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## Political Magazines on Twitter during Election 2012: Framing, Uniting, Dividing

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## POLITICAL MAGAZINES ON TWITTER DURING ELECTION 2012

Framing, uniting, dividing

**Susan Currie Sivek**

*This study offers a content analysis of Twitter activity from 16 American political opinion magazines during the month before the 2012 presidential election. The study is an exploratory attempt to operationalize aspects of tweets that may contribute to frame alignment processes and mobilization among Twitter users. The analysis identifies these components and examines how political magazines' Twitter activity may demonstrate aspects of this process. These magazines must consider both the normative goal of achieving specific political gains by mobilizing readers and the pragmatic goal of remaining sustainable as publishing enterprises. The degree to which their Twitter usage reflects frame alignment processes may not only reinforce political mobilization, but also affect the longevity of their publications. This analysis offers practical and theoretical insights into the changing role of political magazines in an increasingly digital era of political engagement.*

KEYWORDS election; frame alignment; mobilization; political movement; political opinion magazines; Twitter

### **Introduction**

Political opinion magazines reflected varied political philosophies and opinions well before blogs and social media further diversified political discourse. In the U.S. and elsewhere, this genre of magazines has long invigorated political movements and helped identify, form, and mobilize communities. In the U.S., examples include *National Review*, which significantly aided the development of the 20th-century conservative movement by providing a coherent paradigm for movement aspirants (Sivek 2008). *The Progressive* magazine, founded in 1909, is another long-lived magazine, connecting “academic and public traditions in dissent against the mainstream” (Buhle 1986). Other American magazines have had lasting significance, including *The New Republic* (founded 1914), *The Nation* (1865), and *The Freeman* (1956).

However, despite their longevity and significance, these magazines are threatened by changing technology, readers' interests, and economic conditions. Nonprofit foundations publish many of them and have suffered from declining donations. And, though political angst and polarization may foster some loyalty to these magazines, cynicism regarding politics may also diminish audience interest, particularly among younger readers disengaged from both politics and print media (Bakker and de Vreese 2011) — a double whammy for political magazines seeking to replace their aging audience.

As Bakker and de Vreese (2011) also note, however, the Internet offers the prospect of new forms of political participation by all ages. Political opinion magazines now offer not only

multimedia websites, but also blogs and social media. While print magazines provide a monologic opportunity for audiences to learn about and contemplate political perspectives, digital media permit large-scale discussions. In particular, social media's dialogic features may enable the kind of frame alignment process that social movement theorists have studied in a variety of movements (Benford and Snow 2000). If political magazines seek to engage readers in their political perspectives and to mobilize them for participation, social media afford many opportunities.

This study offers a content analysis of Twitter activity from 16 American political opinion magazines during the month before the 2012 presidential election. The study is an exploratory attempt to operationalize frame alignment processes on Twitter and examine their representation through content analysis of tweets. The analysis identifies aspects of Twitter usage that may reflect components of the frame alignment process and examines how political magazines' Twitter activity may or may not have advanced elements of this process among their audiences. These magazines must consider both the normative goal of achieving political gains by mobilizing readers and the pragmatic goal of remaining sustainable as publishing enterprises. The degree to which their Twitter usage advances frame alignment among audiences not only may reinforce political mobilization, but also may affect their publications' longevity. This analysis offers both practical and theoretical insights into the changing role of political magazines in an increasingly digital era of political engagement.

### **Today's American Political Magazines**

Despite the transformation of journalism by digital technology, American political magazines remain significant. These publications deliver not only notable reporting and opinion, but also enjoy intermedia agenda-setting power, construct coherent political frames and narratives, and provide a growing digital presence.

Perhaps the most notable recent instance of political magazines' influence is *Mother Jones'* September 2012 release of secretly recorded video of Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, in which he labeled "47 percent" of Barack Obama's supporters "victims" and "dependent upon government" (Corn 2012). The magazine's investigation and skillful dissemination of the video damaged Romney's candidacy. *Mother Jones* received a 2013 National Magazine Award for this coverage. Political magazines continue to run substantial investigative journalism and insightful commentary, one of the few places readers can find such content as local newspapers and newsmagazines decline.

