

Political Leaders' Social Media Platforms and Communication Impact During the 2020

Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the impact of four political leaders' social media accounts related to coronavirus on pandemic effects and media consumption. Information from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Twitter, a governmental entity that is nonpolitical, on coronavirus and recommendations for safe practices, was also examined. The four political leaders chosen for this study were governors in hotspot states during the duration of the pandemic; these leaders provided extensive information on the pandemic and precautions that should be taken via their social media accounts. This study has been designed to give an unbiased look into the impact of political social media, specifically Twitter, on the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020.

Keywords: *republican, democrat, coronavirus, CDC, Twitter, pandemic, masks, scientific information, social media, political leaders, and publics*

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Introduction

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world unexpectedly which resulted in thousands of deaths, an economic crisis, and hysteria. In the United States, the pandemic affected over 7.42 million people up until the beginning of October 2020 (Roser et. al, 2020). In the beginning of June 2020, the COVID-19 cases in the U.S. were at 1.79 million (Roser et. al, 2020). As states and the nation have responded to the crisis, social media and politics are also part of the intersection of public belief, health behavior, and health outcomes (Sylvia Chou, Gaysynsky, & Cappella, 2020), and examination by communication researchers is warranted. June, the start of summer, is the period in which the present study analyzed tweets of four governors of hotspot states regarding the pandemic: Governor Greg Abbott of Texas, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida, Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York, and Governor Gavin Newsom of California. With the pandemic, there was an opportunity to look further into hotspot states and the impact political leaders' social media had on relaying news to the public regarding COVID-19 safety. This content analysis examined the COVID-19 pandemic during this period and assessed how political leaders' social media displayed bias, spread messages to the public, and impacted the state's cases.

Review of Literature

Twitter and Political Campaigns

Social media platforms have sparked a new revolution in the political world when it comes to providing information to the public about societal issues. Since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, Twitter has become the main source of information for Americans regarding politics (Dounoucos, Hillygus, & Carlson, 2019). The year 2016 brought more viewership to

social media platforms as a place to receive news than political figures' websites or emails (Dounoucos, Hillygus, & Carlson, 2019; Boatwright, Mazer, & Beach, 2019). Previous research has shown that more than a quarter of respondents rely upon social media platforms for information as opposed to websites or campaign emails (Dounoucos, Hillygus, & Carlson, 2019).

With the shift in platforms used to portray information to the public, there has been an adverse effect on the public agenda, per agenda setting theory. Agenda setting theory is the idea that the media affects the presentation of information to the public that can alter the perception on a specific subject (Mohn, 2020). The first information people see is what they consider the most important or accurate (In Advertising, 2019). If information, such as political news and/or health mandates and regulations, comes from Twitter, the public may believe the first thing read on the Internet regardless of accuracy or bias. Since Twitter is one of the largest social media platforms with approximately 175 million people in the world, this has led to the spread of misinformation and fake news (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Twitter is a statement or writing platform, but also allows users to link online sites, websites, petitions, photos of themselves, and government-based sites (Parmelee, & Bichard, 2012; Fitton, Gruen, & Poston, 2019). Thus, Twitter can benefit political figures in multiple ways especially when providing information to the public quickly about a pressing situation. Another way this platform is beneficial to political leaders is any positive mentions on Twitter can lead to more exposure as well as more followers (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). With this, officials such as governors have the potential to reach a wider public than in previous years when they relied on campaigns through TV commercials and websites. Further, political figures also have the ability to create a two-way communication channel between them and the population they are serving; for instance, viewers of political

posts may “like,” forward, and respond to messaging (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Nicolau, Sharma, & Shin, 2020). With Twitter, there are also negative aspects that can contribute to the political world including bias, fake news, and bad reputations. All of these can work together against political leaders to make it harder to win the support of their party and influence decision making when election times come around. Democrats and Republicans utilize Twitter in different amounts as well as in types of communication; Democrats have lagged behind Republicans in amount of posts along with number of followers since 2010 (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Therefore, those who associate themselves with being conservative have shifted campaigns to Twitter more than those who call themselves liberals (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Vendemia, Bond, & DeAndrea, 2019). The seriousness of the pandemic along with the increasing influence of social media, particularly related to political communication, warrants an examination of how such communication is related to the pandemic and public response. Thus, the following research question is advanced:

RQ1: How was political social media, specifically Twitter of governors in hotspot states, related to various aspects of the pandemic (message spread, cases)?

