

The Impact of 280 Characters: An Analysis of Trump's Tweets and Television News Through the Lens of Agenda Building

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Abstract

Twitter impacts what is covered by journalists, which affects what viewers think is important. This article explores the association between Trump's tweets and cable and network television news coverage through the theoretical framework of agenda building. During a 3-week period in January 2020, a content analysis of story topics and publication times of Fox News, CNN, ABC, and NBC (N = 1,436) was conducted in conjunction with Trump's tweets (N = 277). The findings showed a strong correlation between Fox News and @realDonaldTrump's tweets and a moderate correlation with CNN. About half of Trump's tweets reflected Fox News stories, hosts, or guests. More than 40% of news stories mentioned Trump, while his tweets were in stories at least 10% of the time. The results showed that Trump and Fox News had a strong influence over agenda building in the United States' television news landscape.

Keywords

agenda building, Donald Trump, television news, Twitter, cable news

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In just a decade, social media has gone from connecting friends to connecting billions of people worldwide and being integrated into business, politics, home, and more. Twitter specifically has become a powerful platform through garnering new users, sparking conversations, and promoting events (Xiong et al., 2019). In 2019, 22% of Americans were using the app (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). Research showed that Twitter was the only social media platform—out of Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Reddit—to often influence news coverage, not only the other way around (Groshek & Groshek, 2013). Building on that research, this study extends the scholarly literature on agenda building by examining the relationship between Twitter and TV news, specifically as it relates to former President Donald Trump.

Agenda setting theory says the more coverage a topic receives, the more staying power and importance that topic has in the minds of the audience (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda building theory explains the factors behind the creation of the media, public, and policy agendas (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Where agenda setting focuses on the subjects brought forth as the main “agendas,” agenda building focuses on who or what sets that agenda (Parmelee, 2013). Trump, as the 45th U.S. president, impacted the media agenda and the public agenda, especially through Twitter (Perez-Curiel & Naharro, 2019). A Pew Research Center study showed that 16% of 2017 news stories about Trump or his administration included one of his tweets (Mitchell et al., 2017). From an agenda building perspective, by choosing to cover his tweets instead of other news, media placed Trump and his 280-character Twitter addresses at the center of the public agenda (Conway et al., 2015).

Before scholars turned their attention to the agenda building power of Trump’s tweets, some journalists informally observed Trump’s influence, without specifically calling it agenda building. They referred to the pattern as the “Trump-Fox feedback loop” (Gertz, 2019, para. 1). This study formally examines this feedback loop by considering the role of Trump’s tweets in the context of media agenda building related to news coverage from Fox News, CNN, ABC, and NBC. It also develops theory through applying agenda building to television as well as a social media outlet, Twitter. Ultimately, results reveal that Trump’s tweets were influential in building the media agenda. This finding also has implications for journalistic practices and the public agenda, even though Trump is no longer president.

Literature Review

Political Communication and Agenda Setting/Building

McCombs and Shaw (1972) founded the agenda setting idea after they surveyed undecided voters during the 1968 presidential campaign about which topics they thought were most important and compared their responses to a content analysis of local news stories. The issues reported by the participants as the most important were the same ones as the area’s media. More specifically, McCombs and Shaw explained that a media agenda can be disseminated through the placement of each story, how

often a topic is covered, how much time is dedicated to each topic, and other factors. Rogers and Dearing (1988) defined agenda setting as “a process through which the mass media communicate the relative importance of various issues and events to the public” (p. 155). They wrote that how salient a topic is does not necessarily reflect its *true* importance within society, but it does influence how important it is *perceived* by the audience. Iyengar and Kinder’s (1987) research was the first to show causality between news stories and public opinion. Just as agenda setting predicted, participants’ opinions about the most important issues facing the nation were changed or reinforced after watching a week of television news that focused on nuclear arms control, civil rights, or unemployment. The pre- and post-surveys showed respondents’ opinions were altered or reinforced to align with the topic they had been watching.