Political magazines also possess intermedia agenda-setting capability. Intermedia agenda-setting occurs when prestige news media organizations shape news priorities at lower-level organizations, whether traditional print and broadcast news organizations (Sweetser, Golan, and Wanta 2008) or online news services and blogs (Meraz 2011). Ragas and Kiousis (2010) found a strong correlation between the issue agenda presented by *The Nation* (a liberal magazine) and the issue agenda within media produced by liberal citizen activists during the 2008 presidential campaign. The *Mother Jones* scoop is just one example of a story launched into mainstream media by a political opinion magazine. Combined with their reputation for solidly researched content, the longevity and prestige of many political opinion magazines lend them authority as intermedia agenda setters.

Political opinion magazines present distinctive issue agendas and framing. As Victor Navasky, publisher emeritus of *The Nation*, argues, “Over the long haul, these magazines provide their own narratives, a long-running moral/political/cultural paradigm complete with its own heroes and villains” (2005, 22). These magazines present factual information within a monthly construction of events, ‘characters,’ and conflicts, as in the incrementally revealed plot of a serialized novel. Readers follow the magazines’ representations of the political world and become immersed in their narratives — and may adopt aspects within their own interpretations and resulting participation.

Navasky’s description of the political opinion magazine’s function is similar to the description of collective action frame construction by social movement theorists Benford and Snow (2000):

...movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change. (615)

Political opinion magazines also advance the development of their audiences’ shared understanding. Though they occasionally publish divergent voices, the editorial perspective must be coherent to maintain their brands and to ensure readers’ cognitive consistency. Of course, magazine audiences may also “negotiate” their own readings, à la Stuart Hall (1999). As a whole, however, much of the definition, attribution, articulation and motivation work has already been done for the reader through the magazine’s editorial viewpoint and content. Stories have been constructed, protagonists and antagonists identified, and recommendations for action made within the magazines.

These magazines are experimenting with digital distribution methods to maintain their influence despite the decline of print media. All the magazines in this study have websites that offer some or all of their print content; many also publish additional online-only content, such as blogs by editors and writers. Some offer digital editions or iPad apps. Their social media participation includes multiple platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, YouTube, and others. In short, just as major consumer magazines are using digital tools, so are these political opinion magazines — albeit with fewer resources to invest because of their typically nonprofit, independent status, and therefore at a slower rate.

This study asks whether and how these digital efforts — specifically, Twitter usage — have allowed political opinion magazines to reach out to not just their print readers, but also to much wider audiences to spread and activate their political frames. Social media appear to offer a perfect opportunity for this dissemination. Moreover, Twitter’s growing role in politics and the unique interactions it enables make it well suited to these magazines’ goals of strengthening their respective movements, reaching their political goals, and engaging and retaining audiences.

## Magazines and Digital Media

Magazines are experimenting with ways to use various digital tools. With regard to social media, most magazines have Facebook and Twitter accounts where they share links to their online content, invite reader contributions, and conduct promotions. Magazines have also experimented with other social media, such as visually oriented lifestyle site Pinterest, video sites like YouTube and Vimeo, and photo sites like Flickr (Bazilian 2012).

With regard to content production, social media have enabled journalists at all types of news organizations to access eyewitness reports, contact varied sources, and incorporate more audience perspectives. Of course, these capabilities have raised concerns about ethics and verification, but the immediate collection and re-dissemination of information via social media presents a different challenge for print magazines: the shift from a slower production cycle to the establishment of a 24/7 presence in audiences' lives. Many magazines have found routine, frequent social media participation difficult to manage. While major newspapers and wire services have added social media editors and others dedicated to monitoring social networks and distributing updates (Gleason 2010), magazines — particularly smaller and independent publications — have been slower to create such roles, likely due to a lack of resources. Social media responsibilities tend to be distributed among staff members who post as time permits or only when they have created new online content. Therefore, magazines' social media presence can be erratic.

