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Maria Stover and Elza Ibroscheva

## #ImWithHer

Hillary Clinton's strategic use of Twitter during the 2016 presidential campaign

**ABSTRACT.** Using Reed's (2013) concepts of relational, discursive and performative power, this study analyzed the Twitter presence of Hillary Clinton for the first six months of her presidential campaign, to examine how a woman aspiring to become a viable presidential candidate in the U.S. strategically uses Twitter as a communication platform. The analysis paid attention to the structure of her digital operation and the structural characteristics of her Twitter network as part of relational power, the thematic frames on her feed as part of discursive power, and the use of Internet memes during the Benghazi Congressional hearing as part of performative power. The results of this analysis paint a more nuanced picture of Clinton's use of the relational, discursive and performative power dimensions of Twitter, one that might not be equally transversal in all three dimensions, but instead reveals a heavier stress on the discursive and performative aspects of Twitter.

**Keywords:** Hillary Clinton, 2016 election, Twitter, relational, discursive and performative power.

### 1. #ImWithHer: Hillary Clinton's strategic use of Twitter during the 2016 presidential campaign

Hillary Clinton has been a staple of American politics for over 20 years and a role model for women from all parts of the globe, having occupied some of the most visible positions of power as a First Lady, then as a U.S. Senator, and later on as a Secretary of State. Her unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 2008 did not deter her from renewing her efforts in 2016. Yet, in her strong 2016 bid to become the first female president of the United States, Clinton's candidacy poses a fascinating question for media scholars, who have followed closely her impressive momentum through the turbulent, frequently ridden with obstacles, tunnels of American politics.

When she became First Lady in 1993, information traveled in a more conventional, often closely monitored and mainly television-driven mediascape, where visuals ruled the airwaves and leaders with political ambitions painstakingly crafted an image they believed could define electoral success. Today, the process of political influence has been fundamentally transformed by the emergence of social networking sites, otherwise known as SNS, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat. Their rapid adoption by American voters, aided by the ubiquitous use of smartphones, has transformed the world of politics and become the new «battleground» for winning the hearts and minds of American voters. In fact, social media have been hailed by many on the 2016 Presidential campaign trail as the most important path towards reaching the electorate in this media-saturated environment, causing Teddy Goff, the digital director for the Obama 2012 campaign, to proclaim that Facebook has become «the most significant new addition to the voter-contact arsenal that's come around in years, since the phone call» (cited in Hendricks and Schill, 2015: 3).

Although social media have had a short run in the political process, it is beyond any doubt that they are revolutionizing American elections (Hendricks and Schill, 2015). In fact, social media redefined the «soundbite» in the Web 2.0 environment because they enable politicians to individualize and personalize their campaigning style (Vergeer, Hermans and Sams, 2011). As a result, politicians have felt empowered by the tools of technology not only to increase their reach and visibility, but also to «control» their message (Gruszczynski, 2015: 113). And while there have been a number of studies in recent years on how digital media have changed the course of political campaigning, a few studies have focused on the messages that political candidates produce in social media channels while on the campaign trail (Duman and Locher, 2008; Johnson, 2012). Given the fact that the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns were dominated by male players, all of the existing literature on strategic use of Web 2.0 tools for campaign communications has exclusively focused on male actors, Obama and Romney in particular (Johnson, 2012; Kreiss, 2014; Stromer-Galley, 2014; Hendricks and Schill, 2015) while studies on how women politicians use social media for campaign purposes are virtually nonexistent. We have a very limited understanding, therefore, of the role new technologies play as part of the gender and elections dynamics. In an attempt to close this gap, the present study will examine how a woman candidate who is running for U.S. president during the 2016 cycle is strategically using Twitter as a communication platform.

## 2. Twitter and politics

Twitter, a microblogging platform that was created in 2006, has been quickly gaining traction among politicians and voters due to the fact that users can hold a «two-way» conversation about matters they are interested in. Twitter allows a user to post short messages, called tweets, to a large group of users, who can, in turn, choose to re-tweet them on their networks, thus increasing exponentially the impact of the message. The remarkable power of Twitter has been the ability to amplify certain messages that could spread through other SNS like a virus, or «become viral», and thus shape public perceptions. Some users choose to become «followers» of certain users as a sign of their interest in the person. Users can also choose to follow other users, creating in some instances reciprocal networks. Twitter users write a 160-character bio that is public (i.e. appears anytime somebody searches for you) and becomes one of the most visible descriptors of a person on the web. Currently, Twitter boasts 320 million active users and 500 million tweets a day (Hinckley, 2015).

