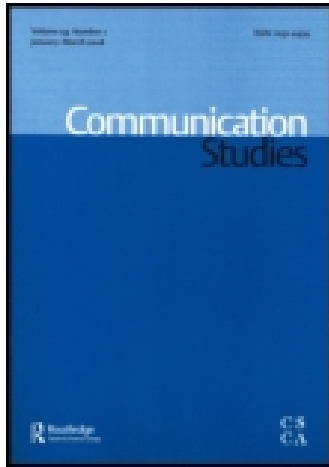


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### Tweets, Polls, and Quotes: Gatekeeping and Bias in On-Screen Visuals During the Final 2012 Presidential Debate

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# Tweets, Polls, and Quotes: Gatekeeping and Bias in On-Screen Visuals During the Final 2012 Presidential Debate

Kristen D. Landreville, Caitlin White, & Sam Allen

*This study content analyzed the on-screen visuals (i.e., candidate quotes, live Twitter feed, and poll results) displayed during the final presidential debate on the ABC News/Yahoo News live-streaming online coverage. Gatekeeping and research on political campaign coverage were used to provide rationale about the nature of the on-screen visuals. Results largely confirmed previous research into presidential campaign coverage: The on-screen visuals revealed a reliance on elite sources (media-related professionals and public figures), the on-screen visuals were largely neutral in nature for the candidates (although there was a slight pro-Obama advantage in the tweets and a slight pro-Romney advantage in the quoted material shown on-screen), and the on-screen visuals focused on horserace, strategy, and image at the expense of issue and policy discussion.*

*Keywords: Mediated Communication; New Media; Political Communication*

Debates are a key element during presidential campaigns and are oftentimes the climax of a campaign that has spanned several years. Debates also attract millions upon millions of television viewers. The 2012 presidential debates were no different; the first debate reached an approximate 67.2 million viewers (Nielsen, 2012a), the second debate saw viewership drop slightly with 65.6 million viewers (Nielsen,

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2012b), and the third debate dipped to 59.2 million viewers (Nielsen, 2012c). Collectively, the debates and the candidates' performances can make an impression on voters' minds. For example, a meta-analysis of debate effects shows that vote preference and perceptions of the candidates' personality can be influenced by viewing presidential debates (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003).

There is also research geared at media coverage of presidential debates. Once a presidential debate is finished, the postdebate "debate" about who won and who lost begins. These postdebate analyses can differ by television network and can influence individuals' perceptions about who won and who lost (Brubaker & Hanson, 2009; Fridkin, Kenney, Gershon, & Woodall, 2008). Moreover, the framing of postdebate coverage influences citizens; specifically, when news media cast presidential debates as a game (i.e., game-framed coverage), citizens are less likely to use policy reasoning in subsequent reflection on the debates (Pingree, Scholl, & Quenette, 2012).

Recently, there have been changes in presidential debate coverage, especially considering that the broadcasted presidential debates of the past did not feature an abundance of on-screen visuals, such as live polling results, candidate quotes, and a live Twitter feed. However, recent presidential debates (e.g., 2004, 2008, 2012) broadcasted by television networks, in particular, cable networks (e.g., MSNBC and CNN), have included more on-screen visuals. For instance, live dial-testing results from focus groups were shown on-screen during CNN's live coverage of the presidential debates in 2008 (Kirk & Schill, 2011) and in 2012. Although the use, effectiveness, and ethics of these live dial tests during presidential debates continues to be debated (e.g., Kirk & Schill, 2011; Moore, 2008), there is no indication that this type of debate coverage will decline.

In another example of presidential debate coverage changing, CNN solicited YouTube videos from citizens who wanted to ask questions to the 2008 presidential primary candidates. Nearly 3,000 submissions were reviewed by journalists and 29 videos were chosen by journalists to air (Cooper as cited in McGookin, 2007). These CNN/YouTube debates show how social media is being integrated into the presidential debate process (Kirk & Schill, 2011). Although, exposure effects to the CNN/YouTube debates did not differ when compared to traditional journalist-controlled debates (McKinney & Rill, 2009).

The 2012 US presidential election was even further infiltrated by new media and social media technology. The 2012 election has been described as the "Twitter election" (McKinney, Houston, & Hawthorne, 2014), in part due to campaigns', journalists', and the public's use of Twitter to send and receive election news and event updates, as well as to disseminate and read political analysis and opinions (Houston, McKinney, Hawthorne, & Spialek, 2013). For example, 6.5 million tweets were sent about the final presidential debate on the evening of the event (Sharp, 2012). All of this tweeting during debates can affect viewers. Among other findings, Houston et al. found that individuals who tweeted most frequently during the presidential debates learned more from the debate compared to individuals who tweeted less. Clearly, new and social media are influencing the presidential campaigns and presidential debates.

