, points to a certain sophistication in its use of the platform.

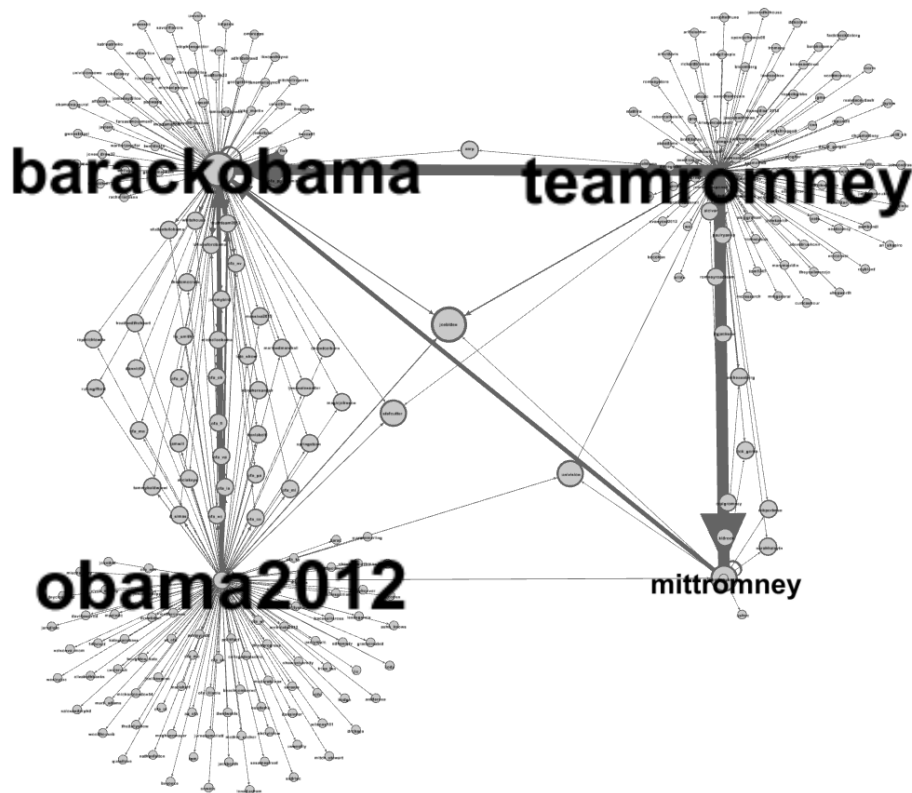


Fig. 3: Overlap in @mentioned and retweeted users between the four key campaign accounts

Fig. 3 illustrates these referencing patterns of the four accounts in the form of a network graph. It shows the significant interactions between the two Obama/Biden and the two Romney/Ryan accounts, respectively, and the considerable unreciprocated @mentioning activity which is directed by the Romney/Ryan accounts at the Obama/Biden accounts. The two accounts on either side of politics also reference a substantial circle of other *Twitter* users (mainly in the form of retweets, as we have seen), but while there is significant overlap in the accounts referenced by the Obama and the Romney campaign accounts, respectively, there are very few accounts which are referenced by *both* Democrat *and* Republican accounts. The four accounts which are referred to by at least one account from both sides are those of Vice President @JoeBiden, of Obama 2012 Deputy Campaign Manager Stephanie Cutter (@stefcutter), of Hispanic media company @Univision, and of the American Association of Retired Persons @AARP – the latter two also demonstrating the perceived importance of those groups in the wider electorate to the overall success of the political campaigns.

Our observations so far reveal some markedly different tweeting strategies amongst the four accounts we examine here. @BarackObama and @Obama2012 choose to engage almost solely with their own supporters in their messages, and virtually ignore the existence of the *Twitter* accounts operated by the opposing campaign; @Obama2012 @mentions the @MittRomney account a total of four times. In addition to the original campaign messages spread through these accounts, they largely restrict themselves to retweeting the friendly messages sent by their prominent supporters. @MittRomney and @TeamRomney, on the other hand, pursue different and diverging strategies: while both choose to directly @mention @BarackObama (and, to a considerably lesser extent, other Obama/Biden campaign accounts such as @JoeBiden), Romney's personal account is focussing its @mentions almost entirely on taking the fight to his opponent; however, the @TeamRomney account mixes such combative @mentioning with retweets of supporters' messages.