Agenda setting is only part of how media impacts society. Years later, scholars addressed another question: How do stories get on the agenda in the first place? Agenda building theory explains the factors behind the creation of media, public, and policy agendas. A media agenda is made up of issues brought forth by media, the public agenda is the issues the public feels passionate about, and the policy agenda is the issues that are top priority by those in power, such as legislators or policy makers (Perloff, 2018). Agenda building looks at how all of these factors are interrelated and how they affect news creation (Cobb & Elder, 1971). This theory asks why journalists choose to cover one event over another, focusing on who or what sets that agenda (Parmelee, 2013). Just as policymakers must select a few issues upon which to focus, reporters also cannot cover every newsworthy topic. These choices can affect what public and policy agendas are priorities. On the other hand, members of the public or public figures can influence the media agenda as well. For example, during the presidency of Barack Obama, conspiracy theorists insisted that he was not a U.S. citizen and, therefore, ineligible to be in office. Researchers found that Trump helped bring the “birther” argument to the media spotlight through Twitter, which later influenced public and policy discourse (Ott, 2016).

Trump’s influence on news persisted during his presidency as well. Perez-Curiel and Naharro (2019) studied Trump’s Twitter influence over the media agenda through a thematic content analysis of his tweets and four national newspapers. They analyzed over 300 tweets during Trump’s first 100 days in office and compared the tweets to the front pages of the newspapers. Additionally, they considered the public agenda aspect of agenda building by looking at the tweets’ public responses through metrics (i.e., likes, retweets, comments). The findings suggested that Trump’s tweets had a strong influence over the public and media agendas. Journalist Gertz (2019) referred to Trump’s agenda building through Twitter as the “Trump-Fox feedback loop” (para. 1). Gertz noticed that Trump tweeted about a variety of topics within a span of a few minutes. After further informal observation, he noticed the topics in Trump’s tweets were close to those discussed on *Fox & Friends*. This study examined the “Trump-Fox Feedback loop” with formal methodology and modified Perez-Curiel and Naharro’s agenda building research to focus on television news.

News-Making Processes and TV News

Reporters pursue stories based on their perceived newsworthiness, such as timeliness, proximity, unusual nature, human interest, conflict, impact, helpfulness, celebrities, entertainment, and issues/problems in the community (Rich, 2015). Journalists are also under an enormous time constraint, so they unintentionally (or intentionally) tend to rely on the same sources for ideas and quotes (Parmelee, 2013). Other outside influences are content demands and institutional norms; however, research suggests that personal preferences and routines can strongly influence news creation. Finally, pressure from authorities and the public also serve as news-making influences (Shoemaker & Reese, 2014).

Local and network television newscasts can serve as an illustration of how these news-making processes can impact a media agenda (Berkowitz, 1987). Specifically, half of the televised information from Berkowitz' (1987) study came from a news release or government-issued document. Applying an agenda building theoretical framework, Berkowitz argued that an over-reliance on governmental information gave those sources the power to set the media agenda and, thus, the public agenda. Additionally, journalists deemed official sources, like press releases from government institutions, as more credible and important than other sources.

TV news-making processes, in particular, are critical because of the dominance of TV news in American culture, which is a primary reason for why this study examines that medium. Television is Americans' top choice for gathering news, followed by online sources, such as social media, websites, or applications (Mitchell, 2018). Fox News exerts its supremacy in the cable news realm: in 2019, eight of the top 10 most-watched cable news programs were from Fox News, while the next highest-ranking cable networks were MSNBC and CNN (Q2 2019 Cable, 2019). From its inception in 1996, Fox News has applied a decidedly conservative perspective to its news and opinion, which was directed from the top executives, such as the late Roger Ailes (Sherman, 2014). Right-leaning Americans flocked to Fox News, and it has been the primary news source for conservative Americans. Subsequent research has found that although Fox News brands itself as "fair and balanced" journalism, Fox News was more persuasive than journalistic when it came to reporting on health care reform, leaning toward a conservative slant (Bard, 2017). Therefore, although Fox News could be thought of as infotainment rather than journalism during many segments and shows, it labels itself as "the undisputed leader in 24-hour news service" (Our Leadership, 2020, para. 7). Thus, Fox News presents its content in an openly conservative manner and yet still maintains it is committed to objective journalism. In short, the potential power of Fox News to be influential in the news ecosystem due to its prominence among conservatives and former President Trump is one reason why this study examined that outlet.