Turning to the coverage of the 2012 presidential debates, debates were live streamed on the Internet, and social media were even more incorporated into the debates. For example, ABC News teamed up with Yahoo News to live stream the presidential debates on the Internet, which featured GoPollGo survey results (GoPollGo is a service that allows social media users to give simple polls and instantly track results) as well as periodic Twitter feed updates from journalists, prominent politicians, celebrities, and average citizens. MSNBC featured a Twitter feed on its televised broadcast of the debates. CNN's televised and online streaming broadcasts of the debates featured a "speaking time" visual that tracked the amount of time each candidate spoke and featured the live dial-testing results of undecided voters' positive and negative feelings toward the candidates as they spoke. New viewing formats that incorporate many on-screen visuals and social media updates are allowing viewers to experience the presidential debates in a very different way than previous presidential campaigns. Consequently, questions arise about the content of these new debate-viewing formats and on-screen visuals. Currently, there is a gap in the political communication literature about these topics, such that the bulk of presidential debate research is focused on televised broadcasts as opposed to live online streaming broadcasts. Although research on split-screen versus single-screen presentation of presidential debates exists (Cho, 2009; Cho, Shah, Nah, & Brossard, 2009; Scheufele, Kirn, & Brossard, 2007), there are no other recent studies that examine the on-screen visuals presented during presidential debates. Accordingly, the current study applies past research on televised presidential debates and content analyzes the abundance of on-screen visuals displayed during the third presidential debate on the ABC News/Yahoo News live-streaming online coverage. Gatekeeping and research on political campaign coverage are used to provide rationale for several hypotheses about the nature of the on-screen visuals.

### **Gatekeeping**

On-screen visuals are becoming more popular during the broadcasting of presidential debates. These on-screen visuals, such as instant poll results and Twitter feeds, could exert an influence on the audience. However, before investigating the potential effects of on-screen visuals, it is important to understand the content of on-screen visuals. What specific information, both textual and graphic, is selected by a television network and featured on-screen during the presidential debate broadcasts? That is the guiding question for this study. Essentially, information selection by the television network is at the heart of this study. Thus, gatekeeping is the most appropriate theoretical perspective with which to begin this discussion.

Gatekeeping theorists suggest news production occurs through a complex process where communication industry players use traditional journalistic techniques (e.g., reliance on elite sources) to shape how the news is made, gathered, and transmitted (Shoemaker, Eichholz, & Wrigley, 2001). Gatekeeping refers to the process of selection and omission of potential stories by news sources, journalists, editors, and news organizations, whereas each point where a decision is made about information

selection and omission is a gate in the news flow (Shoemaker et al., 2001). In updating previous gatekeeping models, scholars have argued that understanding the process of newsmaking requires one to take into account “every aspect of message selection, handling, and control” (Shoemaker, 1997, p. 57). Gatekeeping research suggests news production utilizes a process of “indexing” its sources, where news producers choose primarily elite officials to act as sources to fill broadcasts at the expense of nonofficial sources (Alexseev & Bennett, 1995; Bennett, 1990). The indexing of sources has a meaningful impact on setting the agenda of which issues count as news and the frame through which selected issues are reported (Entman, 2003; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991). In sum, traditional news organizations have utilized a gatekeeping process (Reese & Danielian, 1989) and an indexing of sources that emphasizes elites as their primary news sources (Sigal, 1973).

### *Gatekeeping and Social Media*

As social media begins to alter communication dynamics, some researchers have explored its implications on the gatekeeping process. Research on Internet blogs found a gatekeeping process in place where large blogs function as opinion leaders for smaller blogs, and moderation of large blogs enabled a structure for editorial gatekeeping to occur (Haas, 2005). New social media formats have also been found to highlight public figures and elites when compared with average citizens on popular Internet venues, such as YouTube (Dylko, Beam, Landreville, & Geidner, 2012). Previous research has also found that the integration of audience participation into traditional formats of journalism, such as the integration of received text messages from audience members into news production, utilized a gatekeeping process that left the moderator to select and edit messages (Enli, 2007).

Literature suggests that gatekeeping theory continues to offer valuable insight into the production of news through new social media platforms. As traditional media formats begin to merge aspects of social media into their broadcasts, such as some news stations streaming selected Twitter comments during the presidential debates, gatekeeping is likely in play. We predict that deep-seated gatekeeping habits of seeking elite opinion more often than average citizens’ opinions will be present in any on-screen visuals (e.g., social media) shown during the presidential debates.

H1: On-screen visuals shown during the presidential debates will feature more commentary and information from elites (e.g., public figures and media personnel) than nonelites (i.e., average citizens).

