

Jocelyn Burbach

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Female Politicians and the Use of Twitter for Identity Construction

1. Introduction

Women politicians continue to face negatively biased mainstream media coverage stemming from pervasive culturally based gender norms positioning women as «other» in the world of politics (Campus, 2013; Goodyear-Grant, 2013; Raicheva-Stover and Ibroscheva, 2014; Ross, 2010; Ross and Comrie, 2012; Sampert and Trimble, 2010; Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996). Challenging sexist news media portrayals is important for achieving a more egalitarian political landscape for women (Trimble *et al.*, 2015: 325). The rise of digital communication technology and social networking has produced a shift in the way political news is presented (Sampert and Trimble, 2010), and while traditional media is still an extremely influential force, «professional journalists no longer control all the means of mass communication» (Marland *et al.*, 2014: 230). As a result, has become easier for politicians to bypass traditional media (Graham, Jackson and Broersma, 2014: 766). Social networking sites (SNS) in particular have become «an important extension of the public sphere» (Dahlgren and Alvares, 2013: 54). Using manual content analysis from a feminist-oriented analytical perspective, this research investigates *how* Canadian women politicians are communicating on Twitter, *what* they are communicating, and whether this behaviour is producing alternative narratives to gendered mediation.

1.1. Gendered mediation

Cultural discourses surrounding leadership, competence and gender influence mainstream mediation. Scholars recognize that «politics is still perceived as a gender-incongruent profession for women, i.e. one that violates feminine gender roles» (Raicheva-Stover and Ibroscheva, 2014: 5). Women politicians who appear to be «too masculine» are seen as defiant and less acceptable as leaders, while those considered «too feminine»

are judged as incompetent (Jamieson, 1995: 16) because «the evaluated woman has deviated from the female norm of femininity while exceeded or fallen short of the masculine norm of competence» (Jamieson, 1995: 121). This competency-femininity double bind is based on an underlying belief that «the presence of women in the public sphere is somehow inappropriate or unnatural» (Campus, 2013:55).

Women politicians need to construct an identity that moves «beyond stereotype-confirming information [...] [that] may subtly (or not so subtly) bias voters against women candidates» (Bligh *et al.*, 2012: 588), using strategies which enable them to surmount gendered socio-cultural expectations and mediated discourses. SNS, with their «increasingly present paths to social change» (Papacharissi, 2015: 8), may provide an environment for creating narratives normalizing women's roles in the political sphere. Ross (2010) identifies SNS as a uniquely public opportunity for women politicians to speak up and out, especially in countries that routinely deny women other platforms (Ross, 2010: 142). Raicheva-Stover and Ibroscheva (2014) conclude that as «the political impact of social media [...] is weighed, more attention should be given to when or how political women strategically use these new media» (Raicheva-Stover and Ibroscheva, 2014: 6).

1.2. Identity construction

A constructivist view of identity is one which «considers it a fluid, dynamic, manifold concept, constantly rebuilt and renegotiated in the course of social life» (Dayter and Jarmulowicz, 2016: 11). Identity construction is rooted in social environments, and Twitter is an environment where «identity is constructed in and through talk» (Dayter and Jarmulowicz, 2016). A micro-blogging site allowing instant sharing of short messages, identity is constructed on Twitter through narrative self-presentation which «takes place through ongoing «tweets» and conversations with others, rather than static profiles» (Marwick and Boyd, 2011: 116). Papacharissi (2015) characterizes Twitter as a contemporary medium for storytelling (Papacharissi, 2015: 27), which is a key device for identity construction (Dayter and Jarmulowicz, 2016: 18). Within the everyday talk of tweeting, identity is expressed «through a succession of fragmentary, low-tellable stories» (Dayter and Jarmulowicz, 2016: 21). Once these short communiques are aggregated, they create a corpus from which «narratives can and do emerge» (Murthy, 2013: 8). Twitter is thus a space to create alternative narratives, which Somers (1994) contends is «a crucial strategy when one's identity is not expressed in the dominant public [narratives]» (Somers, 1994: 631).

