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Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election

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Abstract

In the 2016 US presidential election campaign, social media platforms were increasingly used as direct sources of news, bypassing the editorial media. With the candidates' millions of followers, Twitter has become a platform for mass communication and the candidate's main online information channels. Likewise, social media has provided a platform for debating and critiquing the mainstream media by the campaigns and their networks. This article discusses the Twitter strategies of the democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and republican candidate Donald Trump during their US 2016 presidential election campaigns. While the Clinton campaign's strategy confirms theories regarding the professionalization of election campaigns, and only occasionally broke with expectations and using elements of 'real talk' to underline her authenticity, the Trump campaign's more amateurish yet authentic style in social media points toward de-professionalization and amateurism as a counter-trend in political communication.

Keywords

Personalization, professionalization, election campaigns, presidential election, Twitter

Introduction

Social media is the latest fascination of political communication strategists, particularly during election campaigns. While television and newspapers remain dominant sources of news in general, social media has become an increasingly important source for political news in particular. In the 2008 US presidential election cycle, with Democratic candidate Barack Obama as its icon, the social media political campaign became a buzzword of sorts, and the potential of social media to mobilise voters was thoroughly hyped as well.

Since then, social media has developed and grown in scale and scope—new platforms and services have emerged, and established platforms have expanded. These platforms have replaced campaign websites as the parties' and candidates' main online information channels. Yet there is no evidence that social media has replaced traditional channels for political communication—TV debates, advertising, rallies, door knocking, the news media and press conferences are still highly prioritised by the campaigns and their candidates (Kleis Nielsen 2012; Craig 2016). What has changed is that all of these activities are now impacted in some way by social media—documented, debated and mentioned on Twitter, Facebook or Instagram by the campaigns and those who follow them.

The research literature on social media and election campaigns can be divided into three main strands. The first strand is concerned with the *historical development* of digital campaigns and the use of blogs, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to mobilise voters (Howard 2006; Kreiss 2012; Stromer-Galley 2014; Bruns et al. [eds] 2016). According to these studies, blogs were included in US election campaigns starting in 2004, but it was the 2008 Obama campaign that represented the first 'social media election'. The second strand looks at the level of *interaction with voters* in social media campaigns (Stromer-Gally

2000, 2004; Jackson and Lilleker 2011; Graham et al. 2013; Enli and Naper 2016). A key finding in these studies is that politicians are reluctant to engage in dialogue with voters on social media, and that campaigns use social media primarily as an arena for political marketing. The third strand of research deals with the level of *professionalization* of campaigns (Lilleker and Negrine 2002; Stromer-Gally 2014; Kreiss 2014; Kreiss and Janinski 2016).

Contributing to these three strands of research, this article asks the following: What are the most recent developments in social media election campaigns in the United States; and to what degree do these developments point in the direction of increased interaction with voters and/or increased professionalization of the campaigns?

These research questions will be analysed in a discussion of the US 2016 presidential election campaigns of democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and republican candidate Donald Trump in relation to their use of social media. In addition, the discussion will draw on insights from recent European election campaigns.

The article is divided into three main parts. The first looks at the recent developments in the election campaigns' use of social media; the second deals more specifically with the candidates' interactions with voters; the third addresses the level of professionalization in the campaigns.

Recent Developments in Social Media Election Campaigns

In order to discuss recent changes in the social media and technology-driven election campaigns, it is useful to take a step back and discuss the development of political communication prior to the current phase. It is nearly two decades since Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) divided political communication in Western democracies into three

distinct historical phases, starting with the two decades following World War II and what has been called the ‘golden age of the parties’—that is, a party-dominated communication system. The second phase, starting in the 1960s, was the ‘era of television’. The third, more generally termed the digital era, is characterised by an intensified personalization of political advocacy and increased anti-elitism, popularisation and populism.