Unbiased Information

It was necessary to look at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website in order to connect an unbiased source to the information being gathered on social media. Since the CDC is a governmental entity, a nonpolitical organization, there is importance in recognizing the information being promoted by this agency versus what is being promoted by politically tied state officials such as governors. According to the organization’s website, the “CDC is the Nation’s leading science-based, data-driven, service organization that protects the public’s health” (2020). A different source, such as that of news outlets, was not chosen to be examined

because of the inherent bias shown by reporters as well as news organizations themselves.

Naturally, since the beginning of time, bias has been present in the news and consumers watch the news outlets that align with their political beliefs (Xiang & Sarvary, 2007). Therefore, any of the news outlets that would offer information on the subject were not used in the present study. Information from the CDC regarding the pandemic informs the coding of the present study as well as the examination of bias in the political tweets of the sample. And, thus, the following second research question is advanced:

RQ2: What was the content of the political tweets in terms of the 3Ws and other unbiased scientific information per the CDC?

Method

Sample

The sample that was used to evaluate the research questions are social media accounts from the U.S. major political parties: Twitter accounts of two Republican leaders and two Democrat leaders. Further, the governors chosen are from hotspot states during the COVID-19 pandemic. Governor Greg Abbott and Governor Ron DeSantis will represent the Republican side and Governor Gavin Newsom and Governor Andrew M. Cuomo will represent the Democratic side. Therefore, the choice to look into these four governors ensures fair and unbiased research that includes both major political parties, as well as states in which the pandemic was especially impactful. It is important to note that these governors all have state legislatures controlled by their own parties. The number of tweets that were evaluated was 31 tweets per individual which accounts for each day during the month of July. In addition, the first tweet per day was the one analyzed for this project. The choice of thirty-one tweets gave sufficient information about each

governor's usage of Twitter and how Twitter was used to promote and inform regarding COVID-19 information.

Procedure

All tweets published by Gov. DeSantis, Gov. Cuomo, Gov. Newsom, and Gov. Abbott during the month of July 2020 were examined for the current study. With July being the start of summer as well as when the country started to open back up from being shut down, July will offer pertinent, timely data regarding state case fluctuation and information promoted on the governors' social media. To be included in the study, the tweets had to be made between July 1st, 2020 and July 31st, 2020 as well as made public to the citizens of the U.S. As noted, there were 31 tweets per governor analyzed, and thus, during the month of July this amounted to one tweet per day. One tweet per day reduces the bias and ensures accuracy in the results. On the basis of common controversial COVID-19 topics, and the CDC information per the organization's website, the codes were created to assess the components that interest the public regarding the pandemic as well as examination of bias. One university student coder participated in coding the information on Twitter and was restricted to the time frame in which discussed above. Data was analyzed for frequencies and correlations using JASP software.

Codes

Rationale for Codes

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been a variety of sources promoting information regarding safe practices and protection from the virus. One of the most common and accurate places to gather information pertaining to the virus is from the CDC. The CDC is a scientific based organization that helps prevent the spread of diseases and spreads information about how to lower the chances of contracting the virus. The CDC has released information

regarding protection efforts including the 3 Ws (wash your hands, wear a cloth face covering over your nose and mouth, and wait, or social distancing). The CDC justifies the use of these practices with the evidence that COVID-19 is, “spread through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks” (CDC, 2020). In addition to this information, the CDC recommends, “all people 2 years of age and older wear a mask in public setting” (CDC, 2020). Social distancing is another keyway to prevent the spread which involves staying at least six feet apart from people (CDC, 2020). Lastly, one of the most important ways to mitigate the spread of the virus is through hand washing especially when touching high touch surfaces like doorknobs, counters, and more (CDC, 2020). Codes were related to this safety information, which includes masking, COVID-19 information, and statistics. Tweets could have multiple different codes for this research study.