1.3. Politics and Twitter

According to the Pew Research Center, 41% of US voters cite access to «breaking news» as a major reason for following political figures on SNS. 35% feel more person-

ally connected to politician or group they follow, while 26% maintained that they follow politicians to bypass traditional political journalism, believing that the information they get as followers was more reliable than information from traditional news organizations (Anderson, 2015). Van Dijck (2013) sees Twitter as an indispensable tool for politicians because it «allows them to control their messages – a big advantage over mainstream media, where they are dependent on journalists' framing». «Disintermediation» (Gellman, 1996) is the process of bypassing journalists and traditional gate-keeping by directly mediating to the public (Bernhard and Dohle, 2015: 758). Twitter makes it possible to «bypass the heavily mediated connections offered by traditional media and bring issues to the public's attention» (Graham *et al.*, 2014: 766). Ross and Comrie (2012) assert gendered mediation can be mitigated to some extent by using SNS to bypass traditional media gate-keepers (Ross and Comrie, 2012: 970).

Twitter is heavily used by journalists because it is an «interesting and promising virtual biotope for reporters in search of news and information» (Broersma and Graham, 2012: 403), and for reporters, it can be a rich potential source of quotes (Broersma and Graham, 2012: 408). This «amplification» of tweets as quotes in mainstream news coverage could help female politicians gain some control over their mediated identities. The use of Twitter by female politicians to construct an identity may lead to both disintermediation and amplification, thus potentially producing narratives which push back against gendered mediation. The purpose of this research is to take a first step towards exploring how tweeting behaviour by female politicians might construct identity and potentially allow for the production of narratives countering existing gender biases.

2. Research focus and methodology

Using content analysis as the primary instrument of investigation, this study focuses on the everyday Twitter use of three Canadian women politicians. A comparative inquiry (Przeworski and Teune, 1970) is employed to analyze and compare a sample of 876 tweets. These politicians are female and federal level Members of Parliament (MPs). Rona Ambrose is the interim leader of the Conservative Party of Canada. A federal MP since 2004, Ambrose (47) is an experienced politician and has had a Twitter account since April 2011 with 33,800 followers. Bardish Chagger is a Liberal Party member, minister of Small Business and Tourism (SBT), and Government House Leader. Chagger (36) is a rookie MP elected in 2015 with two Twitter accounts, one focusing on her role as an MP and the other as Minister of SBT, with a total of 12,500 followers (tweets from both accounts were included in the sample). Elizabeth May (62) has been the leader of the Green Party of Canada since 2006, and a federal MP since 2011. She joined Twitter in September 2008 and has 259,000 followers.

While key similarities exist between these women, there are differences to be noted, for instance their amount of political experience and their generation. They are

members and leaders within different Canadian political parties with varying political ideologies, size, and resources. These women are also not necessarily the authors of their tweets. While May states that she personally tweets with some additional assistance from her staff, both Ambrose and Chagger make no statements regarding account management. Regardless of authorship, this sample provides insight into the tweeting strategies that the politician and her team are employing.

This purposive sample was selected from a non-election period during an active parliamentary session, capturing everyday tweeting behaviour. Political parties and politicians now operate in «permanent campaign» mode (Marland, 2014), and SNS are used by politicians during non-election periods to construct and maintain their political identity. Tweets were saved for a 20 day period (April 26–May 15, 2016). On May 1, 2016, a wildfire began southwest of Fort McMurray, Alberta, causing destruction and a mass evacuation of the city – the costliest natural disaster in Canadian history. This sample provides an opportunity to observe any changes in tweeting behaviour brought about by this crisis.

The main unit of analysis is the single English tweet. While each politician also posted French tweets, most were duplicates of English tweets and for this reason were not included. Within a tweeted conversation, the context unit of analysis was the thread in which the tweet was situated (Graham *et al.*, 2014: 771). This study focuses on the manifest content found in these tweets, exploring «the obvious, explicit, surface or denotative nature of texts», as an analysis of «the manifest features of a text, as opposed to the latent content [...] is likely to be more reliable» (Benoit, 2011: 273). Several rounds of in-depth coding of the tweets were carried out as a means of exploring patterns and identifying trends.

Three groups of research questions were developed, building on research by Small (2014), a content analysis examining the tweeting behaviour of Canadian party leaders during the 2011 election period, and a comparative content analysis by Graham *et al.* (2014) researching the tweeting behaviour of Dutch and British politicians during 2010 election campaigns. The first set of questions compares communication habits and patterns that emerge when asking the following:

RQ1: How often did these politicians tweet during the sample period?

RQ2: What are the most common types of tweets?