I will suggest the label ‘era of social media’ for the current phase of political communication, not because social media has replaced television (or newspapers or radio, for that matter) but because it has changed it, and the way audiences watch it (Enli and Syvertsen 2016). Television is no longer a stand-alone medium for political communication, because its mainstream media presence currently exists only in tandem with social media, in the context of both multi-platform campaigns and multi-tasking users. This means that politicians are required to have a ‘performative flexibility’ in the interests of connecting with voters (Craig 2016), moving comfortably between different format criteria and expectations, from the complex and formal to the light and informal, from the professionalized to the personalised. This ups the threshold for political candidates’ communicative skills and presents the need for a professional and skilled communication division within their campaigns.

Between the 2008 and 2016 US presidential election cycle, social media has changed and become more various and omnipresent. In 2008, both the democratic and the republican campaigns used Facebook, YouTube, Myspace and Flickr. By 2012, Facebook had increased its user base significantly, and Twitter had emerged as the new social media network with a critical mass of devotees. In the 2012 US presidential election cycle, the democratic Obama campaign used far more social media platforms (nine) than the

republican Romney campaign (five). The 2016 US presidential election cycle saw a drop in the total number of social media platforms; the Clinton and Trump campaigns both used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, and the Clinton campaign also used Pinterest (Pew research 2016).ⁱ In the past decade or so, then, US campaigns have seen a period of expansion and experimentation, then a period of consolidation around the most widespread social media platforms. This does not imply that social media has become less important to the campaigns but rather that the social media landscape itself has become more consolidated.

A key development between the 2012 and the 2016 US presidential election campaigns is that the focus on images and videos has grown. This is especially evident in the ascent of the online mobile photo-sharing platform Instagram, which was used by the aforementioned campaigns as well as that of Bernie Sanders (Pew report 2016).

Moreover, the use of video on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter increased significantly since the 2012 election cycle; the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign, in particular, regularly posted videos as part of their social media messages. In sum, social media has become a more prominent communication channel for US campaigns since 2008, particularly in relation to campaign websites. In addition, in 2016, social media platforms are increasingly used as direct sources of news, bypassing the editorial media (Pew report 2016). Hillary Clinton launched her presidential candidacy by tweeting: 'I'm running for president. Everyday Americans need a champion, and I want to be that champion.—H' (tweet, 12 April 2015). Rather than initiating a press conference and relying on the mainstream media to share her news, Clinton's campaign staff chose Twitter, in tandem with a YouTube video release titled 'Getting started',ⁱⁱ in which Hillary Clinton tells us that she is 'getting ready to run for president'.

Likewise, social media provided Donald Trump with a platform to critique the mainstream media as biased and untrustworthy. In addition to several other established media companies, the *New York Times* was subjected to harsh judgment in this tweet:

The failing @nytimes is truly one of the worst newspapers. They knowingly write lies and never call to fact check. Really bad people! (Tweet, 13.03.16)

Given that Trump has 12.8 million followers on Twitter and the *New York Times* has a daily readership of 1.2 million (digital),ⁱⁱⁱ one could easily argue that this campaign, at least, has become a mass media channel. In relation to the three phases suggested by Blumler and Kavanagh (1999), one might wonder whether social media as a direct media channel to the voters returns us to the 'golden age of the parties', except that this time around, the parties have been replaced by the campaigns.

Social Media as a One-Way Political Marketing Tool

Rather than using social media as a way to interact with voters or encourage dialogue which might empower the citizens and in turn create an arena for participation, the political campaigns primarily uses social media as a channel for political marketing.

Historically, every new media technology seems to have brought with it a set of expectations related to the revival of democracy and the empowerment of the people in relation to the power elites (Brecht 1930; Barber 1998; Benkler 2006). These idealistic expectations have often led to disappointment, as new media revert to the reinforcement of existing power hierarchies.

