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## Digital Democratic Voices: Intersecting Student Research, Twitter, and Presidential Debates

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# Digital Democratic Voices: Intersecting Student Research, Twitter, and Presidential Debates

Adam W. Tyma & Barbara A. Pickering

**Courses:** Mass Communication and Public Opinion, Political Communication

**Objectives:** Often, there are media events (e.g., local and national elections, the Super Bowl) that match up with what we hope to accomplish in a particular class. The purpose of this semester-length project for students was threefold: (1) to read and comprehend literature related to communication studies, media, and political strategy; (2) to collect and analyze data; and (3) to participate in civic engagement by taking part in Presidential DebateWatch events, both as an audience member and through the use of Twitter.

## Introduction and Rationale

A common observation on college campuses today is “students do not look up when walking on campus.” It is often thought that such attachment to our communication devices demonstrates a lack of connection to the “real world.” This perspective exemplifies the need for faculty to connect with the “digital generation” and do so on students’ terms. The following semester-length activity offers one way such a connection can be made. In conjunction with the American Democracy Project (ADP, n.d.), this activity was designed as a collaborative classroom experience between two classes to introduce and discuss literature focusing on both political communication and public opinion, host a DebateWatch event on campus with a real-time social media component, and engage members of the university and surrounding community in the political process.

### *What is DebateWatch?*

In 1992, the National Communication Association (NCA) worked with the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD, 2012) to create the DebateWatch project (Carlin, Schill, Levasseur, & King, 2005). Based on theories related to political discussion (Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000), DebateWatch works to bring communities together to discuss the Presidential campaigns in small groups and to gain insight into how audiences reacted to the televised debates.

In 2012, a new communicative element emerged: the overt proliferation and ubiquity of social media (in particular, Twitter) and the campaigns’ use to reach out to potential voters. Twitter (as well as Facebook, blogging, etc.) has become a central component in political messaging since it was created in 2006 (e.g., Aparaschievi, 2011; Howard, 2005; Vitak et al., 2011). Twitter allows for quick messaging about topics, and can be

both responded to and recorded. It was this corner of the social media universe that the coursework and the 2012 DebateWatch (DW12) event on our campus examined.

## **Curriculum Design**

This semester-length project, in conjunction with the prescribed coursework, had three curriculum objectives: understanding the research process (through the Research Boot Camp, detailed below), conducting research (through completing a research project from literature review to data collection and analysis), and DebateWatch as *civic engagement* (Ehrlich, 2000; through attendance at and participation in a presidential debate “tweet-up” event). The curriculum design for each of these will be examined in turn.

### *Understanding the Research Process*

Beginning in spring 2012, the authors began working on how to incorporate DW12 into their respective courses (Political Communication [PC] and Mass Communication and Public Opinion [MCPO]) in ways that aligned with the underlying goals of their particular course.

The following were curricular goals common across both courses. The authors decided the courses would (1) be scheduled at the same time during the semester; and (2) meet together during the first two weeks to conduct a Research Boot Camp, ensuring that all students had a baseline understanding of various methodologies and theoretical groundings, particularly those that would be relevant both to the courses and DW12. Student research projects would then extend from these meetings throughout the semester. Though students in both MCPO and PC went through the joint Research Boot Camp together, specific methodological approaches were not given preference, allowing students to construct and conduct their own studies.

### *Research Boot Camp*

A key part of the course was the Research Boot Camp, which occurred during the first two weeks of the semester. As a research methods course is not a prerequisite for their courses, the authors used this two-week mini-curriculum to introduce and acclimate students to the research process who may not have had previous experience. Information from Keyton (2006), Treadwell (2014), and personal experience guided the curriculum.

The Research Boot Camp was organized around key topics: basic understanding of epistemological approaches, how to read and appreciate current research, and how to complete a research project from development to write-up—this was completed by holding two class sessions devoted to social scientific and hermeneutic research approaches. Basic guiding principles were discussed (e.g., what are empirical data; how to utilize theory during critique), providing students with research examples throughout the conversation. After the first day, students were placed in groups and assigned to locate three research articles that were examples of quantitative, qualitative, and

rhetorical/critical research. Students then identified key components of the articles in order to discuss these with the rest of their research teams during the following class sessions. Subject matter was not important (though aligning with the courses was helpful). The central outcome here is the ability to make sense of each research approach. The Research Boot Camp connected to the semester-length research assignment when students were asked to discuss what makes a “good” introduction, literature review, methods section, results, discussion, and so on in their examples, listing them on the board at the front of the class. This list was then used to guide discussions throughout the semester.