While President Obama is not the first politician to use Twitter, he is credited for pioneering its masterful use for politics since he was one of the early politicians to fully understand and utilize the power of Twitter as a tool to connect with, not broadcast to, voters (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012: 8). Soon after Obama's inauguration in 2009, the number of Twitter accounts in Congress doubled, solidifying the use of the micro blogging platform for political purposes (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012). After the 2012 presidential elections, it was clear that Twitter was the platform that politicians and their campaigns must pay attention to. To quote Teddy Goff again: Twitter «has changed the whole way that politics works. Not just the press element, but the organizing element and the fund-raising element and the relationship building that all campaigns try to do» (as cited in Stromer-Galley, 2014: 146).

One of the most pertinent studies on the use of Twitter for strategic communication has been Daniel Kreiss' (2014) examination of how Romney and Obama's campaigns used Twitter during the 2012 electoral cycle. Applying a mixed method approach that relies on interviews with campaign staffers and qualitative content analysis of their Twitter feeds, Kreiss provides a contextual look into how the two campaigns used this platform to influence the agendas and frames of mainstream media as well as reach supporters. While the uncovered distinctions between the two campaigns are important, Kreiss' application of the concept of power to explain political discourse and influence on Twitter is particularly noteworthy. Kreiss argues that Isaac Reed's (2013) theoretical work on the concept of power «appears highly relevant for understanding how campaigns navigate [the] unfolding sequences of communication around political events on Twitter» (*ibidem*: 5). While Reed (2013) draws on the

conceptual link between power and causality to develop an account of the relational, discursive and performative dimensions of power, his attempt is purely theoretical and grounded in making sociological research on power «more complex and explanatorily effective» (*ibidem*: 193). Kreiss' (2014) work, on the other hand, extends Reed's theoretical examination of power to new media and as such it presents a rare attempt to situate research on Twitter within a solid theoretical framework (see Jungherr, 2014, for a meta-analysis of Twitter and politics). This study adopts Kreiss' discussion of relational, discursive and performative power with the aim of examining how a woman politician aspiring for the highest post in the United States strategically uses Twitter as a communication tool. In this sense, we echo Kreiss' appeal that «scholars must look across all three dimensions of power to understand Twitter and politics» (*ibidem*: 6).

Relational, or network, power places «emphasis on social relations as real and consequential» and emphasizes that power should be seen as «existing, primarily, in the relations [...] between actors or between positions in a social structure» (Reed, 2013: 199), which Kreiss (2014) extends to relations in a «socio-technical structure» (*ibidem*: 5). If applied to Twitter, such a dimension would pay attention to the «starting positions of actors on the platform, such as the number of followers they have or whom they are followed by» (Kreiss, 2014: 5). Albeit narrow, such an examination of relational power provides a starting point for better understanding the *social* power structure of this social network.

Discursive, or hermeneutic, power on the other hand, emanates, as the name suggests, from social theories of discourse. It «refers to the degree to which the categories of thought, symbolizations and linguistic conventions [...] determine the ability of some actors to control the actions of others» (Reed, 2013: 203). As applied to Twitter, this dimension of power draws attention to signification and representation as encompassed by such popular communication theories as agenda setting and framing. One of the most popular definitions of framing is provided by Entman (1993) who sees it as a process of message selection and salience where «to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation» (*ibidem*: 52). An underlying assumption as part of this definition is that the process of framing affects audience perceptions. Framing has been previously used in Twitter research by Kreiss (2014), Parlmelee and Bichard (2012) and Schill and Kirk (2015), and we will adopt it as part of this study as well.

The third dimension of power, or what Reed (2013) calls performative power, refers to «how situated action and interaction exerts control over actors and their future actions» (*ibidem*: 203). As part of this dimension of power, emphasis is placed on well-timed acts, often «magnifying [power] by becoming a public specta-

cle» (Reed, 2013: 204). Applied to Twitter, performative power would underscore the use of «well-timed, emotionally resonant, and rhetorically effective» tweets (Kreiss, 2014: 13) that have an effect on how an event is perceived by the public or the professional press.