The different electoral positioning of the two campaigns might explain these differences. The benefits of incumbency, and a somewhat more comfortable position in most opinion polling, mean that the Obama campaign could perhaps afford to adopt a more sanguine approach which focussed largely on its own achievements and spoke to existing supporters, without engaging too directly with the opponent; by contrast, Romney’s role as challenger and electoral underdog may have meant that he had to adopt a more aggressive stance towards the President and his campaign organisation. One danger in Romney’s choice is also that the frequent @mentioning of @BarackObama and other Obama campaign accounts would have made it easier for *Twitter* users to click through to the activity streams of such accounts, thereby encountering directly the messages put out by the Obama campaign; however, given the already well-established prominence especially of Obama’s ‘personal’ *Twitter* account (which by late March 2013 had accumulated over 29 million followers), this might have been seen as an acceptable risk. By contrast, absent the benefits of incumbency, the Romney campaign’s accounts may have been considerably less well-known to *Twitter* users who were following the election – thus, the Obama campaign’s decision not to @mention any such accounts in its tweets may also have been a conscious decision to deprive them of visibility wherever possible. (We acknowledge at this point that there is a considerable amount of hindsight which flows into such interpretations, however; during the campaign, with the likely election outcome appearing at times much tighter than it turned out to be, such strategy decisions may have been influenced by a much more complex range of factors.)

The strategic communicative choices made by either campaign organisation may also be observed by examining the range of Websites they referred to in their tweets; table 1 compares the top link targets referenced by the four key accounts. Here, however, we must also acknowledge a common problem with research into *Twitter* links, related to the ephemerality of *Twitter*-based communication: a substantial number of the links provided in tweets by the campaign accounts could no longer be resolved to their eventual targets. This is especially pronounced for the accounts operated by the Romney/Ryan campaign, which decommissioned its custom URL shortener *mi.tt* at some point between election night on 6 November 2012 and our processing of these data in late March 2013. From a qualitative examination of the tweets in which *mi.tt* short URLs were included, we can assume that the majority of these links would have pointed to articles on the official Romney/Ryan campaign site(s); however, it is impossible at this point to say so with complete certainty. For the Obama/Biden campaign accounts, a range of links using the mandatory *Twitter*, Inc.-provided URL shortener *t.co* could similarly not be resolved.

@BarackObama		@Obama2012		@MittRomney		@TeamRomney	
site	tw.	site	tw.	site	tw.	site	tw.
www.barackobama.com	281	www.barackobama.com	131	mi.tt	113	mi.tt	341
register.barackobama.com	216	twitter.com	105	twitter.com	3	romneyresponse.tumblr.com	29
www.youtube.com	183	www.youtube.com	52	debates.mittromney.com	3	www.tout.com	25
twitter.com	168	t.co	31	www.youtube.com	2	www.mittromney.com	19
t.co	59	instagr.am	19	t.co	1	www.youtube.com	19
contribute.barackobama.com	30	my.barackobama.com	12	mittromney.com	1	twitter.com	16
my.barackobama.com	23	twitpic.com	8			www.gop.com	6
instagr.am	14	dashboard.barackobama.com	6			twitpic.com	6
vote.barackobama.com	12	www.washingtonpost.com	4			Debates.MittRomney.com	5
go.barackobama.com	6	vote.barackobama.com	4			t.co	5

Table 1: top 10 link destinations for the four campaign accounts

However, table 1 nonetheless demonstrates the considerable reliance of both campaigns on their own sites and materials. The Obama campaign references a range of destination in its *barackobama.com* campaigning ecosystem, especially including sites designed to encourage supporters to register for campaign updates, to make financial donations, and to vote in the election itself. Also notable is its considerable use of audio-visual

materials: the third most referenced site for both @BarackObama and @Obama2012 is *YouTube*, used to host advertising videos and related materials, while the *Twitter.com* references in this table largely link to campaign snapshots posted through *Twitter* and other photo-sharing services such as *Instagram* and *Twitpic* are also used extensively. Other external sites barely appear in the list of URLs referenced by the Obama campaign; the *Washington Post* is referenced four times by @Obama2012, and other news sites also receive a small handful of mentions. This is likely to reveal a desire for the greatest possible message control: rather than referencing to news articles on external news Websites (where users critical of the Obama administration may have added negative commentary), the campaign shared positive media coverage, if at all, through its own *barackobama.com* platform where criticism could be more easily controlled.