The third research question analyzes originally created tweets, comparing the type of information being tweeted and for what purpose.

RQ3: What types of original messages are being communicated directly via broadcast tweets?

The next question analyzes with whom the politicians are interacting. This comparison of tweeting behaviours will highlight whom they are attempting to connect with and what types of relationships they are prioritizing.

RQ4: With whom are the politicians interacting?

The final set of research questions focus on the content of the tweets. By looking closely at the topics discussed, another layer of insight into identity construction may be uncovered.

RQ5: What political topics are these politicians are tweeting about?

RQ6: Was their tweeting behaviour affected by the crisis in Fort McMurray?

Rather than employing a computer-assisted analysis, tweets were carefully hand-coded, thereby providing a more «comprehensive semantic analysis – including a focus on the key terms, concepts and attitudes expressed in the tweets» (Bruns and Highfield, 2013: 688). Tweets were coded by a single coder, and although leaning on the work of an individual coder can lead to lower levels of reliability, for the exploratory purpose of this study it provides a suitable entry point to investigate how female politicians are using Twitter to construct political identities.

3. Findings

RQ1–2 examines the frequency of tweeting and compares the nature of the tweets in this sample. Tweets were counted and identified as either social or broadcast. Social tweets include some form of interaction between users employing the «@user» syntax. Social categories identified by Small (2014) are the retweet and @reply. Retweets «re-post» a message originally written by another user and redistributed to the retweeter's followers, implying that the retweeter is listening (Grant, Moon and Busby Grant, 2010). Messages that include an @reply are direct responses to specific Twitter users, where the @ symbol

Table 1. Canadian female politicians' Twitter activity

	Ambrose	Chagger	May
<i>Total number of tweets</i>	196	200	480
<i>Social</i>	121 (61.7%)	55 (27.5%)	424 (88.3%)
Retweets	117	51	305
@replies	4	4	35
Conversation	0	0	84
<i>Broadcast</i>	75 (38.3%)	145 (72.5%)	56 (11.6%)

is used as a marker of addressivity (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009: 1). Conversation tweets are part of a series of reply messages combined into a single window, providing an easier way to follow a discussion between multiple users. Broadcast tweets are defined as original messages composed by the individual account holder (or her team).

As table 1 shows, May was significantly more active on Twitter than her colleagues, posting 480 tweets with an average of 22.9 tweets per day. At a little less than half of May's volume, Ambrose and Chagger posted 196 and 200 tweets respectively, averaging 9.8 and 10 tweets per day. May's tweeting behaviour is distinctly more social than her counterparts, with 424 social tweets versus 56 broadcast tweets. The majority of May's social tweets are informational retweets. Not only does May retweet significantly more, she also engages in conversations. While 121 of Ambrose's tweets are identified as social, the vast majority are broadcast tweets from fellow Conservative party members. Chagger posted the largest number of broadcast tweets (145). This data reveals substantial differences in the way that these politicians are using Twitter.

RQ3 examines and compares the nature of the broadcast tweets. Small's code (2014: 96) categorizes broadcast tweets into 6 types:

1. events: future political events, local events, acknowledging holidays;
2. political: policy/political issues, messages not considered official party communication;
3. personal: matters unrelated to politics;
4. party: party related activities: policy announcements, press releases, other documents;
5. reporting news: current events, news from non-partisan sources;
6. status update: what the individual has done, is currently doing, or is going to do.

Table 2 shows that the majority of Chagger's broadcast tweets were status updates detailing her own political activities. These brief textual updates are accompanied by multiple photographs depicting Chagger at conferences, business openings, or local fundraisers. Ambrose posted 75 broadcast tweets including 38 status updates containing text about her current movements with photos of herself engaging in various political activities. The majority of May's 56 broadcast tweets were text-only, tweeted directly from the floor of the House of Parliament.

RQ 4 examines @user references to determine with whom these politicians are interacting. A coding scheme developed by Graham, Jackson and Broersma (2014: 775) was employed and modified. This code identifies the primary types of individuals the politician interacted with on Twitter, including the members of public, other politicians and journalists. All social tweets were sorted into one of 10 inductively determined main categories of identified individuals. Tweets referencing individuals outside of these categories were coded as miscellaneous. Multiple @user references within one tweet were individually coded.