Turning to network news, the highest rated program in 2019 was ABC's "World News Tonight" with David Muir, followed by NBC's "Nightly News" with Lester Holt, then "CBS Evening News." "Good Morning America" was number 1 in the morning,

followed closely by “The Today Show,” but trailed widely by “CBS Morning News” (Ramos, 2020). For these reasons, ABC and NBC were examined in this study.

Social Media and Donald Trump

Researchers have sought to understand how social media platforms have impacted the theories of agenda setting and agenda building. Because of the rise of social media, the public is no longer just a media consumer, but also a content producer (Conway et al., 2015). People will spend more than 5 years of their lives scrolling through social media—more than the combined time people will spend eating (Herhold, 2018). Journalists have also reported using social media sites—especially Twitter—for story leads, quotes, or other information. Therefore, Twitter has played a role within public and political discourse (Conway et al., 2015).

Twitter is a format in which profiles are mainly public, allowing for simple, lateral discussion without traditional journalistic gatekeepers, but that does not mean that Twitter plays no role in its site’s content. For example, Twitter officials and employees play a gatekeeping function in their design of the algorithms and in their interventions in users’ content (e.g., applying a warning label, deleting material, or deactivating accounts, such as what happened with former President Trump as explained in the next paragraph). Thus, the traditional gatekeeping role of media editors and journalists is diminished on Twitter. Twitter users often connect with—or follow—other like-minded people. It is referred to as one of the more effective forms of communication for politicians due to its immediacy and lack of barriers between the source and receivers (Gertz, 2019). For example, Trump continued using his personal @realDonaldTrump Twitter account over the @POTUS account because “it’s working—and the tweeting, I thought I’d do less of it, but I’m covered so dishonestly” (Atkinson, 2019, p. 172).

Trump, who grew to fame through his real estate business, casinos, reality TV shows, books, and other self-promotions, was also known for his Twitter account (Kellner, 2016), which was permanently suspended in January 2021, following the Capitol riot (Twitter Inc, 2021). Kellner (2016) argued that Trump, in part through Twitter, attacked democracy and weakened the U.S government through his attacks on journalists, mainstream media, and “on the truth, itself” (p. 34). Kayam (2018) stated that unofficially the U.S. president is head of national political discourse and required to oblige a presidential etiquette. This changed with Trump’s 2016 presidential race. His rhetorical and nonverbal tactics, what Kayam referred to as the “anti-political rhetorical strategy,” included low-level language, negativity, and exaggerations (p. 185). Unlike other politicians or his presidential predecessors, Trump broke the mold of “sanitized, prepackaged rhetoric” and opted for early morning Twitter “rants” and unscripted announcements (Jamieson & Taussig, 2017, p. 620). This article built upon these studies by analyzing the impact of his Twitter rhetoric on the media agenda of TV news.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

TV news is a dominant news source for Americans, with Fox News raking in the highest cable ratings (Q2 2019 Cable, 2019) and being preferred by conservative viewers (Bard, 2017). Moreover, journalists have informally observed what they call the Trump-Fox Feedback Loop (Gertz, 2019). For these primary reasons, the following hypotheses were put forth:

Hypothesis 1: The topics in Trump's tweets will most closely resemble the topics on Fox News rather than CNN, ABC, or NBC.

Hypothesis 2: After Fox News covered specific topics, Trump (@realDonaldTrump) often tweeted about the same topics.

Because Dearing and Rogers (1996) demonstrated how media, policy, and public agendas can influence each other, Perez-Curiel and Naharro (2019) found Trump's tweets shaped national newspapers' agendas, and Mitchell et al. (2017) discovered 16% of news stories about Trump included or mentioned his tweets, the following research questions were asked to determine the association between the tweets and top U.S. cable and network television channels:

Research Question 1: Was there a relationship between the topics in Trump's tweets and the topics on CNN, ABC, or NBC?