Masking

The specific codes regarding masking were coded as positive, negative, and neutral. A positive code were social media posts that push for masking or discuss the positive outcomes when wearing a mask in the public (e.g., photo of wearing a mask, tweets telling people about a mask mandate, etc.). The negative code indicates that the political leader is against masking and encourages the public not to wear a mask (e.g., A picture of the governor not wearing a mask, masks don't alter the spread, etc.). Neutral would be social media posts that show the leader in a mask or not but does not push the public one way or another (e.g., masking demonstrated, social distancing, etc.).

COVID-19 Information

The COVID-19 information broke down into three codes which included scientific facts, opinions, and actions. The social media posts that were classified as scientific facts included any

post that referenced a credible source or media outlet about COVID-19 (e.g., reference to CDC, World Health Organization [WHO], etc.). The social media posts that were classified into opinions were posts where the political leader used any form of possessive pronouns, stated “I believe,” or did not provide sources to back up the statement regarding the information presented about COVID-19 (e.g., I think COVID-19 will., etc.). The actions were posts that pushed for people to social distance, wash their hands, or wear a mask in the social media posts with no direct reference to outside information (e.g., encouragement to follow the 3 Ws).

Statistics

For this category, statistics were coded by graphs, infographics, or numbers. Graphs were coded as any type of graph that provided information on COVID-19 cases or safe practice (e.g., case fluctuation). Infographics were coded by any pictures that described the COVID-19 information being presented (e.g., process of the 3Ws). The numbers were coded as any tweet that spelled out the data regarding positive or negative cases (e.g., positive rate percent).

Consistency with CDC information

Consistency with CDC information was coded on a one to five scale being ranked from lowest to highest. The one represented inconsistent information, the two represented partially consistent information, three represented neutral information, four represented moderately consistent information, and the five represented extremely consistent information. Since the CDC is the basis for most COVID-19 information, it is necessary to code for tweets that present scientific data that lines up with what the CDC states, per its website and the frequency of codes noted previously, and note when the tweets do not reflect any scientific information at all which would include opinions.

Likes

The specific codes regarding likes involved recording the likes on each tweet evaluated during the July 1st to July 31st time frame. The likes were recorded based on the first tweet by the governors on each day. Likes to offer a measure of message attention and spread.

States

The specific codes regarding states were coded as Texas, Florida, New York, and California. All of these codes correspond to the governors chosen for analysis and their Twitter accounts. The states chosen were based on how each of them was considered a hotspot state for a period of time throughout the pandemic. The states were coded in order to link together the states and cases of COVID-19 during the period of June.

Cases

The specific codes regarding cases were coded per day based on the recorded number by the *New York Times* for each state. The cases were studied to determine if there was a relationship between cases and the governors' use of Twitter.

Results

A total of 102 tweets were analyzed, representing one tweet per day if applicable (in the month of July 2020) by each governor studied. In some cases, governors had zero tweets in one day which resulted in less than 31. In order to ensure accurate and unbiased information, the first tweet on each day was analyzed for the governors. In order to analyze the data, the results were calculated with JASP software employing descriptive statistics and correlational data for likes and cases.

RQ1: How was political social media, specifically Twitter of governors in hotspot states, related to various aspects of the pandemic (message spread, cases)?

Descriptive statistics were run for the individual governors and the entire sample as well. The sample had 53% of tweets during the month of July coded as COVID-19 information. The other 47% of the sample tweets had no relation or no specific code regarding the pandemic. Of that 53%, 14% of the tweets coded for the COVID-19 information actions and 14% of the tweets coded for the COVID-19 information opinions. Around 25% of the tweets were coded as statistics while approximately 18% were recorded as positive masking tweets during the month of July. In addition, the overall correlation between likes and cases for all four states was strong and negative but nonsignificant ($r = -.290, p > .05$).

According to the descriptive statistics, 68% of tweets during the month of July were recorded as information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic on Governor Cuomo's Twitter. The number of cases during the month of July averaged around 691.8 in New York State with the total being 21,446 {Table 1}. The tweets during this period had an average of likes at 38,700 for the month of July. In terms of correlation between likes and cases, there was a nonsignificant, weak positive relationship ($r = .332, p > .05$).

The data found that Governor Abbott of Texas had 15% of tweets during the month of July as recorded information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic out of 27 tweets in July {Table 1}. The number of cases during the month of July had an average of 8,919 out of the 276,477 total {Table 1}. The average number of likes in July was around 9,500 for Governor Abbott's Twitter. The correlation demonstrated between number of likes and cases was strong and negative but nonsignificant ($r = -.717, p > .05$).