## **Presidential Campaign Coverage by the Networks**

### *Partisan Bias*

Journalists are expected to strive for objectivity, balance, and fairness in their reporting (McQuail, 1992; Schudson, 1999). However, accusations of partisan bias thrive,

especially during presidential elections (Entman, 2010; Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012a; Weatherly, Petros, Christopherson, & Haugen, 2007). Typically, television networks are accused of favoring the Democratic presidential candidate and promoting a liberal bias, although these views are more widely held by Republicans (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012a). Indeed, accusations of partisan bias abound; yet, there is no consistent empirical evidence of an entrenched, systematic liberal bias in network television coverage (Niven, 2001). There is, however, evidence of “a very small, and not completely consistent, liberal (or at least pro-Democratic) bias” in presidential campaign coverage on TV network news (i.e., ABC, CBS, and NBC), according to a meta-analysis of media bias research during presidential campaigns from 1948 to 1996 (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000, p. 149). The presence of a pro-Democratic coverage bias was so minor that the consequences of this bias may be insubstantial (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000), but they still exist and it is important to consider when most Americans report getting election news from television (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012a).

With the advent of increased on-screen visuals featured during the broadcasting of presidential debates by the television networks, this study examines the potential partisan bias of these on-screen visuals. Inferring from previous research, there may be a minor pro-Democratic bias (i.e., pro-Barack Obama) in the use of on-screen visuals during the presidential debate. Thus, the following hypotheses are advanced:

- H2: On-screen visuals during the presidential debates will feature more positive commentary and information about Barack Obama compared to Mitt Romney.
- H3: On-screen visuals during the presidential debates will feature more negative commentary and information about Mitt Romney compared to Barack Obama.

At the same time, the mainstream media do not appear to show an overwhelming partisan bias during its presidential campaign coverage (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000), and there should be an effort to provide balanced coverage of the candidates on network TV (i.e., not cable news). Thus, we offer a research question about the neutrality of the on-screen visuals present during the presidential debates:

- RQ1: To what extent do on-screen visuals during the presidential debates feature neutral commentary and information about Barack Obama and Mitt Romney?

### *Emphasis on the Horserace and Image*

In addition to the potential partisan bias from the mainstream television networks during presidential campaigns, previous research also shows a bias toward covering the horserace (e.g., poll numbers, understanding why a candidate is ahead or behind, debating motives and implications of campaign decisions) at the expense of covering policy and issues (Bucy & Grabe, 2007; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Fox, Angelini, & Goble, 2005; Lichter, 2001; Patterson, 1993; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991). There also

tends to be a focus on confrontation and attack between the candidates when discussing issues (Rudd & Fish, 1989) and when featuring candidate sound bites (Bucy & Grabe, 2007). Reasons for the prevalence of the horserace perspective include the rise of interpretative journalism, such that the modern journalist must focus less on presenting the candidates' messages and focus more on debating the motives and tactics of campaigns (Iyengar, Norpoth, & Hahn, 2004). While this may be true, voters themselves may also be partly responsible for the rise of "horseracism" (Iyengar et al., 2004). When voters were given access to a wide variety of news reports (e.g., issues, policies, strategy, polls) before the 2000 election, voters (especially highly engaged voters) were drawn to horserace and strategy reports (Iyengar et al., 2004). Therefore, news media have increasingly relied upon a barrage of political experts, pundits, and analytical journalists or commentators to fill the airtime, at the expense of using the candidates as a news source (Iyengar et al., 2004). Relevant to this study is the question if television networks will continue the horserace focus in their selection of on-screen visuals during the presidential debates; literature suggests an affirmative answer. Thus, we present the next hypothesis:

H4: On-screen visuals during the presidential debates will feature more horserace/ image commentary and information compared to issue/policy commentary and information.

## Method

A quantitative content analysis was used to examine the four hypotheses and one research question. The online streaming coverage of the final presidential debate by ABC News/Yahoo News was used in the study. This decision was made because ABC News' online coverage of the debates featured a variety of on-screen visuals, while CBS and NBC did not feature any on-screen visuals (besides their news logos) in their online streaming coverage of the debates. Moreover, "in 2012, the Yahoo!-ABC News Network maintained its position as the #1 source of news and information online for 12 consecutive months, serving over 85 million users per month on average," according to ABCNewsPR (2013, para. 1). During the course of the presidential election (from the political party conventions to Election Night), there were more than 20 million live video streams across ABC News, Yahoo! News, and other partner sites (ABCNewsPR, 2013). "To deliver the full picture to viewers, the ABC News-Yahoo! News Live Stream combined untraditional social media surveys with premium ABC News content to engage viewers on the issues they valued most" (ABCNewsPR, 2013, para. 10).

The live online streaming version, rather than the live television version, of the ABC News/Yahoo News coverage was used in the content analysis because of the easy and convenient access to the online version for coders, as well as the increased presence of on-screen visuals in the online version.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the online version showed additional on-screen visuals (e.g., tweets) compared to the broadcast TV version.



Because our study is focused on understanding new on-screen visuals presented during debates, it was appropriate to use the online version with more on-screen visuals.