May again differs in her tweeting behaviour, interacting with members of the public in 175 of her social tweets compared to eight for Chagger and only one for Ambro-

Table 2. Canadian female politicians' types of broadcast tweets

	Ambrose	Chagger	May
<i>Total Broadcast tweets</i>	75	145	56
Events	6	2	0
Political	13	10	29
Personal	5	2	4
Party	0	32	0
News	13	3	8
Status update	38	95	15
<i>Status: photos of self</i>	63	126	0

Table 3. The actors with whom Canadian female politicians' interact on Twitter

	Ambrose	Chagger	May
Public	1	8	175
Fellow party member/party	98	35	36
Politician in different party	1	0	35
Journalist	3	0	46
Expert/leader in field	1	4	17
Celebrity	0	0	5
Industry/business	2	42	0
Media organization	5	5	30
Government	0	14	0
Group	10	33	59
Miscellaneous	1	2	8

se. May interacted regularly with individuals and organizations outside of her own party, primarily by retweeting information in the form of hyperlinks to articles and reports, but also by engaging in conversations with members of the public and journalists. Worth noting is that May had number of interactions (46) directly with journalists. The majority of Ambrose's and Chagger's interactions were with fellow party members or partisan groups, Ambrose with almost 100 retweets from fellow party members' accounts.

RQ 5 and RQ6 examined the content of each tweet. Following Graham, Jackson and Broersma's coding method, a semantic analysis was employed to inductively identify the primary topic discussed in each tweet, and a code was created reflecting the main topics found. If a tweet dealt with more than one topic, the dominant topic was determined by the amount of content (i.e. number of characters) used to address it. Only topics with more than 10 tweets were included in the coding categories, with all others added to the miscellaneous category.

Table 4. Primary topic discussed in tweets by Canadian female politicians

	Ambrose	Chagger	May	Total
Total number of tweets	196	200	480	876
Business/economy	11	94	69	174
Government/political affairs	21	8	128	157
Party affairs	70	6	39	115
Fort McMurray Fire	53	8	32	93
Environment	0	10	51	61
Local event/promotion of local	2	8	25	35
Health/social welfare	8	10	14	32
Personal	7	7	18	32
Feminist issues	4	8	10	22
Days (May, Easter, mourning)	6	5	5	16
Civil/human rights, social justice	0	0	14	14
Refugees/citizenship	0	0	14	14
Remembrance/Veterans	4	4	5	13
Miscellaneous topics	10	32	56	98

Table 4 reveals that business/economy (20%), government/political affairs (18%) and party affairs (13%) were dominant topics. May posted 128 tweets discussing political topics, primarily focused on issues being discussed in parliament. While May tweeted a considerable number of posts about business/economy, these tweets were almost exclusively about the energy industry. Combined with environmental tweets, 25% of May's tweets featured environmental issues. Chagger's main tweeting topic was business/economy, primarily focused on the Canadian tourism and high-tech industries, while Ambrose's tweets focused on partisan messages. Ambrose posted 53 tweets about the Fort McMurray fire (27% of her total) with the majority of these tweets being broadcast, breaking from the pattern of partisan retweets which comprise the majority of her posts. May and Chagger posted a limited number of tweets containing crisis information, but these posts did not represent a large percentage of their total.

4. Analysis/Discussion

This content analysis of female politician's tweeting behaviours revealed some clear differences in strategies. May tweeted far more actively than either Ambrose or Chagger, posting more than twice the number of tweets. One possible explanation for this difference in volume is the greater level of Twitter experience that May has. Her tweeting rate has increased over time: 3.1 tweets per day in 2008 and 11 per day in 2011 (Small 2014:

97), and doubled to 22.9 in 2016. Being the leader of a smaller, minority and less financially strong party, it is possible that May chose to pursue disintermediation by being very active on Twitter, as her active posting increases the probability of her tweets being read and retweeted by other users.

Comparing the nature of the tweets posted, a marked difference in styles was evident. The majority of May's tweets were social, with only 56 tweets categorized as broadcast. When May did post broadcast messages, they were political, text-based and spontaneous, often tweeted in real-time during a parliamentary session, highlighting her engagement with current political issues. Of May's social tweets, 71.9% were retweets, primarily links to information from media sources, social justice groups, or local organizations. By retweeting a large percentage of non-partisan links, May constructed her identity as competent source of information. As Dayter and Jarmulowicz note, «linking to outside resources is an important identity practice for tweeters, as it allows them to position themselves within global knowledge network and the internet» (2016: 26).