Some magazines have expanded their websites beyond the re-posting of print content to include timely updates. They have added blogs or have created affiliated niche websites. Among the magazines in this study, *Mother Jones* again provides an excellent example. MotherJones.com boasts five active blogs, plus up-to-the-minute news stories, slideshows, infographics, and databases. *Mother Jones'* social media accounts publicize this content. Articles from each print issue are also released online gradually “as a public service” of the nonprofit magazine, but subscriptions are encouraged to fund the magazine's work (Mother Jones 2013).

Though many magazines have made impressive efforts to produce online content at a faster pace, it has been a tough adaptation with difficult-to-quantify rewards. However, political publications need to develop efficient, timely social media newsgathering and dissemination methods to participate in the growing use of social media in journalism and politics. Balancing newsworthy online content with a more reflective, less frequent print/digital magazine-style product may be one way these magazines can retain audiences and be sustainable as the shift toward digital media continues.

## Journalists' Use of Twitter

Though research specifically on magazines' use of Twitter is sparse, a number of studies have examined Twitter usage by journalists at varied news organizations. The tool has been adopted widely, though with differing styles and levels of usage (Holcomb, Gross, and Mitchell 2011). Most relevant here are studies that reflect journalists' use of opinion or political content in their tweets. For example, Lasorsa, Lewis, and Holton (2012) found that tweets of the 500 most-followed journalists on Twitter (across all media types) included opinionated statements

more often than expected; in fact, 43 percent primarily contained opinions or offered “an element” of opinion. Some of these journalists were columnists or analysts who chiefly express opinion in their work, but still, the quantity of opinion is remarkable. These researchers conclude that journalists are adjusting their professional practices to suit Twitter’s norms, which call for an informal, personal style.

A more recent study on journalists’ tweets during the 2012 party conventions found opinion in 23.5 percent of “objective” journalists’ tweets; these opinions primarily pertained to candidate characteristics like personality or appearance (Lawrence et al. 2013). The researchers were again surprised to find so much opinion, and suggest that political reporters “have become more comfortable passing along judgments about candidate appearances, mannerisms or personal characteristics than sharing opinions on policy issues” (11).

While these studies illuminate Twitter usage by traditional mainstream journalists and reveal interesting trends in their campaign-related tweets, this analysis specifically considers tweets by journalists whose magazines’ goal is *primarily* to express opinion and to generate audience support for a certain perspective. These publications’ unique uses of Twitter may reflect their medium’s readiness for the new era of digital journalism, as well as its likely success in generating audience interest and potential mobilization toward the end goal of political participation. This mobilization could aid these magazines in achieving their aims of provoking political change, retaining audiences, and remaining sustainable publications.

Although previous studies of journalists’ use of Twitter have examined some of the same variables that are included here, they have not done so for political magazines in particular, nor with regard to the question of audiences’ potential mobilization. Political opinion magazines may, like other news organizations, use Twitter for the purposes of simply promoting their work or providing information, but their work would presumably also contain an undercurrent of persuasion and an effort toward mobilization that is not typical for mainstream journalists.

### **Frame Alignment on Twitter**

In order to address this unique medium and its potential for audience mobilization, this analysis seeks to theoretically connect specific features of Twitter conversation with scholarly insights into the frame alignment process found to occur when political and social movements work toward mobilization. The study thereby operationalizes the frame alignment process within the Twitter context. The presence and frequency of specific Twitter features might alter political opinion magazines’ success in garnering audience engagement and in developing audiences’ allegiance to and action upon the magazines’ content. This approach to operationalizing frame alignment processes might also be applicable in the analysis of other media and movements’ Twitter usage.