### *Categorizing the On-Screen Visuals*

The first step in the content analysis was to record all of the on-screen visuals shown during the debate. The lead researcher took this role and discovered four types of on-screen visuals that will now be described:

1. Short news facts about the topic of discussion: for example, during a discussion of Syria, an image of a globe was featured, along with the geographic outline of the country's border with the statement "An estimated 30,000 Syrians have been killed so far in the violence" (ABC News, 2012).
2. Brief quotes from the candidates: for example, during the same discussion of Syria, a quote that Obama said about Syria was shown on the screen, "The suffering citizens of Syria must know: we are with you, and the Assad regime must come to an end" (ABC News, 2012). And immediately following that Obama quote, a Romney quote about Syria was shown, "I will work with our partners to identify and organize those members of opposition . . . and ensure they obtain the arms they need to defeat Assad's tanks, helicopters, and fighter jets" (ABC News, 2012).
3. GoPollGo unscientific poll results: for example, during the Syria discussion, poll results reported, "Which foreign policy issue are you most concerned with hearing about in tonight's Presidential debate? US Foreign Debt 820 \* Wars and US Troop Safety 738 \* Terrorist Threats 456 \* Other 203" (ABC News, 2012).
4. Tweets from various sources about the debate, including public figures (e.g., @realDonaldTrump and @ChuckGrassley), people from news media (e.g., @rickklein, who is self-described as a senior Washington editor for ABC News), and average citizens (e.g., @GovInTrenches, who is self-described as someone who "used to be a government employee – till I took a budget axe to the knee") (Whitaker, 2012).

Each unique visual, including each tweet, was shown on the screen for about 10 seconds. Oftentimes, the visuals would appear in spurts. That is, there would be no visuals on the screen for a few minutes, and then a spurt of tweets would occur for about minute or two. In total, there were 57 tweets shown on the screen during the whole debate in nine separate spurts.

Once the lead researcher recorded all of these visuals in an MS Excel file, the other researchers involved with the study both viewed the final presidential debate by themselves and checked for errors in the on-screen visual record compiled by the lead researcher. No errors were found.

### *Intercoder Reliability*

Coders were the three researchers involved with the study. To establish intercoder reliability, all three coders independently coded the entire sample (i.e., not a percentage

of the sample) and then Krippendorff's alphas were calculated for each coding category; all coding categories had alphas more than .67 (see the next section for coding categories and specific alpha levels). Any discrepancies in the individual codes were resolved through discussion after intercoder reliability was established using an SPSS macro for calculating Krippendorff's alpha (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007).

#### *Development of Coding Scheme*

The researchers created a coding scheme for each particular on-screen visual or, in the case of on-screen visuals that were not coded, explanations for the decision making is detailed below. The coding scheme for each on-screen category (excluding the category that was not coded) addressed one or more of the following: (a) frequency; (b) presence of elite versus nonelite commentary and information; (c) tone of candidate commentary and information; and (d) presence of horserace, issue, and image foci in the commentary and information.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Short news facts about the topic of discussion*

These on-screen visuals were not coded. This decision was made because the facts were (a) maps featuring the location of the country being discussed and (b) short factual statements about the topic being discussed. Typically, the facts were similar statements to what the moderator said at the beginning of the topic for discussion.

#### *Brief quotes from the candidates*

The brief quotes from the candidates were only coded for frequency. Thus, coders counted the number of quotes by each candidate and included a total word count for both candidates' quotes that were featured as an on-screen visual (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 1.0$ ). The content of the brief candidate quotes was not coded because the candidates were saying nearly the exact same statements in-person during the debate as the brief quotes were shown on-screen, which was solely focused on issues and policies.

#### *Gopollgo unscientific poll results*

The GoPollGo unscientific poll results were coded for candidate tone and presence of horserace, issue, or image foci. Because the poll's results were unscientific, this gives no weight to the reliability and generalizability of the results. However, poll results may exert a social influence on debate viewers' opinions (C. J. Davis, Bowers, & Memon, 2011). We considered the poll results a true "extra" source of information that was in addition to what the candidates and moderator were discussing. Thus, polls were coded for the presence or absence of (a) Obama positive, (b) Obama neutral, (c) Obama negative, (d) Romney positive, (e) Romney neutral, (f) Romney negative, and (g) unrelated to candidate preference (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 1.0$ ). These categories were not mutually exclusive. Additionally, coders identified the poll results as reflective of an image, horserace, or issue focus (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 1.0$ ).

*Twitter feed*

Like the poll results, the tweets were considered extra bits of information that were in addition to what the candidates and moderator were discussing. Thus, the tweets from the on-screen Twitter feed were analyzed for elite versus nonelite commentary, candidate tone, and presence of horserace, issue, or image foci. First, the Twitter profiles of all featured tweets were content analyzed as elite, nonelite, or unknown identity (Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 1.0$ ). To do this, coders performed a Twitter search for the Twitter-profile name and used the profile's short self-description to identify the Twitter profile as elite or nonelite. Elite categories included: (a) media-related professional, (b) public figure, Obama supporter, (c) public figure, Romney supporter, and (d) public figure, unknown affiliation. Nonelite categories included (e) average citizen, Obama supporter, (f) average citizen, Romney supporter, and (g) average citizen, unknown affiliation. If coders could not categorize a Twitter profile into one of the seven categories when examining the profile's short self-description (i.e., average citizen, public figure, etc.), or if the Twitter profile was deleted and did not exist at the time of coding (i.e., January 2013, nearly 3 months after the broadcasting of the third presidential debate), then the Twitter profile was coded as (h) unknown identity. Elite, nonelite, and unknown identity categories were mutually exclusive.

