

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

TECHNOLOGY

How Well Is Hillary Clinton Tweeting? Syracuse Takes a Closer Look

By Kate Stoltzfus | NOVEMBER 23, 2015

Sen. Bernie Sanders gets more retweets than Hillary Clinton does. And Syracuse University wants to find out how those tweets will affect the 2016 presidential campaign.

But the three professors behind the research aren't just looking at the front-runners for the Democratic Party's nomination. They plan to collect and analyze every tweet and Facebook post for every presidential candidate through the end of the 2016 election. A single day can yield a million tweets, scores of Facebook posts, and 42,000 comments, says Jeff J. Hemsley, an assistant professor in the university's School of Information Studies. That calls for time and storage — a lot of it.

The research is part of a new digital-politics project at the university's Behavior, Information, Technology, and Society Laboratory, which opened last year. Though Syracuse is not the first university to study such issues, with social-media research and data collection a growing trend in higher education, the researchers hope to draw new conclusions about the power of social media in elections.

A team including Mr. Hemsley, Jennifer Stromer-Galley, an associate professor, Bryan Semaan, an assistant professor, and a handful of graduate students is collecting Twitter tweets and hashtags as well as Facebook posts, likes, and shares. They do so with a system Mr. Hemsley developed as a doctoral student at the University of Washington called the Social Media Tracker, Analyzer, and Collector Toolkit.

Each researcher has a particular focus when analyzing the messages for broader patterns, says Mr. Hemsley. Ms. Stromer-Galley looks at strategic campaign messaging, while Mr. Hemsley focuses on how candidates and the public interact, and Mr. Semaan studies how people use technology. What kinds of tweets are candidates posting? How do messages change over time and across platforms? What kinds of media draw the biggest response?

The research is useful, says Mr. Hemsley, because it can help journalists and candidates to predict what kinds of stories voters most respond to.

Predicting a Winner

So what trends are emerging?

The project is monitoring a space that continues to evolve, but early research suggests that politicians use Facebook and Twitter for different purposes. Twitter is seen as reaching a more "politically savvy" audience of journalists, activists, and academics, and is frequently the medium for attack messages, says Mr. Hemsley. Facebook, meanwhile, is valued for reaching a general audience.

"Politicians, like the general public, are finding new and interesting ways to utilize social media for their benefit," says Mr. Hemsley. "When politicians used to reach the public, they always did it through a mediated channel or direct fliers. Now they have the opportunity to interact fairly directly with audience."

Given the role social media now plays to spread news, it's important to understand how Facebook and Twitter can help shape a campaign, says Ms. Stromer-Galley, who is the author of *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age* (Oxford University Press, 2014). The project is an effort to study whether politicians' social-media presence can predict a winner. The large number of candidates in the 2016 race gives more opportunities to look at the factors at play.

"We want to begin to understand which variables of social media might be indicators of ultimate electoral success," says Ms. Stromer-Galley.

The raw data the researchers collect cannot be shared due to Twitter's privacy policy, so the university is limited to releasing its findings through analysis and aggregated results. Katrin Weller, a Kluge Fellow in Digital Studies at the Library of Congress who specializes in social-media research, says that is one challenge for researchers. The Library of Congress has access to all Twitter archives, but has not been able to share that information.

The challenge for every university is to figure out how to collect, save, and use social-media data, she says. Preserving data on major events, like elections, is especially important, says Ms. Weller, because it's a way to "capture certain eyewitness accounts and public opinion. It's a very important source for daily conversations in the public sphere."

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