Research Question 2: What frequency of coverage did (a) Trump and (b) Trump's tweets receive on the cable and network news outlets?

Method

To answer the hypotheses and research questions, a quantitative content analysis examined tweets from former President Trump's account between January 6–27, 2020, as well as the news coverage from Fox News, CNN, ABC, and NBC during those dates. At the time of the study, Trump had two Twitter accounts—@POTUS and @realDonaldTrump. He used the latter more frequently and had more followers on his personal account (87.3 million) than the official Presidential account (31.9 million). Because of the larger audience and more frequent use of his personal account, only @realDonaldTrump was used for this study.

The unit of analysis was every direct tweet during the study's time frame. No retweets (except manual retweets where Trump added comments), liked tweets, or replies were part of the study, as only Trump's direct words were included. Therefore, a tweet was operationally defined as a post of a maximum 280 characters published by @realDonaldTrump. If a tweet had more content than just text, that additional content was coded in the same entry as the tweet. Tweet threads (a series of connected tweets) were coded as a single unit as they are intended to be read continuously. Nine tweets that were deleted by Trump and two duplicate tweets were coded because these tweets are accessible and can potentially impact the public, policy, and media agendas.

January 6–27, 2020 was chosen to examine agenda building during the start of Trump’s final year in office. The intention was to look at television news during a normal news cycle, but the impeachment trial provided an interesting opportunity to study an angle not examined in previous research. The news programs on Fox News, CNN, ABC, and NBC¹ were recorded and analyzed from 6–8 a.m. Eastern Time. As noted in the literature review, the most-viewed cable programs are FOX News, MSNBC, and CNN; and the most-viewed morning news and nightly news shows are from ABC and NBC. However, CNN was chosen for this study over MSNBC because CNN ranked as one of the top eight topics mentioned in Trump’s tweets (Brown, 2019). Therefore, that network was more pertinent to this study. The time frame of 6–8 a.m. was chosen because these hours set the agenda for the rest of the day, and Trump also tweeted most frequently at this time before starting his work (Jamieson & Tausig, 2017). One hour before and after the allotted time frame was a cushion, so if a tweet echoed what was on Fox News at 5:45 a.m., both the corresponding story and tweet were included. The specific shows that were examined were “Good Morning America” and “World News Tonight with David Muir” on ABC; “The Today Show” and “NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt” on NBC; “Fox and Friends First” and “Fox and Friends” on Fox News; and “New Day” on CNN. Qualitatively, the morning news shows all provide a mix of hard news and human interest stories with some talk among the anchors (Haltermann, 2020). Prior investigation by the Pew Research Center showed ABC, NBC, and CBS morning news shows primarily focus on hard news in the first hour only (News Coverage Index, 2020), so the nightly news programs were added for more comparison of the news angle by those networks.

Coding Topics/Categories

Coding topics were developed from Lee and Xu’s (2018) categories, which were based on the National American Election Studies’ survey items of the most important issues in the 2016 presidential election. This study condensed those topics to the following categories: economy, defense/terrorism, criminal justice, education, foreign policy, healthcare, immigration, environment, entertainment, media bias, problems with Washington, impeachment, and other. Some of the topics under “other” included veteran affairs, social justice, religion, and weather. This study added impeachment because an inquiry into Trump began on September 24, 2019, with the Senate trial starting on January 21, 2020. The topic of entertainment was also added after a pilot study. (A codebook is available upon request.)

Coding Procedure

Trump often mentioned several topics in one tweet (Gertz, 2019), so when a tweet or news story pertained to one of the topics, no matter how many, it was coded as present. The time of each tweet and news story was also recorded. During the three-week period, a 24-hour rule was implemented to determine if the tweet or news story was

published first. For example, if a tweet was published Monday morning, but in response to the Sunday morning news, it would be coded as the news story being published first. Each television story was coded based on its affiliation. If a tweet referred to a news program or if the news program referred to one of Trump's tweets, it was coded as present.