As shown in the above categories, most Twitter profile categories included a candidate-preference specification, except the (a) media-related professionals, (d) public figure, unknown affiliation, and (g) average citizen, unknown affiliation. The candidate-preference specification was coded from the tweeters' actual tweet that was featured during the debate if political ideology was not mentioned in the Twitter profile's self-description. For example, @lindapetrou describes herself as a "Conservative college professor" (lindapetrou, 2012) from North Carolina. She tweeted, "Romney is being presidential and Obama is begin [*sic*] defensive and aggressive #debates" (lindapetrou, 2012) Thus, @lindapetrou was categorized as (f) average citizen, Romney supporter. In another example, @Jellsworth1978 describes himself, "I'm a big fan of the Minnesota Vikings, great food, but most importantly a lover of Jesus Christ. John 3:30" (Ellsworth, 2012) from St. Paul. He tweeted, "America's relationship with Israel is important. Which commander is going to visit there during their tenure in office? #debates" (Ellsworth, 2012). This Twitter profile was categorized as (g) average citizen, unknown affiliation because there is no indication of candidate preference from the profile's self-description or the tweet itself.

Additionally, all of the tweets were content analyzed for candidate tone (Krippendorff's alphas for all categories were above .67) and focus (Krippendorff's alphas for all categories were above .92). For candidate tone, tweets were coded for the presence or absence of (a) Obama positive, (b) Obama neutral, (c) Obama negative, (d) Romney positive, (e) Romney neutral, (f) Romney negative, and (g) unrelated to candidate preference. These categories were not mutually exclusive; thus, a tweet could be both Obama positive and Obama negative, or Obama negative and Romney negative. Using the examples from above, @lindapetrou's tweet would be categorized as Obama negative because of the statement about Obama being "defensive and aggressive," which are typically considered negative character attributes, and it would be coded as Romney positive because

of the statement about Romney being “presidential,” which is typically considered a positive attribute for a candidate. Moving on, @Jellsworth1978’s tweet would be coded as Obama neutral and Romney neutral because both candidates are implied in the tweet (i.e., with the statement “which commander”) yet there is no candidate tone or preference indicated.

For tweet foci, each tweet was coded for the presence or absence of (a) image (i.e., focus on appearance, mannerism, facial expressions, demeanor), (b) horse-race (i.e., focus on who is winning, strategy, poll numbers, candidate motivations), and (c) issues (i.e., focus on policy or any political topic). These categories were also not mutually exclusive. Again using the examples from above, @lindapetrou’s tweet would be categorized as an image focus because of the reference to candidate character and demeanor. @Jellsworth1978’s tweet would be coded as an issue focus because of the reference to America’s relationship with Israel, a foreign policy issue.

## Results

It is important to note that because the analyzed results were intended to provide a census of on-screen visuals during the final presidential debate that streamed online by ABC News/Yahoo News and were not randomly sampled from a larger population, it is not appropriate to use inferential statistics to compare coverage; thus, only relative percentages and frequencies are reported in this article.

Our first hypothesis predicted more on-screen visuals from elite sources as opposed to nonelite sources. An analysis of all of the tweeters’ Twitter profiles and corresponding tweets shows that elite sources were indeed used more often than nonelite sources in the featured on-screen tweets. In the 57 tweets, about two thirds (38 tweets) were from elites: media-related professionals (32 tweets), a public figure who supported Obama (one tweet), and public figures who supported Romney (five tweets). Just under a quarter of the 57 tweets (14 tweets) were from nonelite sources: average citizen who supported Obama (one tweet), average citizen who supported Romney (one tweet), and average citizens whose candidate preference was unknown (12 tweets). Finally, less than 10% of tweets (five tweets) had a deleted Twitter profile or lack of a self-description to further categorize the profile and tweet. Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that on-screen visuals would feature more positive commentary and information about Barack Obama compared to Mitt Romney. Likewise, H3 predicted that on-screen visuals during the presidential debates will feature more negative commentary and information about Mitt Romney compared to Barack Obama. To examine these hypotheses, three types of on-screen visuals were reviewed. First, the frequency and word count of candidate quotes that were shown on-screen were noted. Obama had 27 brief quotes shown on-screen during the final presidential debate, for a total of 591 words. Romney had 35 brief quotes, with a total of 829 words. Romney had a clear advantage in this type of on-screen visual. The sources of the quotes were barackobama.com, mittromney.com, and public statements or speeches that Obama or Romney had made, dating from April 2007 to October 2012. The issues that were

discussed on the on-screen candidate quotes mirrored the issues that were discussed verbally by the candidates. Although not formally content analyzed, examples of the issues that were discussed include the Benghazi 9/11 terrorist attack, the Syrian civil war, US military spending, international trade agreements, trade conflicts with China, US manufacturing jobs and outsourcing, Iran's nuclear program, Israel, and the war in Afghanistan.