Assuming, as noted, that the vast majority of *mi.tt* links pointed to sections of the *mittromney.com* Website and other campaign-controlled platforms, this focus on message control is even greater for the Romney/Ryan campaign; here, direct links to *YouTube* videos or *Twitter* images are far more limited. Even the comparatively more active @TeamRomney account posted only 19 direct links to *YouTube* and 16 direct links to *Twitter* images, representing almost exactly one tenth of @BarackObama's activity on these sites. By contrast, more interesting (but still limited in total volume) are @TeamRomney's use of the more closely managed video hosting service *Tout.com*, and its links to the "RomneyResponse" *Tumblr* site (contained mainly in retweets of a dedicated @RomneyResponse account's messages), which in turn hosted a variety of pro-Romney *YouTube* videos. This preference for links to video wrapper sites appears to indicate a desire to control the context in which *Twitter* users encounter Romney-related *YouTube* videos – on *Tout* or *Tumblr* rather than on *YouTube* itself, potentially out of concern that *YouTube*'s recommendation engine might display Romney-critical content alongside or subsequent to viewing the initial pro-Romney video.

Particularly given the significant disruptions which the Romney campaign faced from unauthorised audio and video coverage of Romney campaign events (most notably, the candidate's infamous "47%" remarks during a private fundraising event, footage of which was widely shared through *YouTube*), such reluctance to use now-standard tools of online campaigning in its own efforts are perhaps understandable; however, if this self-limitation constituted a general strategy (beyond its use of *Twitter* alone), then it may also have negatively affected the potential shareability of Romney/Ryan campaign messages, reducing the effectiveness of the Republican online campaign. The Obama campaign's tweets, by contrast, were clearly and effectively designed to encourage widespread retweeting (and sharing beyond *Twitter* itself) – most notably, perhaps, in the case *Twitter* photos such as the famous "This seat's taken." tweet in response to Clint Eastwood's speech during the Republican National Convention on 30 August (BarackObama, 2012a; more than 62,000 retweets to date) or the "Four more years." victory tweet on election night (BarackObama, 2012b; 810,000 retweets to date)

Finally, the 2012 campaign also marked the first time that *Twitter*'s 'promoted tweets' advertising system – introduced in April 2010 – was available for use in a US presidential election campaign. Our approach to gathering *Twitter* activity data for each campaign account has also enabled us to identify such advertising tweets, which are marked in the metadata as having been posted from a specialised *Twitter* Ads client. As advertisements, such tweets must be treated as different from the regular tweets posted by the campaign accounts: subject to the distribution negotiated between the campaign managers and *Twitter*, Inc., these promoted tweets would have appeared in the *Twitter* feeds of a considerably larger number of users than follow the campaign accounts on a regular basis. Fig. 4 compares the use of advertising tweets across three of the four campaign accounts; the fourth, @TeamRomney, does not appear to have purchased any *Twitter* advertising during the final two months of the campaign.