This disappointment is also found by those who study social media in political communication; at various stages in the development of digital media and in various national contexts, researchers have met with a profound reluctance amongst politicians

regarding enhanced interactivity with voters. As pinpointed by Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2000; 2014) in several studies over the course of more than a decade, US campaigns do not prioritise dialogue and interactivity. In a study of social media use in the 2012 US presidential election cycle, Stromer-Gally (2012) noted: ‘Campaigns wish to mobilize the public in the service of the campaign, but getting too close to them, really listening and empowering them, is dangerous and at least disadvantageous’ (2014:187). Politicians’ reluctance to engage in dialogue is also uncovered by studies of European political campaigns; in the UK, for example, online campaigns and social media usage were found to simply replicate the one-way communication pattern established by mass media campaigning (Coleman 2001; Jackson and Lilleker 2011).

In the Scandinavian countries, the picture is more mixed; studies have demonstrated both a reluctance to interact with citizens using social media (Larsson and Moe 2013) and the opposite inclination—the Norwegian prime minister, Erna Solberg, for example, has frequently traded tweets with journalists as well as citizens (Larsson and Ihlen 2015). This willingness to engage in dialogue with voters, however, brings with it a cost, in the form of reduced control over one’s message and a greater risk of making a mistake. Solberg experienced the latter when she was mocked by one of her followers for a couple of spelling mistakes in her tweets. Even this worked out in the end, however: she politely explained that she suffers from dyslexia, and the Norwegian Twittersphere promptly voiced its support for her candour and accessibility. This episode perhaps demonstrates less political reluctance to engage in dialogue with voters in egalitarian societies like those in the Nordic region than in more hierarchical and polarised societies like the United States.

In the 2016 US election campaigns, familiar patterns from previous cycles reappeared,

including a tendency towards one-way communication and little sign of voter–campaign interactivity. In fact, it would appear that the opportunities for public participation in digital political campaigns have decreased between 2012 and 2016. While the official campaign websites of recent election cycles firmly controlled the message and any resultant public participation, 2016 campaign websites lacked comment sections altogether. In addition, the campaigns clearly used social media platforms as channels to promote candidates and mobilise voters, not to engage with the public (Pew Research 2016).

While US presidential candidates do not engage in dialogue with other users of social media, they more passively engage through actions such as retweeting, or directly reposting content already posted by another user. According to a study by Pew research (2016), interestingly, retweeting was practised very differently by each of the 2016 US campaigns. The 2016 Trump campaign retweeted more frequently (about a quarter of his tweets were retweets) and engaged most extensively with the general public (78 per cent of the retweets were written by ordinary users). In comparison, the 2016 Clinton campaign retweeted considerably less frequently (only 15 per cent of her tweets were retweets), and the messages Clinton retweeted were not posted by the general public but by her team’s related campaign accounts. Consequently, the Twitter strategies of the two presidential campaigns diverged—the 2016 Trump campaign was more willing to engage with the general public, and thus also to take the risk of retweeting content it did not control, whereas the 2016 Clinton campaign was more guarded and geared towards total control over the message.

Professionalization of Campaigns and Amateurism as a Counter-Trend

The divergent Twitter strategies around user engagement of the two campaigns in the 2016 US election point to a fundamental difference between professionalization and amateurism in the social media strategies of the two campaigns. The 2016 Clinton campaign's social media activity confirms theories regarding the professionalization of election campaigns in Western liberal democracies, while the 2016 Trump campaign has a more amateurish yet authentic style in social media.

Following the 2008 Obama presidential run, social media campaigns were no longer an amateur activity—technical expertise, focus group research, and specialisation of staffing all contributed to what was an international trend. European political parties were eager to study the strategies used in Obama effort, and social media expertise was exported from the United States to European countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom to help users there to exploit the marketing potential of social media. The largest political party in Norway, the Labour Party, visited Obama 2008 campaign staffers for training and skill development regarding social media (Karlsen 2013). Likewise, the UK Conservative Party hired the 2012 Obama campaign manager Jim Messina before the 2015 British election to 'bring to their operation the same binding marriage of social media and political organization that many in the US credit with securing Mr. Obama a second term' (Stratton 2013).¹ The export of expertise contributed to a higher emphasis on the candidate rather than the party, also in party-centred political systems like in the United Kingdom and Norway. (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). As with the arrival of earlier technologies to the realm of political marketing, such as radio or TV, the United States represented the international spearhead regarding the accompanying tendency towards professionalization of campaigning (Maarek 2011). Professionalization of social media in election campaign is mainly found in the form of increasing standardisation of messages

¹ See <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-23551323>.

for the purpose of efficiently promoting the candidate, and research-based and advanced methods for mobilising voters (Stromer-Gally 2014; Kreiss 2014). As such, the new opportunities offered by new technology results in an increasing professionalization of election campaigns.