Second, the GoPollGo results were examined. Two of the poll results mentioned the candidates: (a) Which candidate has the most to lose in tonight's final presidential debate (Obama 3,008; Romney 2,051); and (b) Who do you think is winning the debate so far (Obama 7,227; Romney 3,701)? From the first poll result, Obama is portrayed negatively by having more to lose. However, perhaps the more important poll result is the second result, which unmistakably shows Romney in a negative light as losing the debate. Also important to note are the times at which these poll results were shown on-screen. The first poll result was revealed about 32 minutes into the debate, whereas the second poll result was revealed very close to the end of the debate (about 1 hour and 15 minutes). In the end, the on-screen polls show mixed results about candidate tone.

Third, the 57 tweets from the on-screen Twitter feed were reviewed for candidate tone. Obama was depicted positively in 10 tweets (17.5%), whereas Romney was depicted positively in seven tweets (12.3%). Thus, Obama was more often portrayed positively compared to Romney. As for negative tweets about the candidates, Obama was featured in 10 negative tweets (17.5%), and Romney was featured in 12 negative tweets (21.1%). This shows that Romney was more often portrayed negatively compared to Obama.

In sum for H2 and H3, it appears that Romney had an advantage with on-screen quotes, yet Obama had a slight advantage in the on-screen tweets, and the poll results are somewhat mixed. Thus, H2 and H3 are not fully supported.

The research question asked about the extent of neutral portrayals of the candidates in on-screen visuals. We examined the tweets for evidence of neutrality. Results showed that Obama was portrayed neutrally in 23 tweets (40.4%), and Romney was portrayed neutrally in 23 tweets (40.4%). Thus, there was no difference between the candidates in neutral tweets, and neutral tweets were more common than positive and negative tweets about the candidates. It is interesting to note that candidates were not featured at all in 11 tweets (19.3%).

H4 predicted that on-screen visuals would focus more on the horserace/image than issues/policy. First, GoPollGo results were examined. There were two polls that focused on the horserace and two polls that focused on foreign policy issues. Thus, the result for the on-screen polls is mixed. Second, the on-screen tweets were analyzed. Tweets revealed a horserace or image focus in 39 tweets (68.4%) and an issue focus in 20 tweets (35.1%). A horserace/image was much more common than an issue focus in on-screen tweets, which supports H4. However, the on-screen visuals are mixed when considering both GoPollGo results and tweets.

Finally, although there were no hypotheses or research questions that examined the tweet source relative to the tweet tone toward the candidates, a post hoc analysis was performed to examine any potential relationships. Table 1 shows that Twitter profiles

**Table 1** Twitter Profiles and Presence of Candidate Tone in Tweets

	Presence of candidate tone						
	No Cand.	O. Pos.	O. Neu.	O. Neg.	R. Pos.	R. Neu.	R. Neg.
Av. Cit., O. Supp.	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Av. Cit., R. Supp.	0	0	0	1	1	0	0
Av. Cit., Unknown	3	4	5	1	2	5	3
Media Professional	7	4	16	2	1	16	4
Pub. Fig., O. Supp.	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Pub. Fig., R. Supp.	0	0	2	3	1	2	1
Unknown Identity	1	1	0	3	2	0	2
Totals	11	10	23	10	7	23	12

*Note.* The numbers indicate the number of times the specific candidate tone was mentioned in the tweets from those Twitter profiles. Abbreviations are as follows: “No Cand.” means no candidates were mentioned in the tweet; “O. Pos.” means Obama was portrayed in a positive light in the tweet; “O Neu.” means Obama was portrayed in a neutral manner; “O. Neg.” means Obama was portrayed negatively. The same abbreviations apply to “R. Pos.,” “R. Neu.,” and “R. Neg.,” but Romney is the target candidate.

were responsible for the positive, negative, and neutral candidate tweets. In terms of positive Obama tweets, average citizens were responsible for five tweets and media-related professionals were responsible for four tweets. No public figures authored positive Obama tweets. On the other hand, positive Romney tweets came from only three average citizens and one media-related professional. Only one public figure authored a tweet that supported Romney (@realDonaldTrump). The composition of the neutral tweets are identical for both Obama and Romney with media-related professionals authoring the majority of neutral tweets for both candidates. Negative tweets about Obama were directed from public figures who supported Romney (e.g., @ChuckGrassley, @RickSantorum, @realDonaldTrump) and from unknown identities; whereas negative tweets about Romney were directed the most from media-related professionals and average citizens. Implications of the results are discussed next.