Intercoder Reliability

To establish intercoder reliability on the final dataset, 20% of the data, 56 tweets and 288 news stories, were analyzed by two trained coders (one author and one undergraduate student). The chance-corrected Krippendorff's alpha agreement for each topic was as follows: Economy: .93; Defense: .92; Criminal Justice: .95; Education: 1.0; Foreign Policy: .88; Healthcare: .65; Environment: .75; Entertainment: 1.00; Media Bias: .69; Problems with Washington: .83; and Impeachment: .98. The topic of immigration was taken out of the data set because the alpha score was .53.

Findings

During the 3-week time frame, 277 tweets and 1,437 news stories were collected and analyzed, including 376 Fox News stories, 302 from CNN, 385 from ABC, and 392 from NBC. On average, Trump tweeted 13 times per day. The only day he didn't tweet was January 8, when he addressed the nation regarding Iranian missile attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq the night prior.

To test Hypothesis 1 and Research Question 1 regarding the topics in Trump's tweets and news stories, a Spearman's rank order rho correlation was conducted. See Table 1 for results of the topics.

Trump's tweets and Fox News had a strong, statistically significant, positive relationship between topics ($\rho = .83, p < .001$). CNN had a moderate, nearly statistically significant, positive relationship with Trump's tweets ($\rho = .54, p = .056$). ABC had a weak relationship ($\rho = .22, p = .48$), and NBC had the weakest relationship ($\rho = .08, p = .80$). Because the correlation between the topics of Trump's tweets and Fox News was strong and statistically significant, H1 was supported. The answer to RQ1, the relationship between tweet topics and the other news outlets showed almost no correlation with ABC and NBC, but a moderate, nearly significant one with CNN.

To analyze Hypothesis 2, which stated that Trump frequently tweeted about the same topics as Fox News after they air, Trump's tweets and the news sources were more closely examined. Nearly half ($n = 132, 48\%$) of @realDonaldTrump's tweets during the 3-week analysis were in response to Fox News, or tagged the cable news network in some way. Only two tweets were in response to or tagged NBC, and only one tweet each tagged CNN or ABC. Thus, as predicted by H2, almost half of Trump's tweets were inspired by and in response to what was aired previously on Fox News. To code a tweet as being inspired by Fox News or another source, it didn't have to be published immediately following the aired television segment. There were a few

Table 1. Rank Order of Categories From Trump's Tweets and the Four National Television News Outlets.

Trump's Tweets (N = 277)	Fox News (N = 376)	CNN (N = 302)	ABC (N = 385)	NBC (N = 392)
1. Prob. Wash. (n = 138, 50%)	1. For. Policy (n = 167, 44%)	1. For. Policy (n = 159, 42%)	1. For. Policy (n = 142, 37%)	1. For. Policy (n = 153, 39%)
2. Impeachment (n = 97, 35%)	2. Prob. Wash. (n = 141, 38%)	2. Defense (n = 118, 31%)	2. Crim. Justice (n = 133, 35%)	2. Crim. Justice (n = 146, 37%)
3. Foreign Policy (n = 72, 26%)	3. Crim. Justice (n = 138, 37%)	3. Crim. Justice (n = 98, 26%)	3. Entertainment (n = 91, 24%)	3. Defense (n = 111, 28%)
4. Media Bias (n = 70, 25%)	4. Defense (n = 121, 32%)	4. Impeachment (n = 40, 11%)	4. Defense (n = 72, 19%)	4. Entertainment (n = 54, 14%)
5. Economy (n = 61, 22%)	5. Media Bias (n = 87, 23%)	5. Prob. Wash. (n = 39, 10%)	5. Impeachment (n = 45, 12%)	5. Environment (n = 42, 11%)
6. Criminal Justice (n = 55, 20%)	6. Impeachment (n = 53, 14%)	6. Economy (n = 31, 8%)	6. Other (n = 39, 10%)	6. Other (n = 40, 10%)
7. Defense (n = 48, 17%)	7. Economy (n = 36, 10%)	7. Healthcare (n = 24, 6%)	7. Environment (n = 30, 8%)	7. Impeachment (n = 27, 7%)
8. Other (n = 33, 12%)	8. Other (n = 32, 8%)	8. Other (n = 21, 6%)	8. Healthcare (n = 24, 6%)	8. Healthcare (n = 22, 6%)
9. Healthcare (n = 18, 6.5%)	9. Entertainment (n = 15, 4%)	9. Education (n = 18, 5%)	9. Prob. Wash. (n = 14, 4%)	9. Economy (n = 18, 5%)
10. Entertainment (n = 8, 3%)	10. Education (n = 14, 4%)	10. Environment (n = 17, 4.5%)	10. Economy (n = 11, 3%)	10. Prob. Wash. (n = 17, 4%)
11. Education (n = 4, 1%)	11. Healthcare (n = 13, 3%)	11. Entertainment (n = 8, 3%)	11. Media Bias (n = 5, 1%)	11. Education (n = 14, 4%)
12. Environment (n = 4, 1%)	12. Environment (n = 9, 2%)	12. Media Bias (n = 5, 1%)	12. Education (n = 4, 1%)	12. Media Bias (n = 12, 3%)