However, there is also a counter-trend to professionalization: de-professionalization, and even amateurism. This trend is for example seen in the 2016 Obama campaign, where the focus group tested tweeting seems to be replaced by a more gut-feeling tweeting. The appeal of the de-professionalized campaign was even acknowledged by the 2012 Obama campaign, which explicitly sought alternatives to the professional staffer and consulting model and worked to *de-professionalize* its own staff (Kreiss and Jasinski 2016:15). It would appear, then, that there are benefits to both approaches to social media, depending on the context, targeted audience and goal.

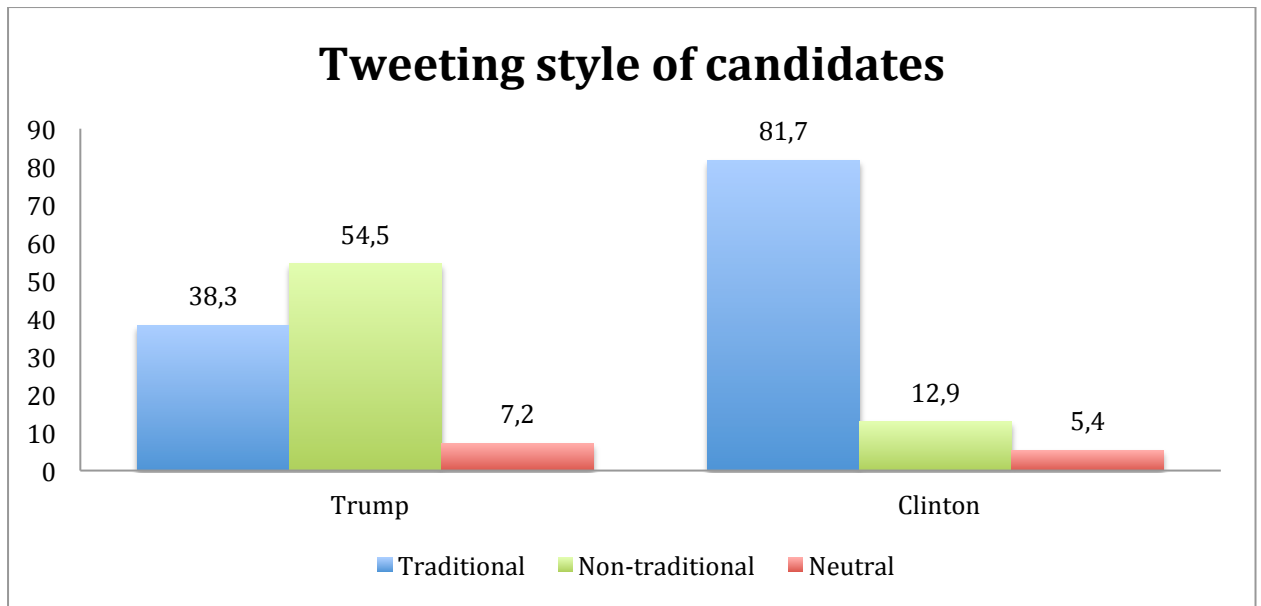
The 2016 Clinton campaign represented a continuation of the professionalized social media campaigns established in previous presidential campaigns by the Democratic Party—technological expertise and digital communication structure, after all, tend to transfer from one cycle to the next (Kreiss and Jasinski 2016). In contrast, the 2016 Trump campaign started from scratch in the realm of political communication; while Donald Trump was already a savvy exploiter of the media as both a celebrity and a business owner, he had never been involved in a political election campaign. In terms of any linear and ongoing professionalization of American politics and election campaigns, then, the 2016 Trump campaign represented a counter-trend.