Through the process of “meaning work,” social and political movements arrive at, and continually re-negotiate, frames of issues and events. The below delineation of this process is an empirically supported version of what Navasky (2005) described above. “Collective action frames” interpret events while offering movement participants guides for appropriate action (Benford and Snow 2000). These frames also legitimate the movement’s activities, gather support, and mobilize participants. Snow et al. (1986) discuss four elements of the “frame

alignment” process that may occur as movements work to connect “individual and SMO [social movement organizations] interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary” (464). This frame alignment is necessary for mobilizing individuals into movement participation. Within the frame alignment process, four sub-processes may transpire; each is itself a dynamic, ongoing phenomenon (Snow et al. 1986, 467).

These four sub-processes — frame bridging, frame amplification, frame extension, and frame transformation — will now be defined and applied to specific features of Twitter activity. These aspects of Twitter usage could be characterized as serving other purposes for these magazines, such as self-promotion. However, their use by a political opinion magazine likely carries with it to varying degrees the additional goal of not just garnering interest, but also provoking audience action around the magazine’s particular framing of politics — as opposed to simply generating more website traffic and thus greater advertising revenue, the typical goal of a consumer magazine. The political magazines likely do not intentionally use these aspects of Twitter to invoke these components of frame alignment, which are probably unknown to them in these terms, but their tweets’ potential for enabling frame alignment may still be present. Therefore, viewing these magazines’ Twitter activity through the lens of the frame alignment processes described below may more fully illuminate the digitization of these publications’ unique function as opinionated, political movement-based journalistic media.

### *Frame Bridging*

Frame bridging is the process of activating “unmobilized sentiment pools or public opinion preference clusters” including individuals concerned about specific issues, but not yet organized to express themselves and act (Snow et al. 1986, 467).

On Twitter, frame bridging may occur for political opinion magazines when they *tweet frequently*, generating awareness of their perspectives, demonstrating their prominence within political discourse, and disseminating information and arguments supporting their paradigms. Following a political opinion magazine’s tweets is a low-stakes way of participating in its political perspective. Snow et al.’s description of frame bridging from 1986 suggested that a movement’s frames could initially diffuse through mass media, direct mail, and phone contacts; today, Twitter may be added to that list. Moreover, the *diversity of topics* contained in their Twitter activity offers audience members ways to connect and identify their own concerns with the magazines’ perspectives. Finally, magazines’ *use of hashtags*, which cut across conversations and demographics, can expose unmobilized Twitter users to the magazines’ perspectives and *link* users to online content, potentially building interested audiences rapidly.

### *Frame Amplification*

Frame amplification refers to the need for a movement’s prospective and existing adherents to feel that movement participation connects to their existing beliefs and values. A movement must offer continuous “clarification and invigoration” of its interpretive frame, reminding participants why they should mobilize to support the movement (Snow et al. 1986, 469).

The continuity of that “invigoration” might be represented on Twitter by the *frequency* of tweets by these magazines, as well as their provision of *links* to their own or other supporting content to repeatedly stoke their audience’s political passions. During an election, political magazines can use Twitter to respond in real time to events, continuously reinvigorating their audiences. The magazines can constantly (re)frame events through their own beliefs and values, and thereby subsidize their Twitter followers’ effort to understand the election. Explicit *calls to action* in tweets may help motivate users to view multimedia, vote in surveys, or otherwise act in ways that deepen their knowledge of and identification with magazines’ framing.

In order to clarify the connection between a magazine’s framing of politics and followers’ own framing, these magazines might also offer *distinctive uses* of Twitter in terms of style and philosophy to reveal their perspective. Finally, perhaps the most effective way to connect Twitter users to a political opinion magazine’s framing of politics would be to engage in *interaction*. A personalized “clarification and invigoration” is possible in this dialogic medium.

#### *Frame Extension*

Frame extension occurs when a movement seeks “to extend the boundaries of its primary framework so as to encompass interests or points of view that are incidental to its primary objectives but of considerable salience to potential adherents” (Snow et al. 1986, 472).