Note. Percentages add to more than 100% because a tweet or story could be coded in more than one category. The category of Immigration was taken out because of low intercoder reliability scores.

instances in which the 24-hour cushion time was used, as explained in the Method section. For example, Trump tweeted on the morning of January 16, 2020, a quote from the previous day's "The Ingraham Angle" on Fox News.

To answer Research Question 2, the story percentages were examined for how often (a) Trump and (b) his tweets were mentioned by these television news outlets. In total, Trump was mentioned 622 times or in 43% of stories. (Each mention of Trump was only counted once per story). For each network, the Trump story references were: Fox News ($n = 184$, 49%); CNN ($n = 170$, 45%); ABC ($n = 133$, 35%); NBC ($n = 144$, 37%). Related to how many times Trump's tweets were mentioned, each network was examined: Fox News ($n = 45$, 12%); CNN ($n = 36$, 10%); ABC ($n = 54$, 14%); NBC ($n = 50$, 13%). Therefore, depending on the network, mentions of Trump in news stories ranged from more than one-third to nearly half. His tweets were mentioned at least 10% of the time. However, when taking into account how many stories that mentioned Trump *also* mentioned his tweets, then it is 24% (45/184) of Fox News stories, 21% (36/170) of CNN stories, 41% (54/133) of ABC stories, and 35% (137/392) of NBC stories about Trump *also* mentioned his tweets.

Discussion

Previous research has revealed the agenda setting power of an American president, but the factors behind Trump's (and his Twitter feed's) role in the agenda building process needed to be examined. This study filled in the gaps of how that agenda is created through studying the relationship between Trump and television news outlets. Looking at all four news outlets, there were some consistent topics. All networks had foreign policy as the top topic (Trump had foreign policy as the fourth most common topic), and all networks included criminal justice and defense in their top four topics. This shows that no matter the network, some of the common journalistic tenets of newsworthiness persist (Rich, 2015).

In terms of the Trump and Fox News feedback loop, there was an association between the topics found in Trump's tweets and the topics presented on Fox News. Not only were the topics of foreign policy, problems with Washington, and media bias in the top five most frequent for both, Trump and Fox were also matched in the least frequently discussed topics of environment, education, entertainment, and healthcare. This commonality in topics could be partly due to Trump's habit of frequently tweeting a reflection of what was previously aired on Fox News, as almost half were published in response to Fox News, or tagged a Fox News host or show guest. For example, Trump tweeted on January 13, 2020, at 6:53 a.m. EST the following: "Wow! The wonderful Iranian protestors refused to step on, or in any way denigrate, our Great American Flag. It was put on the street in order for them to trample it, and they walked around it instead. Big progress" (realDonaldTrump, 2020). One minute earlier, Fox News spoke about this same topic. The headline read, "Iran protestors refuse to trample American flag." Thus, the tweet served as a reinforcement for Fox News' message. Considering agenda building theory, this recurring reiteration of Fox's

messages to Trump's Twitter followers placed Fox News at the start of the agenda building process, which likely influenced the public and policy agendas.