## Discussion

With the rise of on-screen visuals and live online streaming broadcasts of the presidential debates, the goal of this study was to understand the content; what visuals are viewers seeing during the debate? A review of literature showed that network TV tend to favor elite sources, to slightly favor Democratic candidates, and to focus on the horserace more than issues. Overall, the results for this study support previous literature: The on-screen visuals revealed a reliance on elite sources (media-related professionals and public figures), the on-screen visuals were largely neutral in nature for the candidates (although there was a slight pro-Obama advantage in the tweets and a slight pro-Romney advantage in the quoted material shown on-screen), and the on-screen visuals focused on horserace, strategy, and image at the expense of issue and policy discussion.

Turning first to the elite-source bias, about two thirds of the tweets were from elites, primarily media-related professionals (e.g., news producers, reporters, editors). There were three media professionals (@hollybdc, @rickklein, and @danbharris) that were used as Twitter sources four times each. Moreover, another media source was used three times (@jaketapper) and another used two times (@magsABC). An interesting gatekeeping process is occurring during the Twitter feed; the Twitter-feed gatekeeper seems to be relying on sources similar to himself or herself for commentary (e.g., other journalists) rather than searching for tweets using hashtags, such as #debate, that may lead the gatekeeper to a more diverse set of tweets. There seemed to be a hesitation to use average citizens' tweets, as only a quarter of tweets were authored by average citizens. Perhaps the gatekeeper perceived more credibility, professionalism, and analytical skills in the tweets from media-related professionals. Nevertheless, the tendency to use elite sources in on-screen visuals was supported, just as previous research in social media has found a continued reliance on elites (e.g., Dylko et al., 2012). Our findings lend support to the Internet and social media skeptics who do not anticipate that new technologies will change the elite bias in news coverage and that elites will somehow fail to find a way to dominate the newest technology (R. Davis & Owen, 1998; Winner, 2003).

This reliance on media-related professionals as elites is also related to the majority of tweets being neutral in nature for Obama and Romney. When a media-authored tweet was selected, it was typically neutral. However, four media-authored tweets were pro-Obama and only one media-authored tweet was pro-Romney. Examples of media-authored pro-Obama tweets include the following: (a) "It's early but this is like Denver in reverse," (Task, 2012) by @aarontask, the editor-in-chief of Yahoo! Finance; and (b) "Obama on Romney: 'He doesn't have different ideas. That's because we're doing exactly what we should be doing' in Syria. #debates," by @rickklein, the political director at ABC News. These two pro-Obama tweets were considered anti-Romney as well because they either directly or indirectly mention Romney in a negative manner. The only media-authored pro-Romney tweet was by @rickklein, "getting the sense that both these guys would rather re-do debate No. 1. Romney b/c he was good, Obama b/c he wasn't. #debates." In a similar vein, only two media-authored tweets were anti-Obama (one example is the pro-Romney tweet noted above), yet four tweets were anti-Romney. An example of a media-authored anti-Romney tweet is *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* writer @MikeDrucker's tweet, "So far Mitt Romney's strategy has been to agree with Barack Obama, but be really angry about that. #debate" (Drucker, 2012). These tweets help to illustrate the ever-so-slight favoring of Obama by the gatekeeper who was responsible for selecting tweets to show during the live online streaming of the third presidential debate.

Interestingly, even a public figure who supported Romney authored a negative tweet about Romney; @ChuckGrassley tweeted, "Notice how rude Obama is interrupting many times Romney Romney should not be so polite [*sic*]" (Grassley, 2012). Here, Chuck Grassley is being critical of Romney's character and demeanor during the debate and accusing him of not being assertive enough. Altogether, there was a slight pro-Obama bias present in the on-screen Twitter feed, which reflects

previous research that shows a slight pro-Democrat bias in network TV coverage of presidential elections (D'Alessio & Allen, 2000). Yet, in the same breath, it appears that there was no overwhelming partisan bias in the on-screen Twitter feed.

As for the on-screen poll results and candidate tone, there was a split finding, such that Obama and Romney were both featured positively once and negatively once. Consequently, there was balance in this respect. Yet, there was no balance with the on-screen direct quotes from the candidates; Romney had 35 quotes (829 words) and Obama had 27 quotes (591 words). To give some context to this result, it is important to know that, just like tweets, candidate quotes came in spurts. Typically, when the respective candidate was speaking, there were also on-screen quotes from the respective candidate. However, the candidates had nearly identical speaking allotments: Obama spoke for 41 minutes, 42 seconds, and Romney spoke for 41 minutes, 7 seconds (Sullivan, 2012). Thus, it is unclear why Romney had an advantage in the on-screen quotes. In sum, for partisan bias in the on-screen visuals, the tweets can be categorized as slightly pro-Obama, the poll results can be categorized as balanced, and the direct quotes can be categorized as pro-Romney.