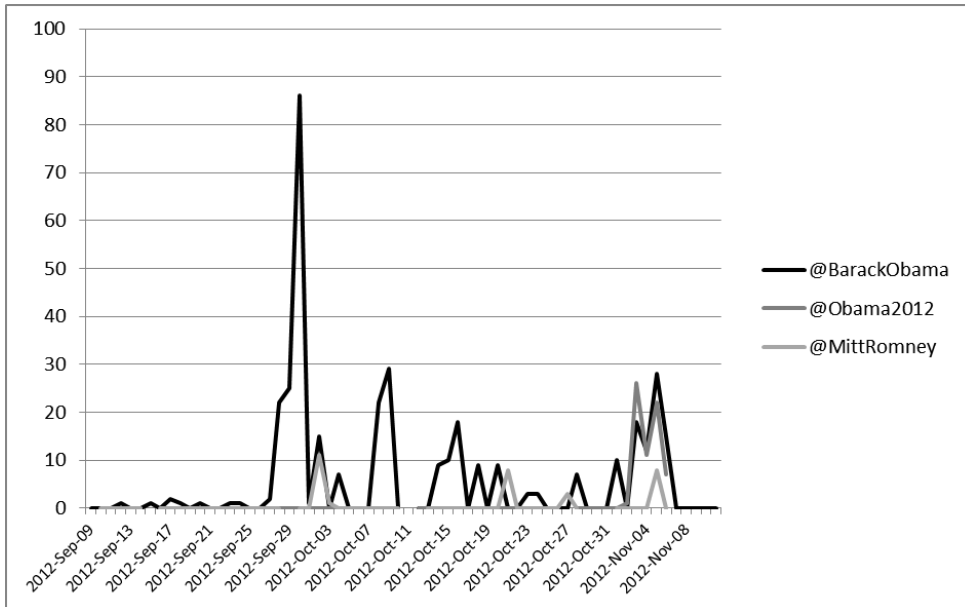


Fig. 4: volume of promoted tweets sent from the campaign accounts per day

Given the substantial funding advantage of the Obama/Biden campaign over its Republican challengers (Federal Election Commission, 2012), it is unsurprising that it would have been able to outspend its rivals on *Twitter* advertising as well. We captured a total of 368 promoted tweets from @BarackObama, and another 67 from @Obama2012, compared to just 31 such tweets from @MittRomney. This is in keeping with the generally more substantial use of *Twitter* by the Obama campaign which we have already documented above.

Advertising activity is distributed across the two months under investigation here, with a period of sustained advertising by all three accounts especially during the final week of the campaign. This time sees the only such advertising activity by @Obama2012, and closely matched advertising from sister account @BarackObama, as well as a more minor spike in advertising by @MittRomney. Earlier during the campaign, advertising is limited almost exclusively to the @BarackObama account, with the majority of such activity taking place in the final days of September ahead of the first presidential debate on 3 October³; the most prominent use of such advertising by @MittRomney also comes on 2 October, on the eve of the first debate. @BarackObama advertising remains broadly linked to the debate schedule, occurring at a lower volume also before the vice-presidential debate on 11 October, the second presidential debate on 16 October, and the third presidential debate on 22 October. The gradual reduction in the volume of such pro-Obama advertising from the significant early peak of 30 September may point to the growing confidence of victory amongst the Obama camp, or could indicate a perception that promoted tweets are an ineffective campaigning tool compared to other advertising media.

Such *Twitter* activity by the leading campaign accounts – whether in the form of advertising or as general tweeting – is ultimately meaningless unless it engages its intended audience, however. Finally, therefore, we examine the resonance of these four accounts amongst the general *Twitter* population. Especially for a global media event such as a US presidential election, it must be acknowledged that such resonance will encompass *Twitter* activities by users who are not eligible to vote in the election itself, of course – and due to the dearth of verifiable account information for *Twitter* users, there is no easy way to separate the *Twitter* responses of US citizens from those of interested onlookers elsewhere in the world. At the same time, there is no immediate reason why international observers should react significantly differently to campaign events compared to their US counterparts; although inflated, therefore, we may consider the resonance we are able to measure in our dataset as a reasonable approximation for the response of US-based *Twitter* users.

³ Late September and early October also saw the start of early and absentee voting in most states.