The other 24-hour cable news network in the study, CNN, had a moderate relationship with Trump's tweets that approached significance ($p = .056$), as three of the top topics were the same—impeachment, foreign policy, and problems with Washington. As Fox News and CNN are news-oriented 24-hour cable networks, it isn't surprising that although they are likely different in tone, framing, and political perspective, they were both discussing similar current affairs, which could explain CNN's moderate correlation with the topics of Trump's tweets. Plus, the rare occasion of an impeachment trial would make that a newsworthy topic.

The two network television outlets, ABC and NBC, did not have many topics similar to those of Trump. This is not surprising, given that ABC and NBC are distinct from Fox News and CNN because broadcast organizations are both news and entertainment organizations instead of 24-hour cable news. ABC and NBC are also less politically charged and do not have an open, concerted organizational political slant to their coverage. ABC and NBC also provide fictional entertainment programming in between its morning and evening news programming. Tellingly, nearly one-fourth of ABC's stories were about entertainment compared to about 4% for the 24-hour cable networks and Trump. In short, ABC and NBC have less in common with Trump's tweets compared to both 24-hour cable news networks because of these reasons.

One topic that CNN, NBC, and ABC deviated from Trump's tweets and Fox News on is media bias. These three organizations rarely talked about media bias, whereas Trump tweeted about it 25% of the time, and Fox News covered it in 23% of news stories. This is an example where Fox News reporting on media bias likely influenced Trump's tweets about media bias, but other news organizations who do not have a widespread conservative political slant did not report on these media bias issues.

During the study, some major news events occurred: Iranian General Qasem Soleimani was killed by a U.S. drone strike, Prince Harry resigned as a British royal, basketball star Kobe Bryant died in a helicopter crash, and the president was impeached. But because at any given time news can happen, the analysis provided an interesting blend of stories and topics, which provided more representativeness and generalizability to the findings. One topic that was not as prominent—and later would be—was healthcare. In January 2020, officials in different parts of the world had identified a new virus, announced the first COVID-19-related death, spotted cases outside of China, confirmed human-to-human transmissions, and started the first lockdowns (Timeline, 2020). However, in this 3-week analysis of top American cable and broadcast news outlets, COVID-19 (Coronavirus) was covered only 23 times and once by Trump via Twitter. This finding is quite revealing of the initial response from the Trump Administration officials, who were learning about how dangerous this novel coronavirus could be. On Jan. 18, 2020, Trump was briefed by Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar about the pending threat of the

virus, and on Jan. 22, 2020 Trump made his first public comments about COVID-19, saying he was not concerned about a pandemic and that “we have it totally under control” (Perano, 2020, para. 4). Thus, early news coverage in January about the pending pandemic was minimal and largely downplayed by Trump and subsequent media reporting.

Trump was discussed in more than 40% of all news coverage during the study, much more than previous research that found 20% of all news stories in 2017 included Trump (Mitchell et al., 2017). CNN and Fox News mentioned Trump more frequently than the other two. However, ABC and NBC mentioned Trump’s tweets more often and in higher proportions than CNN and Fox News (i.e., when ABC and NBC mentioned Trump in a news story, a higher proportion of the stories included Trump’s tweets). These results could be because more network journalists may turn to Twitter as a source than cable journalists (Mitchell et al., 2017). Plus, many of Trump’s tweets mentioned Fox News or something previously discussed on the show, so it is not unusual that Fox News would choose not to mention tweets in which it was tagged or had already covered. But another aspect may be that not all of Fox News or CNN’s stories were included in this study, as they are 24-hour news networks.

In total, @realDonaldTrump tweets were mentioned by the four media outlets 185 times or 12% of stories, and when considering the proportion of stories that mentioned Trump and *also* mentioned his tweets, then the percentage is higher: 30% (185/622). The overall statistic is slightly less than previous research that found 16% of 2017 news stories contained one of Trump’s tweets (Mitchell et al., 2017). One possible explanation for the decrease in frequency is that journalists and the public were desensitized to his tweets and were not discussing them as regularly. However, the statistic that 30% of stories that mentioned Trump *also* mentioned his tweets is quite interesting. This reveals TV news used Trump’s tweets as newsworthy, significant statements in their coverage of Trump.