Moving on to the horserace versus issue foci of the on-screen visuals, past research indicates that news media tend to focus on the horserace during presidential campaigns (Bucy & Grabe, 2007; Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Fox et al., 2005; Lichter, 2001; Patterson, 1993; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991). This study's results were no different. The GoPollGo results showed two horserace questions (i.e., who has the most to lose and who is winning the debate) as well as two foreign policy questions. Additionally, the tweets were predominantly horserace/image oriented (68.4% compared to issue discussion at 35.1%). At times, the tweets would specifically refer to "strategy," such as this tweet from @rickklein, "clear Romney strategy to single out areas of agreement—gives him more credibility in areas he disagrees with. #debates," (Klein, 2012) and this tweet from @magsABC, "Interesting strategy Romney seems to be taking—agreed with Obama at least twice? (On purpose to throw off POTUS?)" (Dawson, 2012). These are examples of two media-related professionals offering their thoughts and insights into the strategies, motivations, and decision-making skills of the presidential candidates. However, even average citizens offered their horserace/image tweets as well. For example, @VEugenia32 tweeted, "I bet the vast majority of people watching this are those who decided whom they were voting for LONG ago. #debates," (VEugenia32, 2012) and @whuddleston37 tweeted, "#debates They both seem more cool headed than the last debate, and stronger, but Obama seems more composed than Romney" (Huddleston, 2012).

While strategy was the most common foci of tweets, issue and policy commentary were not absent from the tweets. For example, public figure (i.e., Governor of South Carolina) and Romney supporter Nikki Haley @nikkihaley tweeted, "Ok enough of the back and forth on defense cuts . . . military families want a President that has our back" (Haley, 2012). Average citizens also commented on issues as well; @bac573 tweeted, "Will there be any questions on #gitmo? And will the US open up trade with #Cuba again so we can smoke those sweet cigars? #debates" (Lucia, 2012). Curiously, of the 32 tweets from the media professionals, 22 tweets (68.75%) used



a horserace/image focus, whereas for average citizens, in the 14 tweets featured by them, only six tweets (42.85%) were horserace/image focused. And, for the six public figures who tweeted, only one was horserace/image focused (16.6%). This finding shows that news media professionals featured in on-screen tweets tended to focus more on the horserace/image than the average citizen and public figures.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Limitations to this study include the use of network TV coverage of just one presidential debate, which was streamed online. This limits our generalizability to how other networks and cable channels used on-screen visuals during the presidential debate. In the future, a content analysis of several TV broadcast networks' and cable networks' on-screen visuals during the presidential debates would be helpful. More content analyses of the on-screen visuals would help us understand if these results continue to hold true, which confirm prior research on gatekeeping, partisan bias, and horserace versus issue coverage during presidential campaigns. Second, the coding did not occur until 3 months after the final presidential debate. This was problematic for identifying some of the Twitter profiles because some were deleted in that 3-month period. Ideally, future research would conduct coding, or at least Twitter-profile identification, immediately after the debates to avoid this limitation. Third, the content of the candidates' on-screen quotes was not coded. However, future studies may provide insightful information about candidate framing by coding the candidates' on-screen quotes (e.g., coding for the quotes' tone—positive or negative—or framing—diagnostic or prognostic—would be helpful). Finally, content analysis studies do not address effects on the viewers. For example, how is the abundance of on-screen visuals during presidential debates affecting viewers' opinions of the candidates, knowledge of the issues, and feelings of cynicism toward the presidential election media coverage and the US political system? These are just a few questions that we had after this study. We hope to engage in future research that can provide answers to these questions, as well as others, that deal with media effects of debate viewing.

Finally, online streaming of presidential debates will likely grow in the next election season, and research that analyzes the on-screen visuals during the online streaming (and televised coverage) should continue. Pew Research Center reported that 32% of people younger than 40 years old followed the first 2012 presidential debate live online: 10% reported only watching the debate online and 22% reported watching both TV and online versions (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, 2012b). These survey data reveal that younger people are moving toward “dual-screening” the presidential debates (i.e., viewing the debates on both TV and online) and moving toward only viewing the presidential debates online. Moreover, broadcast network and cable networks should continue to be monitored for their use of on-screen visuals during presidential debates. ABC and CNN were the only networks that used on-screen visuals during their online streaming. That is, CBS, NBC, Fox News, and MSNBC did not feature on-screen visuals on their online

streaming of the debate. However, in the televised coverage of the debate, MSNBC and CNN had on-screen visuals, while ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox News did not have on-screen visuals. In short, research into the use of on-screen visuals should be researched in future election campaigns. The networks were all very different in their approach to televised and online streaming debate coverage. There are certainly no standards any longer in terms of what content is offered to viewers.

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## Notes

- [1] See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hx1mjT73xYE> for a video of the live-streamed coverage that was content analyzed.
- [2] For a comprehensive text-list of every on-screen visual, please contact the authors, or you can find all of the on-screen visuals that were content analyzed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hx1mjT73xYE>.

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