In the state of Florida, the JASP program recorded 5 out of 24 tweets of Governor DeSantis were associated with the COVID-19 pandemic while the others were unaffiliated to the pandemic during July. Governor Ron DeSantis, in Florida, had an average of 10,2444.9 cases

with the total number being 317,592 in the month of July {Table 1}. The average number of likes per tweet was 1,500 for the month of July {Table}. The correlation shown between numbers of likes and cases in Florida is $r=-.174$, $p>.05$, a weak, negative, nonsignificant relationship.

Governor Newsom had 40.7% of tweets listed under the COVID-19 codes while the rest were unaffiliated. The number of cases recorded during the month of July in California was 8713.5 out of 270,120 total cases during this month {Table 1}. The average number of likes for the month of July was recorded at 7,500 {Table 1}. The correlation shown between numbers of likes and cases in California is $r=-.106$, $p>.05$, a weak, negative, nonsignificant correlation.

RQ2: What was the content of the political tweets in terms of the 3Ws and other unbiased scientific information per the CDC?

According to the data, only one governor directly referenced the CDC in the tweets, but all of the governors based information on the recommendations of the CDC regarding masking. In terms of the 3Ws and consistency of scientific information per the CDC, the four governors had 25% of tweets exhibit consistency of information with what the CDC recommends. On the scale of 1 to 5, the information given was classified as a 3, because it lacked a direct reference to the CDC information. The information regarding accuracy with the CDC all fell under one of the 3W's which was to wear a mask. The other 75% of tweets had no relation or consistency with the information from the CDC.

In regard to COVID-19 content on Twitter, Governor Cuomo had a frequency of 8 tweets when posting information about positive masking information. In addition, Cuomo included information about COVID-19 that fell under the codes COVID-19 information with actions and opinions which accounted for around 51% of tweets. Cuomo also informed the users of statistics

as well as infographics which had a frequency of 3. Governor Cuomo was the only governor to code tweets consistent with CDC information with direct reference which accounted for 6% of his tweets at a scale of 5.

Governor Abbott, of Florida, had a frequency of 22 tweets or 82 percent that had no specific code regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The information about the COVID-19 pandemic was the mention of positive masking which accounted for around 18% of tweets or a frequency of 5.

The tweets of Governor DeSantis were analyzed, and the result was that 20 out of 25 tweets have no specific codes during the time period studied. The COVID-19 information accounted for 20% of the tweets and coded with positive masking as well as COVID-19 information actions.

Governor Newsom had a frequency of 12 with tweets giving COVID-19 information. The codes that were recorded for Newsom were COVID-19 information actions as well as positive masking information. The other tweets, 15 or 60% of the tweets, were listed as no specific codes or unrelated to the pandemic.

Discussion

This study was designed to discuss the correlation between number of COVID-19 cases during the month of July and the tweets of governors in four hot spot states. It was also designed to describe the content of these tweets and study if the information discussed by the four governors on Twitter aligned with the scientific information of the CDC.

The content of the tweets studied during the month of July varied, but overall there was a considerable number of tweets regarding the pandemic by each of the four governors. Based on the data, Governor Cuomo had the highest frequency and average of tweets discussing the

pandemic during the month of July. In addition, Governor Cuomo also focused on social matters such as the American Disability Act and recognized July 4th. Governor Newsom followed similar patterns to Cuomo, focusing the majority of tweets on the pandemic with the mention of important dates or social matters. The discussion of social matters as well as July 4th can be seen throughout all four governors' Twitter accounts. In terms of Governor DeSantis and Governor Abbott, there was a pattern of spreading tweets out which involved skipping over some days during the week. Abbott and DeSantis have the lowest number of tweets during the month of July which contributed to how many tweets were related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The codes of Abbott and DeSantis suggest that Twitter is a platform that focuses on other matters such as business, holidays, natural disasters, and recognition of prominent figures in the community. All of the governors demonstrated importance for the idea of mask-wearing in public and getting information out to the public about important matters outside of the pandemic.