### 3. Gender, social media and politics

Research has found that female candidates are stereotyped by media as better equipped to handle «compassion issues» (e.g., welfare, education), but are perceived as less competent as leaders, less experienced, and less knowledgeable than their male counterparts (Koch, 1999). This tendency to project markedly different expectations of leadership abilities and qualifications is particularly flagrant during presidential elections for two reasons. First, as Falk (2010) pointed out, presidential elections are critical moments because most of what constituents learn about a presidential candidate comes from a mediated source. And second, these types of high ranking executive positions require women to do extraordinary work because, as Nancy Pelosi, eloquently noted, this type of a «marble ceiling» is the hardest to crack (McNara, Nov. 8, 2006: n.p.).

Given the heavy gender bias that traditional media have exhibited towards female candidates, it becomes an even more pressing matter to closely examine if and how social networking sites present a different discursive space for female politicians where they can «control» their own message. Geniets (2010) found that new media provide a potential break with old social hierarchies, and can «give individual producers of media content more freedom, and empower them to expose, interact with and reveal backstage behavior related information about themselves as well as others to a mass media audience» (*ibidem*: 406). The research interest in this area of exploration has been covered by Gelber (2011) who points out that social networks generally favor outsiders, indicating that female politicians are positioned as relative novices to the political battleground, which in turn should give them a natural advantage in the digital space. Similarly, Just and Crigler (2014) found out through analyses of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube in 10 competitive Senate races, that a new space for positive, interactive campaign communication was indeed emerging for women in social media, albeit at the expense of substance.

As one of the most prominent female politicians of our age, Hillary Clinton has received due scholarly attention, but her Twitter activity has been largely unexplored. A study by Anderson and Sheeler (2014) examined how Hillary strategically appropriated the popular Tumblr account «Texts from Hillary» as part of her

Twitter debut in 2013. The authors argue that these tactics illustrate «a new brand of strategic image management» where politicians engage in «non-elite» discourses on sites like Twitter and Tumblr, and as a result could counterbalance the sexist nature of presidential politics. Rhode and Dejmancee (2016), on the other hand, examined Hillary Clinton's Twitter account from the time she opened it in 2013 to April, 2015, when she announced that she is running for president, with the goal of revealing how she used feminine style to strategically soften her image. The authors introduce the concept of relational labor, which was originally coined to describe how «musicians engage[d] with their fans on social media through constant interactivity and self-disclosure» (Rhode and Dejmancee, 2016: 487), and argue that it can be successfully extended to describe how politicians, both male and female, use Twitter to engage with voters. Rhode and Dejmancee (2016) conclude that relational labor on digital platforms is «just as feminizing for politicians as it is for musicians» and that the digital feminine style might not serve to the advantage of women politicians (*ibidem*: 501).

The present study adds to the literature on gender, social media and politics by expanding the theoretical framework on social media to include Reed (2013) and Kreiss' (2014) discussion of the relational, discursive and performative dimensions of power. Such a focus gives us the opportunity to examine how a prominent female candidate who is running for US president chooses to use Twitter as a campaign tool (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013).

As a first step, and in line with the concept of relational power, we examine the configuration of Hillary's digital operation, which emphasizes the value she places on new media as channels of influence. In fact, we see her digital operation as transversal to the three aspects of power we propose to investigate in this study. As part of relational power, we also analyze the structural characteristics of her Twitter account. In particular, we give attention to the type and scope of her Twitter network and compare it to those of other presidential candidates. Second, and in line with the concept of discursive power, we apply qualitative content analysis to reveal the thematic composition of her tweets, with hopes of identifying some of the main frames she chooses to underscore as part of her campaign message on this channel. The third element of our analysis will focus on the performative power of her communication. By using the Benghazi congressional hearing on October of 2015 as a case study, we highlight how the «well-timed, emotionally resonant, and rhetorically effective» (Kreiss, 2014: 13) use of tweets turns into a moment of effective communication action.

## 4. Method

The present study analyzes Hillary Clinton's verified Twitter account (@HillaryClinton) for the first six months of her 2016 presidential bid. The time frame spans from her formal announcement on April 15 through October 28, 2015, to include the Benghazi congressional hearing scheduled for October 22, 2015, which was a defining moment during the early months of her campaign. The analysis covers both text and visuals featured as part of Clinton's tweets, but it will not, at this stage, analyze comments posted as replies to her tweets.