Citing Trump’s tweets in 12% of overall news stories (and 30% of news stories that mentioned Trump) is still a large amount of agenda building power given to one person, even if it was the U.S. president. This linkage may partially explain Trump’s influence on the Republican party, even after he no longer was president (Whitesides, 2021). Journalists have been criticized for relying too heavily on stories that include well-known people in power (Berkowitz, 1987; Shoemaker & Reese, 2014), and are often overdependent on the same routine sources, such as press releases, government-issued information, and now, social media. The reporters for Fox News, CNN, ABC, and NBC could be part of the same overdependent practice that limits the variety of perspectives in the published agendas. By repeatedly covering Trump’s tweets in stories that mentioned Trump, journalists gave Trump and Fox News the advantage of selecting which issues were at the forefront of discussion and debate—i.e. the power of building the national agenda. Journalists can reframe the issues presented by Trump or Fox News, but could also be doing a disservice to the American people in limiting the array of issues.

Limitations and Future Research

The topic of impeachment made up 11% of total news discourse and 35% of @realDonaldTrump dialogue, which may limit generalizability to news coverage beyond an impeachment event. However, a content analysis studying a president's words and television news coverage during an impeachment trial is uncommon, so this limitation also provided a lens into American history that is unique to this study. Additionally, it is possible that some topics could have been news without their mention by the president simply because of their importance on a given day. Other factors, such as time constraints, sample size, and topic condensing, served as potential limitations of this study. For example, all the news from ABC and NBC was in the data set, but only two hours each day was from the 24-hour networks. Therefore, future research should include samples from other months, more hours of the day, as well as CBS and MSNBC. A future study could look at the relationship between what Trump tweets and what is seen on Fox News at different time frames before and during his presidency. Future research also needs to consider framing and if media outlets repeated Trump's frames or offering counter frames, especially if a tweet has distortions, conspiracy theories, or disinformation within it. Future research should also look more in-depth at the level of discussion of each topic to get deeper into the agenda building process.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the literature in political communication, agenda building, and journalism, as it updated research about television journalists' news making processes in the age of the Twitter presidency of Donald Trump. The results showed that reporters used that medium for news tips and sources related to Trump, and that 30% of news stories that mentioned Trump also mentioned his tweets. As the President of the United States, it was inherent that he was at the forefront of how the public, policy, and media agendas were built. But with almost half of his tweets inspired by Fox News, we can see Fox News' potential influence on network TV news through those networks' increased proportions of using Trump's tweets in news stories about the former president. Moreover, this study encourages reflection on television journalists' reporting strategies that relied on Trump's tweets in stories that mention Trump, as it appears television journalists missed the early opportunity to inform the American public about the impending problems with COVID-19, potentially because Trump only had one tweet about the topic, even though he was briefed on the dangerous airborne nature of this novel coronavirus.

Ultimately, this study provides insight for journalists and an interested public about how Trump's discourse through Twitter and Fox News played a crucial role in the media agenda, and, therefore, on the public and policy agendas. It is the first formal quantitative content analysis to study the Trump-Fox News feedback loop and show how Fox News was a key player within the agenda building process during the Trump

Administration. While Trump is permanently banned from Twitter (Twitter Inc, 2021), it is possible that he will return to social media prominence again on another social media outlet because around 70% of Republicans still supported him in early 2021 (Musumeci, 2021; Whitesides, 2021). If that happens, journalists should recall that the opinions voiced in many of Trump's tweets may not have been entirely his, but were inspired by Fox News' hosts, guests, and stories. The new posts may now be influenced by other conservative news outlets, as Trump was angry when Fox News changed its coverage of him (Battaglio & James, 2021). Because any well-known person, either a president or another public figure, could have a strong agenda or influence, this study shows that journalists need to consider the bigger picture behind the story before they publish their work, as it can ultimately influence the media, public, and policy agendas.

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Note

1. Although CBS and MSNBC are two other networks that could have been studied, time constraints for the lead author during the research period prevented additional data coding. But the two examples chosen from cable and network television are representative of their genres and provide a strong foundation for the study.

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