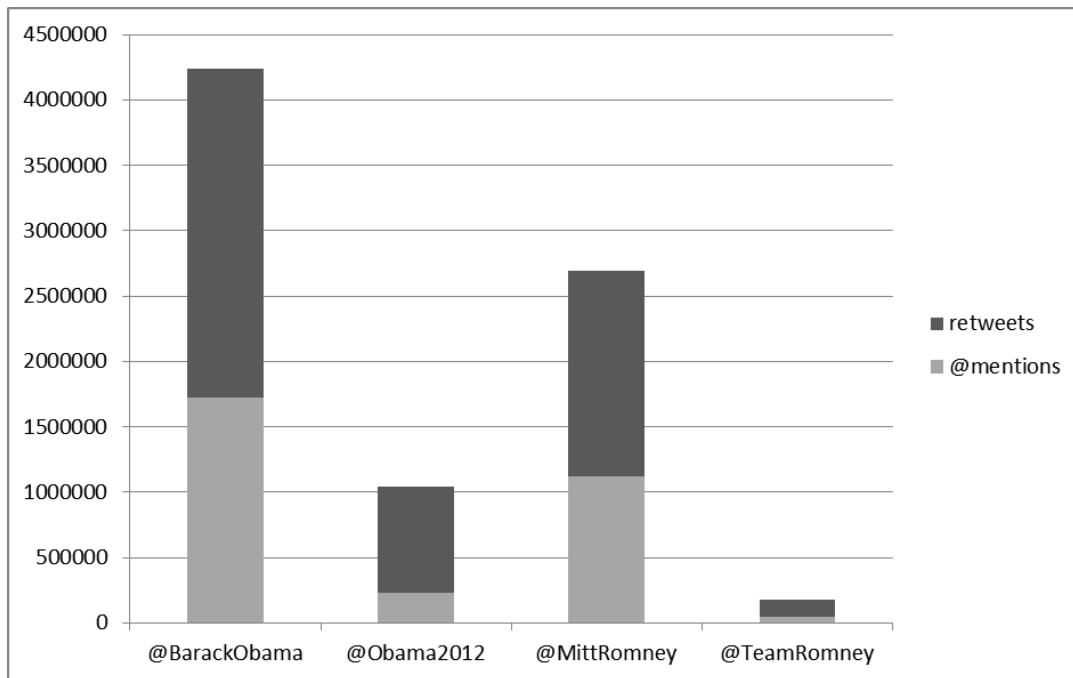


Fig. 5: references to the four key accounts

In the first place, then, it is useful to compare the overall volume of tweets which refer to the *Twitter* usernames of the four accounts during the two months examined here, and to break down that volume into the two possible types of reference: retweets and @mentions.⁴ Fig. 5 indicates both an overall advantage for the Obama campaign accounts, which are referenced substantially more frequently, and shows some systemic patterns in how the two different types of accounts are referenced: the two ‘personal’ accounts, @BarackObama and @MittRomney, both receive significantly more @mentions, while the vast majority of tweets which reference the campaign accounts @Obama2012 and @TeamRomney are retweets of their own messages. This indicates a widespread practice of using the usernames of the two presidential candidates as a substitute to their full names when referring to them in tweets (e.g. “I will vote for @BarackObama” rather than “I will vote for Barack Obama”), without an expectation that the candidate thus @mentioned will respond to the tweet – in other words, such references are @mentions rather than @replies in the narrow sense of the term. Such @mentions are less useful, and less common, for the campaign accounts because in a presidential system such as that of the US the campaigns are inherently less talked about than the candidates for president.

At the same time, this also means that the total volume of references to the four accounts is a poor indicator of resonance for their campaign activities; it is likely that the two ‘personal’ accounts, in particular, would be referred to with great frequency even in the absence of significant activity by the accounts themselves. A concentration on retweets of messages posted by these accounts provides a better indication of actual resonance, since retweets are by definition sparked by an original message posted by a campaign account itself. Fig. 6 shows the difference between the total volume of references to the four accounts on each day (left), and the volume of retweets of the accounts’ messages (right). In the first place, the total volume of activity around the key accounts (left) clearly pinpoints a number of key moments during the campaign. In addition to the election day and its immediate aftermath itself, which clearly generated the most significant

⁴ In the context of this discussion, we again note that the limitations of the *Twitter* API mean that the volumes shown in this and the following graphs are almost certainly lower than the total volumes of such activity, especially for times of particularly high *Twitter* activity around the US election. However, the relative patterns which distinguish the different campaign accounts will remain the same even if our access to *Twitter* data was throttled by the API. Further, we remind readers that a server outage on 11 and 12 October resulted in data loss during those days.

levels of *Twitter* user engagement, key spikes occur especially around the presidential debates on 3, 16, and 22 October. Notably, too, @BarackObama is reliably referred to more frequently than his challenger @MittRomney, except for one day: 18 September – the day after the video of Romney’s infamous “47%” remarks was released. Overall, too, the candidates’ personal accounts are generally referred to significantly more often than the campaign accounts, as is to be expected from the patterns shown in fig. 5.