To analyze the structural characteristics of Hillary Clinton's Twitter profile, the authors recorded the total number and thematic composition of tweets for the six-month period, the number of followers she had, and who she followed and interacted with. Following the methodology outlined in Parlmelee and Bichard (2012) and Schill and Kirk (2015), the frames that appear in the discursive power section were developed qualitatively and inductively, by examining Hillary's archived Twitter feed. The frames became fully defined as both researchers independently read the raw data several times and highlighted key phrases and hashtags, which they worked on converging into larger categories. As part of their consistency check, the researchers reached agreement on the main frames and selected key quotes and examples that conveyed the essence of each frame. In the case of identifying the number of those users Hillary is following (Table 2), the researchers checked the Twitter feed and public bios of each of the 577 Twitter users that Hillary follows on Twitter as of October 2015.

The choice of a qualitative method is purposeful and in line with calls by Kreiss (2013) and Jungherr (2012) to expand the methodologies applied to Twitter in politics. As Jungherr (2012) notes: «The obvious potentials of the quantitative analysis of Twitter data appears to have somewhat obscured the necessity for qualitative analysis [...] [Q]ualitative work allows for a discussion of transformation of practices of political actors – such as politicians and journalists – that might remain hidden in large aggregates of data» (*ibidem*: 73).

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Relational power: Hillary's digital operation

As soon as Hillary made public her presidential bid on April 12, 2015, her formidable presence was felt on all types of social networks, thus indicating her readiness to engage with voters on any type of media platform. Within days,



the former First Lady, Senator and Secretary of State had active accounts on such popular social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Pinterest (Hess, 2015; Hod and Chariton, 2015).

Such a strategy is in sharp contrast to her presidential bid in 2008, when Hillary's MySpace page appeared poorly designed and out of touch in comparison to Obama's expertly managed social media presence (Hod and Chariton, 2015). Clinton's campaign did maintain a Twitter account in 2008, but it was quickly suspended after she ended her presidential bid. Her account was reactivated, however, in June of 2013, amidst speculations that she might be preparing to run for a president in 2016, which did happen.

Comparing the SNS presence of the top presidential candidates reveals useful information about the nature of their relational power during the first six months of the 2016 campaign. Table 1 represents the Facebook and Twitter activity for the top Democrat and GOP candidates as of January 29, 2016. As the numbers

**Table 1.** Facebook and Twitter activity for Democrat and GOP presidential candidates

Presidential Candidates*	Facebook page likes	Twitter followers	Twitter following	Tweets (year open account)	Twitter likes
Hillary Clinton (D)	2.3 million	5.24 million	577	3711 (June 2013)	823
Bernie Sanders (D)	2.5 million	1.24 million	1433	6018 (Nov. 2010)	714
Martin O'Malley (D)	111,738	130,000	2060	12,500 (Aug. 2008)	1060
Donald Trump (R)	5.5 million	5.92 million	49	30,500 (March 2009)	59
Ted Cruz (R)	1.8 million	755,000	13,800	13,200 (March 2009)	461
Marco Rubio (R)	1.2 million	1.1 million	2521	4633 (August 2008)	1523
Ben Carson (R)	5.0 million	1.11 million	52	2556 (Feb. 2013)	134
Carly Fiorina (R)	544,000	655,000	693	3859 (Aug. 2009)	20

\* As of Jan. 29, 2016. Only the top four GOP candidates are included, and the only female GOP candidate is included for comparison purposes. Party affiliation in brackets.

indicate, Hillary Clinton is one of the most followed presidential candidates on Twitter, although she is not among the most prolific contributors. What needs to be taken into consideration, however, is when some of these accounts were created. Hillary is a relative newcomer, having (re)joined the popular platform less than two and a half years ago, although the act generated significant media attention (Rucker, 2013).