May's tweeting style can be described as «social tweeting». May employed @ replies most often and was the only one to engage in conversations with other users. There are several possible explanations for May's interactive tweeting style. Interacting directly with journalists can be a strategy for the amplification of tweets in mainstream media (Bernhard and Dohle, 2015), since politicians who employ the interactive affordances of Twitter are more likely to have their tweets used as a source in news coverage (Broersma and Graham, 2012: 417). Using Twitter's interactive affordance to convey authenticity may also be a deliberate choice, giving citizens a sense of being recognized, respected and understood (Coleman, 2005:194) as a representative who listens and responds to them directly. Politicians who embrace interactivity on Twitter may increase their number of followers (Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013; Graham *et al.*, 2014). Interactivity in the form of «taking initiative and addressing others» is also seen to be key for becoming an influential tweeter (Ausserhofer and Maireder, 2013: 300). May was unique in tweeting interactive, personal messages, portraying warmth with an occasional «low-tellable» personal message to balance informational tweets, thus potentially overcoming the «competent but cold» narrative (Bligh *et al.*, 2012). The majority of the content of May's tweets focused on topics that reflect her own and her party's values and passion: environmental issues. Her tweeting style was seemingly unaffected by the Fort McMurray crisis.

The majority of Chagger's tweets focused on her Small Business and Tourism portfolio, and her tweeting style can be described as «visual tweeting». Chagger predominantly employed a visual broadcast strategy, posting status updates about her activities rather than retweeting substantive information about issues. Account management by staff members may lead to this more controlled broadcast communication style. Chagger's tweets are unidirectional and employ photos to illustrate her competence as she interacts with individuals in the business, technology and research sectors. This visually intensive strategy prioritizes images of political women at work, increasing public visibility and emphasizing competency. This visual narrative normalizes female politicians, as showing en-

gagement in «stereotype-disconfirming behaviors can act to enhance a woman's perceived suitability for non-traditional jobs» (Bligh *et al.*, 2012: 562). A limitation of this tweeting style is the unlikelihood of achieving amplification, as photographs of this nature are considered promotional and are rarely redistributed by journalists. This type of controlled narrative may also lack the authentic tone expected by fellow social media users (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). Perhaps because she was not directly involved in the Fort McMurray crisis, this event did not notably affect Chagger's tweeting style.

Ambrose's tweeted content was primarily partisan in nature, and can be described as «echo-chamber tweeting». While Ambrose's tweeting behaviour appears to be social at first glance, the vast majority of her social tweets were partisan broadcast retweets. This strategy focuses on the Conservative Party rather than to construct Ambrose's own political identity. During the Fort McMurray fire, however, Ambrose's tweeting style shifted to a visual broadcasting style similar to Chagger's, tweeting 38 status updates depicting her activities as a political leader in her home province. One possible reason for this change is the personal interest she had in this crisis, as a resident of Alberta. This shift in tweeting behaviour was not sustained, however, and reverted to the partisan style within days of the crisis ending.

5. Conclusion

Findings from this study suggest that Canadian female political leaders use tweeting strategies to construct identity and produce narratives that may work to mitigate gendered mediation. This research suggests the co-existence of different strategies. First, a social strategy of active and interactive tweeting may increase the likelihood that female politicians' tweets are viewed as a source of information and can help to develop on-going relationships with journalists, and thus is more likely to produce disintermediation and amplification. Second, a visual tweeting strategy may have limited effectiveness in creating a narrative highlighting competency and normalizing a woman's role in the world of politics. This strategy's success, however, hinges on the ability to achieve disintermediation, and the largely unknown audience size is a major limitation for understanding its possible effects. Finally, the third strategy identified is echo-chamber tweeting, which fails to develop the individual's identity on Twitter, and, as such, it is potentially less effective in overcoming gendered mediation. Future research exploring the tweeting behaviours of female politicians and the communication strategies they employ, as well as the composition, size and perceptions of their audiences, would expand our understanding of how strategic Twitter use can effectively challenge sexist and heteronormative news media portrayals of female politicians.

Jocelyn Burbach

Wilfrid Laurier University

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada

E-mail: jodeeburbach@gmail.com

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