Rather than copying the social media strategies of the professionalized campaigns run by the Democratic party, Donald Trump chose a strategy better described as amateurism.

Its amateurism did not derive from any lack of strategy or competence about basic media logics, however, because Trump knew how to get media coverage, validating those studies that have demonstrated that celebrity politicians are several times more likely than unknown politicians to be quoted in the mainstream news on the basis of their social media posts (Wallsten 2013; Chadwick 2014). His celebrity status therefore fuelled the Trump campaign and enabled a strategy based on a controversial and unexpected use of social media, and in particular Twitter. His image as a candidate was largely formed by his widely circulated tweets, which were often quoted and debated in the mainstream media.

In order to analyse these two divergent strategies more closely, I compared the tweeting styles of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in terms of professionalism versus amateurism. Table 1 below presents the results of a quantitative comparison based on the coding of tweets as either *traditional*, meaning professionalized and in line with the established standards for tweets posted by a presidential candidate, or *non-traditional*, meaning amateurish, in the sense that they do not follow the standards.

Table 1. Tweeting style of candidates, coded as either traditional, non-traditional or neutral (n=898)^{iv}.



The comparison clearly demonstrates the contrast between the 2016 Trump campaign and the 2016 Clinton campaign in terms of standardisation and professionalization. While 82 per cent of Clinton’s tweets are categorised as traditional, only 38 per cent of Trump’s tweets are in line with established stylistic standards. Likewise, almost 55 per cent of Trump’s tweets were unconventional, as opposed to only 13 per cent of Clinton’s tweets.

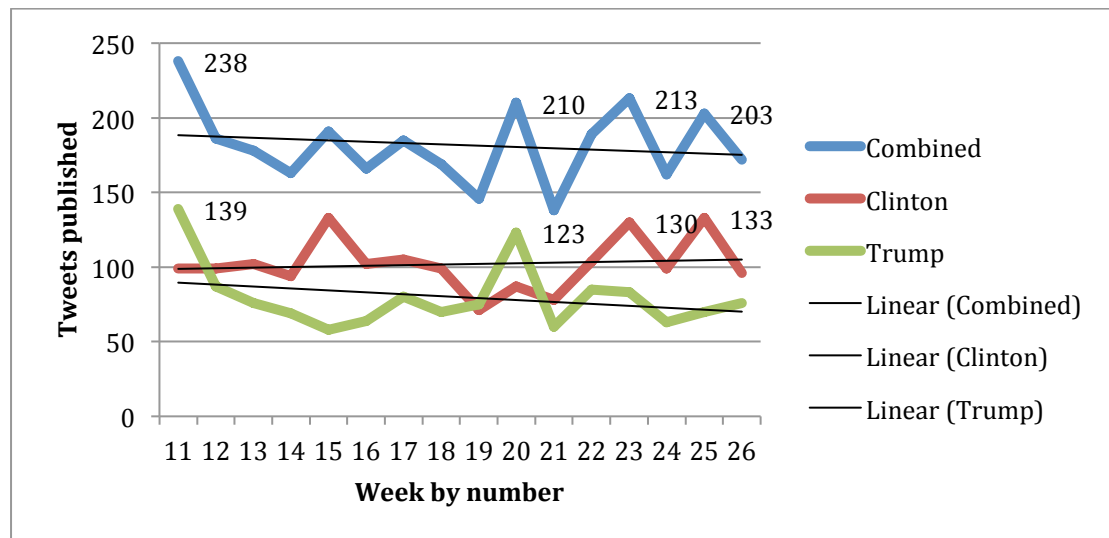
Again, this is not to say that this kind of amateurishness is bad. There is a rhetorical strength in this voice that responds to the ideal of authenticity of the speaker (Enli 2015). By not even attempting the guise of professionalism using digital media staffers or communication experts, that is, Donald Trump made a statement regarding his positioning as a genuine outsider.