Based on the correlation between likes and cases, the data was found to have no significant results. Since the data has no significant results, it can be hypothesized that the populations studied in these states have alternative forms of receiving COVID-19 information such as news outlets, other social media platforms, and press conferences held by each governor. In addition to other sources of news hindering the ability of Twitter to reach the public, based on the average number of likes per state it can be hypothesized the Twitter reaches a small portion of the population in each state. For instance, the total population of Texas is 29 million and the tweets in that state in July had an average like rate of 9,500. Therefore, there is a large gap in individuals not receiving messages via Twitter. Another example can be seen with New York, where the average number of likes was higher at 38,700 but that number still only accounts for .4% of the total population.

Based on agenda setting theory, it is known that the more media highlights specific issues there is more consumer importance put on the issue at stake (Collins & Kim, 2020). With taking into account the four governors and frequency of COVID-19 tweets, there would need to be an increase in the relaying of COVID-19 information to gain more public response. This can be seen during the month of July in New York with Governor Cuomo. Since Cuomo had the highest frequency of COVID-19 tweets, there were more likes per post than the other governors studied who only posted a few times a week. However, since the research only spanned a single month, it offers inconclusive data to support this idea. If the study was extended and looked at Twitter content throughout the entire duration of the pandemic, there could be different results and correlations observed.

It is also important to take into consideration the lack of reference to the CDC data and consistency on Twitter. Since the majority of information on Twitter had little to no consistency with the CDC, it can be hypothesized that the viewers did not see the information as accurate and informative. If there was more direct information coming from the CDC, there could have been a different response in the users and the information that they chose to believe during the pandemic. It is important to consider the lack of reference could be tied to the CDC altering information amidst the pandemic. There was a sudden change in the CDC information on their website during the pandemic which caused skepticism as well distrust of the previously unbiased scientific source (Valencia, Murray, & Holmes, 2020). This information change was tied to the White House and outside sources influencing the CDC to change facts regarding the virus (Valencia, Murray, & Holmes, 2020). With this, the governors of these states might have intentionally avoided providing direct citations from the CDC to avoid the discredit of their own information.

Limitations and Conclusions

One limitation that needs to be addressed for this research is the sample size. Since this study was conducted in a short period of time, it only analyzed the tweets during the month of July. This is arguably not sufficient information to make strong generalizations regarding how Twitter of governors impacted the number of COVID cases during the timeframe of the pandemic as a whole. Though the present study offers a beginning in assessing the relationship between social media, political influence, and this health crisis, to get an accurate representation, it would be necessary to observe all eight months during the pandemic, and even further, given that the story of COVID-19 is not near its conclusion. Further, cause and effect conclusions cannot be made through the method employed, but rather, only correlational relationships.

Another limitation that can be noted for this research is the population that was studied. Since not everyone in the four states have access to or utilize Twitter, the cases during the time period as well as message spread could be changing from other forms of communication. In addition, these governors are only reaching the English-speaking individuals in the United States. In general, individuals who have limited English proficiency lack health information on a daily basis which contributes to these individuals' health issues (Perez, 2020). The results would be altered if the governors had bilingual Twitter so a wider audience could receive information regarding the pandemic via social media.

When looking at all of the data together, there was a high frequency of COVID-19 information being portrayed to the public with reference to positive masking. The findings also suggest that the higher the frequency of tweets made by the governor attracts more audience through likes per day. Although these frequencies were high, there is no strong evidence in the present study that establishes a correlational relationship between messaging, likes, and the case

numbers. Since there are multiple factors that go into obtaining and receiving information and the governors' communication with the public, this relationship cannot be confirmed based on the study reported here. Given the research that social media may attract attention from the public, positive or negative information about COVID-19 communicated via politicians may have an impact on the public view of the pandemic and related health effects in addition to other sources of news. The picture is arguably incredibly complex and future work may delve into social media as well as other kinds of health information sources for various populations. Perhaps surveys of information seeking and influence, as well as analysis of social media content and connection to cases and health behaviors, may be fruitful areas of inquiry.

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Table 1

Governor	Number of Tweets in July	Number of Cases in July	Average Number of Likes Per Tweet in July
Cuomo, NY	31	21,446	38,700
Abbott, TX	27	276, 447	9, 500
DeSantis, FL	24	317, 592	1, 500
Newsom, CA	20	270, 120	7, 500