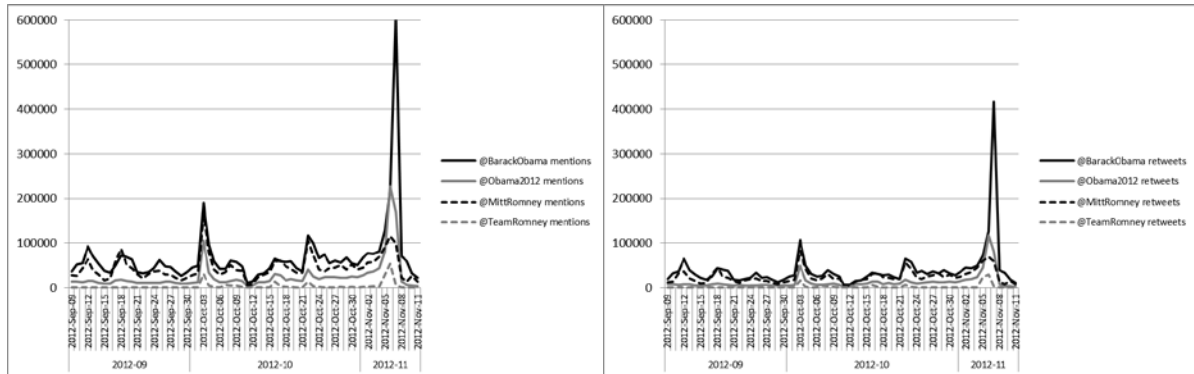


Fig. 6: day-to-day volume of references to the key accounts (left), and retweets of the key accounts (right)

By contrast, retweets of the four accounts are generally more closely matched – yet a pronounced user preference for retweeting the messages of the two ‘personal’ accounts over those of the two campaign accounts remains. This is important especially in light of the fact that the Romney/Ryan campaign appeared to have positioned its generic campaign account, rather than that of the candidate himself, as its main campaigning tool, as was evident from figs. 1 and 2 above: @TeamRomney was substantially more active than @MittRomney during the two months we examine here, yet @MittRomney received consistently more retweets – that is, it had a consistently greater resonance amongst *Twitter* users – than the overall campaign account. Substantial spikes in retweeting @TeamRomney messages occur only during the first televised debate and in the days leading up to election day itself, while retweets of @MittRomney’s tweets are generally closely matched in volume with retweets of @BarackObama.

Conclusion

If, as we must assume, the greater level of activity by @TeamRomney indicates that a greater amount of energy went into updating @TeamRomney than @MittRomney, the conclusion that such energy was misdirected is virtually unavoidable from this analysis: @TeamRomney never gained substantial traction amongst the *Twitter* userbase. From our observations here, it therefore seems that future campaigns would do well to concentrate on the activities of their candidates’ ‘personal’ accounts instead, further cementing the nature of US presidential elections as centrally a contest between two personalities rather than between two parties and their policy platforms; however, it remains to be tested whether this finding translates to electoral systems which are more strongly centred around a contest between multiple competing party organisations, rather than a race between only two candidates for the presidency.

It also remains to be seen how future contests will be framed; the 2012 campaign saw an incumbent President against a new challenger, which had some bearing on the style of tweeting employed by both Obama and Romney. However, by 2016 the place of *Twitter* within electoral campaigns may have changed, as happened with other online platforms following the development of new Websites and services and changing technological capabilities (Karpf, 2012). It is worth noting, too, that while in this study we have focused on *Twitter*, this is just one online tool used by candidates; similar patterns regarding the styles of online campaigning carried out by Obama and Romney were also identified by a Pew study exploring their wider digital strategies, incorporating Websites and platforms such as *Pinterest*, *Spotify*, *YouTube*, *Tumblr*, *Flickr*, and *Facebook* in addition to *Twitter* (Rosenstiel & Mitchell, 2012). The 2016 US presidential election will show

which, if any, of these services become or remain central to online campaigning, and how they are integrated within the campaign strategies of the candidates and their teams.

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