### *Course Content*

Each instructor assigned reading that specifically addressed theoretical and content realities existing within political campaigns. These readings varied depending on the course, but all aided in the development of students’ research questions and survey content. For MCPO, readings in specific subject content (i.e., advertising, public relations, and political advertising analysis), relevant theoretical constructs (e.g., agenda setting), and appropriate methodologies (e.g., content analysis, compositional critique) were assigned. As students designed their research projects for the semester, they were allowed the opportunity to collect data from DW12 or analyze elements of the event for their final papers.

With PC, students examined a variety of topics, including campaign styles and strategies, political debates, public speaking in campaigns, technology (including webbased campaign techniques and social media such as Facebook and Twitter), and the role of young voters. Students developed research projects using a variety of research methodologies that allowed them to focus either on collecting data during the DebateWatch events, or some other aspect of the presidential campaigns.

### *Research Project Design*

Students were allowed (but not required) the opportunity to use the DebateWatch event as a data collection site for analysis/critique. In the week following the Research Boot Camp sessions, students brainstormed research project ideas in class. Referencing the lists developed during the Research Boot Camp, students constructed their preliminary introduction as a way to inform the teachers what they intended to look at and how it was going to be done. Revisions from the teachers were completed, and the document was returned to the research teams. At the same time, students were developing preliminary literature reviews to be submitted, evaluated, and returned with recommended revisions. How this is broken across the first half of your semester is contingent upon schedule, other assignments, material covered, and so on. The same process was completed with the methods section. On week eight (of a 16-week semester), the revised introduction, literature review, and methods section for each of the research projects was combined into one prospectus submitted for review and approval. The completion of the first parts of the research project by mid-semester

guarantees that the research teams will have time to collect data, analyze, write up, and report back on overall research experience. It also allows for the instructor to ensure that the discussion during the Research Boot Camp is reflected in the document.

Undergraduate students worked in teams, while postgraduate students worked independently. One example of a study was an undergraduate group from the PC course who designed survey questions examining whether DW participants associated particular word choices as reflecting a bias in network coverage of political campaigns. Their survey questions were then integrated into the larger questionnaire designed for the DebateWatch events, distributed during the events and collected at the end of each. After the survey instrument was completed, it was submitted and approved for use by the campus Institutional Review Board. After the surveys were completed, students entered the data they had collected into the statistical software they chose to use.<sup>1</sup>

Once the data were collected, survey results were distributed to students based on (a) questions they had created and (b) research questions proposed in various research projects. Students who did not study the DebateWatch events specifically were still able to draw from the events for their research projects. Findings from student research projects were then reported in final papers submitted at the end of the semester.

### **DebateWatch Event**

In conjunction with the courses, two DebateWatch watch parties were organized on campus. The DebateWatch events revolved around the first and third presidential debates. The events were held in a large lecture classroom. Participation in past DebateWatch events (2004 and 2008) has ranged from 125 to more than 400. The first event attracted more than 400 students, while the second more targeted event attracted between 50 and 100 students.

#### *Preparation*

Planning for this event is key. First, identify an appropriate venue. Auditoriums and large lecture halls with viewing equipment including an outside television signal and large screens are ideal. In the event that a large venue is not available on your campus, other arrangements could be made to hold a DebateWatch in regular size classrooms, using a common hashtag to aggregate the Twitter conversation. However, this would change the overall experience for your students.

Event promotion can be accomplished in several ways. Public relations materials (e.g., posters and press releases) can be created by public relations classes or organizations such as the Public Relations Student Society of America. Additionally, enlist the assistance of your campus media relations' office. They can circulate information through campus emails and may also reach out to local newspapers, television, and radio stations. On-campus promotion may include contacting relevant academic departments and encouraging faculty to provide extra credit for participation. Include the Twitter hashtag in promotional materials, ensuring that those who cannot physically

attend can still participate. In addition, if you require funding for promotional materials and refreshments, seek campus units (department heads, deans, academic affairs office, etc.) who may provide financial support.

### *The Night of the Event*

For each event, a welcome was given, where the “rules” of the event (holding your applause until the end of the debate, keeping side conversations to a minimum, etc.) were delivered. In addition, as the use of social media was of primary interest to the teachers and some students, a quick “how-to” on Twitter was offered, specifically addressing the content to be associated with the DW12 hashtags. Similar to the approach utilized in Tyma (2011), audience members were shown how to create a Twitter account and how to utilize smartphone applications, web, and texting to post a comment. They were encouraged to be specific in their comments (keeping in mind the 140 character limitation of the system), to insert hashtags into their “tweets,” and track both individual and comment threads within Twitter.

Audience members also received surveys as they entered. A portion of the survey was completed prior to viewing the debate—the remainder was completed once the debate concluded. Data collected examined variables identified by the teachers, as well as questions specifically designed by students to be used for their own research projects.