Probably motivated by the Trump campaign’s unconventional style, the Clinton campaign also posted some tweets with unexpected and informal content. A key example of this was the tweet ‘Delete your account’ (tweet, 09.06.16), sent as a reply to Trump’s

tweet: ‘Obama just endorsed Crooked Hillary. He wants four more years of Obama but nobody else does!’ (tweet, 09.06.16). This response was surprising, given the more formal and polite messages that were regularly posted to her account, and the tweet gained enormous attention and was retweeted more than 500,000 times. The expression ‘delete your account’ is a standard ironic tweet within various political and media clusters on Twitter when someone tweets an unsuccessful joke, for example.

While the 2016 Clinton campaign used Twitter more conventionally and only occasionally broke with expectations, the two campaigns’ level of tweeting was fairly similar, and, as demonstrated in table 2 below, the candidates were both responsible for peaks in the analysed period.

Table 2. Weekly tweeting output of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (N=2909).



Moreover, the Clinton campaign quickly picked up on new trends such as *gamification*, or the use of gaming elements and game structures in new contexts. To encourage voter registration, for example, the Clinton campaign associated it with the location-based augmented reality game *Pokemon Go* only a week after the game’s launch.^v In a context

of professionalization, the Clinton campaign used social media to re-brand the candidate as trendier than she typically appears in mass-media coverage (Parry-Giles 2014).

One communicative challenge for US presidential candidates is that their social media accounts appear personal but are usually overseen by campaign staffers. In the case of Clinton's campaign, then, it might have been confusing for voters to meet such a digitally savvy and tech-trendy candidate who was inviting users to play online games or respond with emojis. Even when users are well aware of the fact that political advisers and media staffers are administering the candidates' Twitter accounts, the candidate image that is presented on social media might be simply too distant from the candidate's image to be compelling or believable. Accordingly, the campaigns' dilemma is to identify the right balance between the established image of the candidate and the candidate's social media persona.

This dilemma was much less relevant to the Trump campaign than to the Clinton campaign. First of all, Trump simply stayed more involved in his staff's tweeting and even wrote many of his own tweets. According to news interviews, Trump generally wrote the tweets himself after 7:00 P.M. at night, and during the day he dictated them by shouting words and even punctuation marks at his staffers.^{vi} The candidate's personal involvement was also underlined by the account name @real_DonaldTrump, as though to underline that the tweets came directly from Trump himself and were not managed and crafted solely by his campaign.

In comparison, Barack Obama did not write any of his social media messages during the 2008 election campaign, and only 1 per cent of the Tweets posted during the 2012 cycle were signed 'b.o.', the clue that they were in fact authored by the president (Enli and Naper 2016). A similar strategy was used by Hillary Clinton, who used the '—H'

signature to indicate that a tweet was written by her (recall the tweet announcing her candidacy, for example).

A comparative study of the 2012 Obama campaign and the 2012 Romney campaign demonstrates that the autonomy of digital media staffers was considerably higher in the former, and that they could post messages and updates without always consulting with the political side of the organisation (Kreiss 2014). The fact that Trump delegated much less social media work to professionals than either of the Obama campaigns and the 2016 Clinton campaign meant that his candidate image on social media was much closer to his actual self-presentation. This image of the outspoken outsider was constructed through a dynamic between the mass media and social media. A closer examination of the tweets posted on @realDonaldTrump demonstrates that more than one-third of the tweets contained ‘real talk’, meaning that they expressed impoliteness and political incorrectness, often using capital letters. The following tweet, for example, incorporates name-calling, insults and stylistic devices such as all-caps and exclamation marks:

Crooked Hillary has ZERO leadership ability. As Bernie Sanders says, she has bad judgment.
Constantly playing the women’s card—it is sad! (Tweet, 06.05.2016)

Capital letters are often used to emphasise one’s sincerity, spontaneity and engagement, offering the speaker an air of authenticity. In these regards, then, Trump’s tweets were fairly predictable, and his voice was very recognisable to his followers. Even in tweets with a political message that reference specific numbers or make promises, the Trump campaign used capital letters and exclamation marks as authenticity markers:

North Carolina lost 300,000 manufacturing jobs and Ohio lost 400,000 since 2000. Going to

Mexico etc. NO MORE IF I WIN, WE WILL BRING BACK! (Tweet, 15.03.2016)

In comparison, only 5 per cent of Hillary Clinton's tweets had elements of 'real talk' that tried to underline her authenticity. In line with her candidate image in televised debates and public rallies, a typical tweet posted by the campaign *Hillary for America* (HFA) was crafted and policy-oriented:

Our families and workplaces have changed in the 21st century. It's time for our policies—from paid leave to equal pay—to be updated too. (Tweet, 05. 07.2016)

As such, the 2016 election cycle has proven that the professionalization of election campaigns' political communication on social media is at the same time highly personalised. In other words, the professional is also the personal in the age of social media.

Conclusion

Since the mid 1970s, a growing strand of research has argued that a candidate's image is an important factor in predicting voter behaviour and election outcomes. The voters are interested in knowing more about the candidates' character and personality, in order to evaluate their trustworthiness as political leaders. These evaluations are largely based on the mediated image of the candidate and to what degree the candidate comes across as authentic and likeable (Nimmo and Savage 1976; Kendall and Paine 1995; Westen 2007; Vavreck 2009). Social media represents a new means of constructing and negotiating a candidate's image, and campaigns' social media strategies are important sources of information and perspective on a given year's election.

This article discussed social media use in the 2016 election campaigns of US presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, in order to explore recent developments in relation to the candidates' degree of interaction with voters and tendencies towards professionalization. Three main findings stood out.

First, the election campaigns used social media *primarily as a marketing tool*, and the reluctance concerning online exchanges with voters that characterised previous US presidential election campaigns was very present in the 2016 election cycle. Even the candidate who broke all the rules, Donald Trump, kept his social media followers at arm's length and limited his engagement to retweeting selected tweets. The need to control the message and promote the candidate overwhelmed any campaign interest in initiating an open and enlightened public debate.

Second, social media election campaigns are constantly developing, but *professionalization is now being challenged by amateurism*. The technological infrastructure for networked communication is exploited differently by various campaigns in various political cultures. There are clear signs of professionalization in social media campaigns, and in particular the 2016 Clinton campaign clearly inherits the tendency in this regard of previous Democratic campaigns. However, the 2016 social media election cycle was also marked by amateurism, either as a calculated strategy or the result of a spontaneous candidate (or both). In any case, it has become clear that the amateur has a rhetorical claim to authenticity that manages to compete with the professionalism of a more polished or controlled campaign. From a political culture that is very different from the US presidential elections, Norwegian Prime Minister Solberg combines professionalism and amateurism on her social media sites and thus comes across as more accessible than Clinton but more composed than Trump.

Third, social media platforms *have an agenda-setting impact* and constitute a powerful arena for constructing and maintaining a candidate's image. This effect is dependent on the candidate's capital, in the form of either celebrity status or economic resources, because these advantages will in turn attract media coverage in the mainstream media. Yet it must be said that without Twitter or an equivalent social media platform, it would have been difficult for a candidate like Trump, who lacked political experience and a support structure within the Republican Party, to come across as viable. Social media represents an opportunity for both political outsiders and media campaign amateurs to succeed even as it disrupts the comfort zones of established politicians and their professionalized campaigns.

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ⁱ http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2016/07/PJ_2016.07.18_election-2016_FINAL.pdf

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0uY7gLZDmn4>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Times has a daily print circulation of 590,000, and 1.1 million on Sunday

^{iv} Thanks to reserch assistants Linda Rosenberg and Chris Simonsen for data collection and coding.

^v <http://www.vox.com/2016/7/14/12192666/pokemon-go-hillary-clinton-campaign>

^{vi} <http://heavy.com/news/2016/06/does-donald-trump-run-his-twitter-account-page-operate-use-post-write-update-campaign-controversy-retweet-tweet-white-supremacist-bots-followers-first/>