Besides her verified Twitter account with the handle @HillaryClinton, her official campaign has a separate Twitter account @HFA (or Hillary for America) and her campaign newsletter, The Briefing, has its own Twitter account as well (@TheBriefing2016). Hillary's campaign network is extensive, featuring numerous Twitter accounts for specific states (as in @HillaryforNH) and a number of universities, often using their mascot as part of the handle (as in @HillaryJayhawks for the University of Kansas). The most popular hashtags associated with her campaign are: #Hillary2016, #hillaryclinton and #ImWithHer. The candidate account is usually the one providing information and facts, while the auxiliary accounts, like @TheBriefing2016 or those of campaign staffers, are used to launch attacks on opponents or to set «the facts straight». Such a technique makes the main accounts, which also have the largest number of followers, appear more factual while allowing the other accounts, which are usually followed by journalists or political pundits, to «engage in the spin war common among political-media elites» (Hendricks and Schill, 2015: 204).

In contrast to her 2008 bid, Hillary's social media presence exudes that she is conversant with the idiosyncrasies of each new media channel and in tune with the times. To accomplish this feat, she surrounded herself with a small army of savvy tech experts, which to some accounts, is «three times the size of Obama's in 2012» (Osnos, 2015) and which includes names that are credited for winning the 2008 and 2012 elections for Obama (Lapowsky, 2016). For example, her digital adviser is Teddy Goff, who worked for President Obama's campaign in 2008 and oversaw his social media campaign in 2012; Stephanie Hannon, a former Google executive, is Hillary's chief technology officer, and the person behind her Tweets is digital director Katie Dowd, who is a long-time Clinton aide (Easton, 2015).

Clinton's reinvented digital persona is aptly summarized by her political strategist, Geoff Garin: «Her loss in the 2008 campaign really liberated her in the end: to be less guarded, to try new things, to just put herself out there more for people to see, for better or for worse [...] She's starting now with that same kind of liberation, and she has a team who knows how to work with it» (Healy and Haberman, 2015: n.p.).

Although Hillary has been on Twitter for a relatively short time, the heightened significance of the micro-blogging platform to her presidential campaign was underscored by the fact that she chose to add a Twitter message to what is now considered a standard announcement video. Both her video and her tweet were

carefully coordinated and set the tone for her social media campaign. On Twitter, her announcement message read: «I'm running for president. Everyday Americans need a champion, and I want to be that champion. – H» and received 102,000 retweets and 106,000 favorites. An hour after the announcement, the following tweet clarified Hillary's involvement with the popular social media platform and reassured her followers that she will be personally involved with Twitter: «This account will be run by campaign staff from now on – but you'll still see tweets from Hillary. They'll be signed – H».

## 5.2. Relational power: structural characteristics

As of October 2015, Hillary's Twitter account had a total of 2,112 tweets and 780 photos and visuals. The volume of tweets picked up significantly over the summer as her campaign expanded, generating 68% of the tweets ( $n = 1440$ ) during the period July–October, 2015. The data in Table 1 also indicates that Hillary Clinton has a sizable number of followers on Twitter, that is four times the size of rival Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, and that is topped only by that of GOP front-runner Donald Trump. Although the number of followers should not be seen as a gauge of the quality of connections between candidates and their followers, it could be accepted as a possible gauge of a candidate's popularity among potential voters since users freely decide whom they want to follow (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012; Vergeer and Hermans, 2013). Given the lack of research on the reasons people choose to follow a politician on Twitter (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013; Parmelee and Bichard, 2012) and the fact that this study did not include followers' motivations in its analysis, we cannot make any further assumptions about the followers on Hillary's Twitter account. However, we can draw some conclusions about her network by the number and type of people Hillary chose to follow since «the more a candidate follows others on Twitter indicates that the candidate has more need for or interest in information from other people» (Vergeer and Hermans, 2013: 402), which could also be seen as a sign of inclusiveness.

Scholars observe that one of the biggest mistakes Hillary made on Twitter in 2008 was when she «did not take the extra step of following those users who followed her», which is considered not only impolite according to standard Twitter etiquette, but also meant that she was using the platform very much in the traditional communication mode of one to many, i.e. as one-way communication (Parmelee and Bichard, 2012: 8). A close examination of the people she is following on Twitter in 2016, reveals that her approach has not changed dramatically. In terms of sheer numbers, the network of people she follows is two and a half times smaller than that

Table 2. Who is Hillary Following on Twitter?