The lecture hall utilized is equipped with dual projectors and screens up front, with the ability to display unique images, graphics, and media streams. Both projection screens were used during the debates. On one side, the debate was shown via CSPAN’s broadcast. On the other screen, the Twitter aggregation software Tweetdeck (<http://Tweetdeck.com>) was utilized to display multiple Twitter feeds and hashtags: #ADP12 (the American Democracy Project’s feed), #UNODW12 (the Twitter feed we asked students to submit to), #DNC, #GOP, and others as they became relevant. While one of the instructors monitored the debates, the other monitored the Twitter feeds, in particular paying attention to and making note of those that had the particular hashtags assigned for the event.

### **Appraisal**

Based on the above-stated objectives, the following conclusions were drawn. For objective one, students demonstrated their ability to use literature in class discussions as a lens through which to understand campaign and political strategy better. Regarding objective two, students successfully developed, conducted, and completed research projects that were directly or otherwise influenced by the event. Although we did not collect specific data regarding civic engagement (objective three), a number of possibilities emerged. Adding a Twitter conversation after the debates concluded might have provided additional data about whether participants continued to follow the campaign and/or voted in the election. In addition, after the semester was over, students provided feedback on the curriculum and the event, and how they worked together. Four questions were asked:

- Did the viewing help you to understand the presidential campaign more thoroughly?

The responses were mixed. Where some students thought that it was worthwhile (“It helped me understand how the candidates changed their debate strategies from one debate to the next”), others did not think so. A more interesting response from the students centered on revealing what the debates mean to them (“The presidential debates are more for show”). Throughout the Twitter feed for the event, several comments also spoke to this student’s opinion.

- Was the event a worthwhile component of the course?

With this question, there was strong support for the event from students. Comments such as “Absolutely! We spent most of the semester discussing politics and the media and it just makes sense to watch the debate together” and “I would definitely recommend doing it again,” amongst, others, demonstrate that the students made the connection between the event and the course.

- What was the most valuable part of the DebateWatch 2012 project for you?

The dominant theme in comments revolved around seeing “so many students involved in the viewing party.” Other comments alluded to it being “the first time I had ever seen students gathered in an interactive, new media oriented, voter-friendly environment.” These comments help us see that such special events associated with semester-long curriculum solidify the course content in real-world settings. It was rewarding to learn that students believed “it was also effective in helping facilitate discussion about the debate for our class”; this comment directly relates to the rationale for this curricular endeavor.

- What was your reaction to using Twitter while viewing the debates?

Of the comments received, the majority of students found the use of Twitter during the event both entertaining and informative. One student stated, “It was a great way to get the audience engaged without interrupting the debates,” while others thought the “real-time responses to statements made by the candidates were interesting to observe.” Though these comments are encouraging, other students considered the Twitter component to the event “distracting,” allowing “inappropriate comments” to be seen by the audience and, in a larger sense, anyone tracking the hashtags for the event. Such comments must be considered if a teacher is going to use this type of event in her or his classroom.

Regarding the overall classroom project, the experience provided students with a context for understanding political campaigns and how citizens engage in discussion about campaigns (through both classroom discussions and the DW events). This information served as a foundation for discussions that continued throughout the semester in the Political Communication class. In terms of teaching research methodologies, anecdotal comments from our students suggest that they had minimal

exposure to the research process when they enter these upper-division classes. Interactive activities during the Research Boot Camp ensured that all students achieved a fundamental understanding of how to conduct research.

Event attendance by both students and community members far exceeded our expectations, engaging all in the electoral process. Participants were exposed to political messages from both the presidential candidates and from voters alike. Students in both classes were debriefed after the event. In MCPO, students discussed how Twitter—in particular, the use of hashtags and memes—could serve as an Agenda Setting structure (e.g., salience and how it is manipulated within this particular social media space). Students also examined ideas about public relations, marketing, branding, and message design through the social media lens they were able to develop by participating in the event and civic process. In PC, students discussed how emerging forms of communication (e.g., web-based campaigns, email, and Social Media) have changed the landscape of the political process. Students thought that such changes in campaign strategies have potential impact on civic engagement for both younger and older voters.

We hope this event sparked increased interest in political participation by all involved. DW events clearly contribute to the university's strategic mission of community outreach. The second event was created to target Twitter users specifically. Unlike the general audience membership for the first event, this was a smaller, select group. This allowed us to compare post-DW survey responses across the two groups.

Overall, the events were considered a success by students, faculty, and administration alike. With proper planning and curricular alignment, a semester-length research program using social media can be successfully executed. We hope that this demonstrates one way such an endeavor can be implemented.

## **Note**

[1] Both teachers found that large events such as DebateWatch are excellent opportunities for students to learn survey design and experience the process of data collection.

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