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Campaign staff	180	31
Campaign volunteers	83	15
Colleges for Hillary	29	5
Organizations/causes	20	3
Public figures	119	21
Citizens	139	24
Other	7	1
Total	577	100

of Bernie Sanders and almost four times smaller than that of O'Malley (see Table 1). Furthermore, a closer examination of the makeup of her network indicates (Table 2) that 50% of her connections are rather limited since they are directly related to her campaign, including staff, campaign volunteers and college campus support groups. Her connections to public figures or celebrities, many of whom have openly announced their support for her campaign, comprise another 21% of the people she follows. This leaves the number of citizens she follows to 139 or 24% of the sample, which points to a rather limited reach of her personal network.

### 5.3. Discursive power: Twitter frames

*Current and inclusive.* A signature approach of Hillary's Twitter feed, and a dominant theme as part of the present analysis, has been the careful attention to a wide variety of holidays and current developments. Instead of providing a repetitive coverage of her campaign stops, stump speeches or contribution requests, a distinctive feature of her tweets has been the attention to noteworthy happenings of the moment. Indeed, her Twitter feed did include tweets covering her campaign stops or calls to donate, but those were carefully balanced against a fresh, daily commentary on what was noteworthy each day. For example, her May feed acknowledges Mother's Day, National Teacher's Day and Small Business Week as well as posts with Hillary's personal condolences to the family of Beau Biden when he passed away. In June, attention was given to gay rights month, the «massacre» in Charleston, Father's Day, and a wish for a blessed Ramadan to Muslim followers, and in September she extended a wish to those celebrating the Jewish New Year. Later that month she posted a wish

to «Korean Americans and their families a safe and happy Chuseok». In late June, the historic «win for marriage equality» received considerable attention on her feed. In a similar fashion, July was a month for congratulating team USA on their victory in the FIFA Women's World Cup and adding comments under the #SheBelieves social media campaign that was created by the Women's National Team to inspire women and girls to pursue their dreams. Mid-August received focus to back to school messages, while in September she was «proud to #standwithPP» and opposed efforts to defund Planned Parenthood. Gun violence prevention was a big topic Hillary chose to tweet about in October, given the Oregon college shooting on October 1. Furthermore, on a regular basis Hillary's feed featured tweets in Spanish, clearly aimed at Latino constituents.

The attention to current events and holidays on Hillary's Twitter feed serves to further humanize her as a candidate and show her caring side, while strategically aligning those posts with issues her campaign wishes to highlight. Twitter's appeal has always been in the immediacy of comments and reactions that participants can express on different events, often as they are developing. By partaking in the important conversations of the day, Hillary indicates that she is not only in tune with what is happening but that she also cares about the types of things her prospective voters and followers care about. The all-inclusive approach of her tweets is clearly designed to appeal to a broad range of voters, painting her as the candidate who understands the experiences of average Americans, which has been a signature message of her 2016 campaign.

*Women's advocate.* The analysis of Hillary's Twitter feed revealed women's issues as a focal point of her 2016 presidential campaign, at least as presented on Twitter. The references to women's rights and economic issues that resonate with women are not only numerous but they are interspersed throughout the entire six-month period. Such references appear weekly on her feed in messages that read like: «Retweet if you agree with Hillary: We need to do more to make sure women and families can get ahead» or «Equal pay, paid leave, child care – these are not "women's issues"» or «As President, I'll fight to put families first – just like I have my entire career».

Moreover, Hillary was not hesitant to repeat her famous phrase «women's rights are human rights and human rights are women's rights» with a hashtag of throwback Thursday (#TBT) or give considerable attention in her Twitter feed to the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Conference on Women where she first uttered them. The anniversary was a welcome opportunity for her to remind her followers that she has been a lifelong champion of women's rights.

In addition, Hillary made a point to consistently feature the accomplishments of women who have made an impact in the past or are currently making signif-

icant contributions to the advancement of gender equality and women's rights. Prominently featured on her Twitter feed were: Ann Richards as «the 1<sup>st</sup> woman governor of Texas», Mae Jamieson who «made history and became the first African American woman to travel in space», «Dolores Huerta – teacher, organizer, activist – for her civic leadership and trailblazing spirit», and Viola Davis who in 2015 «became the first black woman to win Outstanding Lead Actress in a drama», to just name a few examples.

Hillary's strong stance as a women's advocate on Twitter reveals that she is taking a different approach in her 2016 campaign by placing focus on social and economic issues that resonate with women. Unlike her 2008 campaign, her 2016 campaign is choosing to make her stance on women's issues a central tenet, and thus not leaving any ambiguity about it. In comparison, in 2008 the focus of her campaign was her competency, as supported by her statement: «I am not running as a woman. I am running because I believe I am the best-qualified and experienced person» (Karni, 2015). The constant attention to equal pay, paid family leave and affordable child care are designed to appeal to a broad group of female voters by convincing them that she is the best choice when it comes to addressing those long-standing problems. In her words: «For far too long, these challenges have been dismissed by some as "women's issues". Well, those days are over». In this sense, she is clearly using the «gender card» (Karni, 2015) to generate a wider appeal by making the claim that inequality hurts everyone. To quote one of her tweets: «Inequality is a drag on our entire economy».

#### 5.4. Performative power: the Benghazi hearing

Clinton's performance, withstanding harsh public scrutiny and grueling questioning, has been studied thoroughly in an analysis of the 2013 congressional testimony about the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi and the loss of four American lives (Harp, Loke and Bachmann, 2016). In this analysis, the authors contended that even though media coverage of this event showed progress in acknowledging Clinton's competent performance as Secretary of State, it still engaged in gendered rhetoric when her emotional displays were scrutinized, pitting competence against authenticity.

In the build-up to the second Benghazi congressional hearing scheduled for October 22, 2015, where she was expected to defend her use of a private email account while serving as Secretary of State, Clinton's Twitter feed became an opportunity to project a dramatic and credible performance on the public stage, to decouple her opponents, and to seize the moment to her advantage. Thus, the virtual refusal to engage with vitriolic attacks on behalf of the Republicans while also remaining

unaffected by the gendered notion of her emotional performance during the 2013 congressional probe was quickly turned into an opportunity to highlight Clinton's stoic performance and her «presidential aura» on social media. Her 11-hour marathon questioning session has arguably produced some of the most iconic Internet memes of the 2016 presidential campaign, which were skillfully appropriated by the Hillary campaign itself. For example, one day after the hearing, Hillary's Twitter account featured her now famous response accompanied by a shot of her stoic facial expression, «I'm sorry that doesn't fit your narrative, Congressman. I can only tell you what the facts were», alongside Hillary's own words «11 Hours. One candidate who showed she's ready to be president» (see Figure 1). Moreover, memes with Hillary's «unbothered» look (as shown in Figure 1) achieved instantaneous virality and were construed as a symbolic representation of her ability to endure attacks without «losing her cool». Most prominent became the animated GIF showing how she's «brushing off her shoulder» during the hearing, which started circulating on Twitter the day of the hearing. This seemingly simple and innocuous gesture was used as an opportunity to project and convey a sense of composure over the storm of hostile questions hurled by the committee members. The latter was a particularly well timed meme, which gained the attention of journalists and prompted media headlines such as: «Hillary channeled

her inner Jay Z during Thursday's Benghazi hearing» (Reilly, 2015), which was in reference to Jay-Z's hit «Dirt Off Your Shoulder», and «The many faces of Hillary Clinton: 2016 frontrunner displays rainbow of emotions», (Edelman, 2015) all alluding to Clinton's symbolic performance and asserting her presence as calm and in control. The following week, the Clinton campaign posted the popular GIF with a single #GOPdebate hashtag instead of a message with the intent to convey her feelings concerning the upcoming GOP debate. The resonance of this move is illustrated by the 12,536 retweets and 16,309 likes that this tweet received.



Figure 1. Hillary Clinton's tweet after the Benghazi hearing in October 22, 2015

Furthermore, Clinton's signature tweets with memes were quickly picked up by mainstream outlets, acknowledging and simultaneously validating her performative power, and in turn describing her as «presidential» and «in total control». While reporting on her stoic presence, pundits like Joe Scarborough remarked that the hearing was a TKO for Clinton, echoed by Mike Barnicle who called it «an amazing performance» (Power, 2015) and *The Guardian's* assertion that «Benghazi hearing: Hillary Clinton shows yoga poise through 11-hour stretch», (Gambino and Jacobs, 2015). While the tweets might have also presented an opportunity to cause a firestorm of attacks by her opponents who use the very same symbolic interactions to discredit her on social media, they also offered a structural space for staging Hillary Clinton's performances in hopes of stirring audiences and journalists cognitively and emotionally in a positive way.

## 6. Conclusions

Johnson (2012) has argued that Twitter has expanded the soundbite into what she calls the «twitter bite», stating «political candidates must learn to use rhetoric in the digital world» (*ibidem*: 56) while others have contended that «hashtags are the new lawn signs» (Leighton and Taintor, 2012: n.p.). The analysis of Hillary Clinton's Twitter feed for the first six months of her presidential campaign suggests that, overall, she managed to make full use of the capabilities of this new platform. Indeed, Hillary's social media strategy has evolved beyond her previously lackluster performance. As one critic wrote, «In 2008, [Clinton] was supposedly techno-challenged and out of touch [...] a Luddite who ignored Silicon Valley in the campaign and didn't quite understand the Internet era» (Ammori, 2011, January 25: n.p.). Today, Clinton, with the help of her army of digital experts, presents herself as the «digitally savvy» candidate, who understands the communication needs of the electorate circa the new digital age. Previously criticized for appearing too stiff, contrived, and unapproachable, Clinton was hailed for bringing in new sense of being «human», or as *the Cut* put it, showing a «surprising sense of humor about not having a sense of humor» (Roy, 2015, October 28).

And that freshness is paying off, especially if examined along the three dimensions of power. Hillary's Twitter account clearly exhibits skillful use along the discursive and performative dimensions of power, albeit failing to fully harness the potential of relational power. Her Twitter account boasted an impressive number of followers and enjoyed significant attention from voters and the media. Yet, within the time frame under examination, her ability to capitalize on the relational potentiality



of Twitter didn't exactly pan out to produce the impact a well-managed and well-networked digital campaign could have. In comparison to her 2008 digital campaign presence, there was a notable display of digital savvy bolstered by her team of «Silicon Valley stars» (Lapowsky, 2016), which nonetheless, failed to materialize in securing Clinton the undisputed position of frontrunner for the Democratic nomination.

On the other hand, in terms of discursive power, Hillary's tweets emphasized inclusivity, freshness and women's issues – all issues that carry a broad appeal among potential voters and present her as a champion of everyday Americans. Additionally, Hillary's performative power, as exemplified by the Benghazi hearings, earned her the attention, if not the respect, of political pundits who did not fail to notice her quick wit and often uncharacteristically cool responses, both against attacks by the Republicans, but also by her Democratic opponent Bernie Sanders. As a commentator pointed out, «As Bernie Sanders' Twitter feed churns out populist truism after populist truism, Hillary's talking points are mixed with reaction GIFs and pointed personal jokes» (Hess, 2015: 7), a communicative strategy that appears to have caught the attention of the new digitally tuned-in voters as well as professional journalists.

As a result of this analysis, a more nuanced picture of Clinton's use of Twitter's relational, discursive and performative power emerges, one that might not be equally transversal in all three dimensions of the social network's power, but instead reveals a heavier stress on the discursive and performative aspects of Twitter in an attempt to construct a new political identity for Clinton, which Hess (2015) described as «not molded to mimic Clinton's persona» but «instead [...] written in the voice of a Hillary Clinton enthusiast eager to build an online fandom in her idol's image» (Hess, 2015: 4).

While a Twitter account is a powerful tool to maintain a well-groomed public image – in the case of Hillary Clinton – we must acknowledge this reliance on social media in the vacuum of a more complex understanding of how it intersects with other means of connecting to the everyday experience of the voter, including consumption of and engagement with mainstream media outlets, or a more detailed account of the responses by professional media, thus reminding us that «[a] leader's image is complex and dynamic» (Just and Crigler, 2000). Clearly, further research is needed to disentangle those complex relationships as well as to establish how social media, and Twitter in particular, have an effect on election outcomes. We believe that the outcome of the 2016 elections, where Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by 2.9 million but lost the Electoral College (Krieg, 2016) to Donald Trump, who has become the first actively tweeting President, underscore the need for additional research to better understand the impact of social media on politics. Moreover, Clinton's seemingly complete withdrawal from the social network immediately after conceding the

elections might also be a well-calculated move to re-engage her current following of 13 million, leaving critics wondering whether bringing a «slow burn to Twitter» is not another carefully constructed political strategy (Pindell, 2017). Acknowledging the limitations of our approach, we argue that our study sheds some light on a fascinating new aspect of political campaigning. The examination of Hillary's Twitter feed during the early stages of her 2016 Presidential campaign tells us that 140 characters could, in fact, speak volumes when it comes to political campaigning.

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