Political opinion magazines’ tweets can also support frame extension. Especially if strategically employed, *hashtags* can generate interest among users who did not previously adhere to a magazine’s political paradigm but who are concerned about a shared issue. When a political opinion magazine uses a hashtag for an issue or event, users from related audience segments may investigate the magazine and begin to explore its viewpoint. *Interactions*, as described above, can also serve frame extension. Using an @ mention for another Twitter user, particularly one with a large following, could attract attention from those with interest in complementary movements represented by that individual, and thereby generate interest in the magazines’ own frames.

#### *Frame Transformation*

Frame transformation occurs when movement participants begin interpreting the world through a movement’s frame. Participants understand causes, effects, and solutions in the ways promoted by the movement (Snow et al. 1986, 475). Some movements require life-changing frame transformations (e.g., cults); others are more limited in scope.

Twitter could help initiate and/or support some degree of frame transformation among political magazines’ audiences. The magazines’ news-oriented Twitter activity interprets events through their own frames, perhaps influentially so during the concluding moments of an election. Followers’ real-time engagement with this framing may support the alteration of the lens through which they understand events, given sufficient *frequency* of tweets to ensure the availability of the magazine’s perspective. This “always-on” news system is part of what Hermida (2010) calls “ambient journalism.” Moreover, a magazine’s framing of diverse *topics*, frequent *links* to interpretive content from the magazines’ own perspectives, *distinctive uses* of



Twitter to identify perspectives, and *interactions* with other users that invite the expression of a specific frame: All of these could reinforce the process of frame transformation.

Within this diverse, customizable information environment, Twitter users receive interpretations and frames from many sources. Yet, in order to avoid cognitive dissonance, most users likely choose to follow a set of Twitter feeds that offers parallel framing of politics. Himelboim, McCreery, and Smith (2013) found that Twitter users are unlikely to engage in “cross-ideology” activity. Therefore, political opinion magazines’ real-time framing and interpretation of events on Twitter encourage users’ deeper, perhaps transformational engagement with the magazines’ perspectives — at all times, wherever they go.

Specific, conclusive measures of political opinion and/or behavior change due to social media use have not yet been established. However, the above linkages among the components of the frame alignment process and Twitter features suggest that Twitter may have the potential to aid the mobilization process in political and social movements, even if tweets’ authors do not intentionally seek to cause such mobilization. This study does not attempt to test the actual effects of political opinion magazines’ tweets on audience members’ framing of political topics or their mobilization, but rather to establish a baseline understanding of these magazines’ Twitter activities and their embodiment (or not) of aspects of frame alignment established by prior research as critical to mobilization. The study therefore explores these research questions:

RQ1. How does the content of American political magazines’ Twitter activity during an election reflect frame alignment processes that may aid users’ mobilization into their political movements?

- 1a. Which topics do political magazines tweet about prior to an election?
- 1b. How often do political magazines provide links in their tweets, and to whom do they link?
- 1c. What kinds of calls to action are present in political magazines’ tweets, and how often are they used?
- 1d. How often do political magazines interact with other users on Twitter and to what end?
- 1e. With regard to the characteristics in 1a-1d, do conservative and liberal political magazines use Twitter distinctively?
- 1f. How do political opinion magazines use hashtags to create or join conversations on Twitter?

## **Method**

The online utility DiscoverText (2013) collected all tweets from 16 American political opinion magazines with diverse political perspectives. Tweets were collected from October 6 to November 6, 2012 (Election Day), to analyze Twitter activity just prior to the election.

The sample of political opinion magazines was developed through references to various sources; no authoritative list is available. These 16 magazines were those most often listed in the politics sections of online directories, magazine sales websites, and other listings. Furthermore, though many magazines offer “political opinion,” this list includes only magazines

whose *primary* focus is politics and interpretation. Table 1 provides data on these magazines and their print and Twitter audiences and activity.

[insert Table 1 about here]

DiscoverText retrieved all tweets from these magazines' accounts and all tweets from any user in which the magazines' usernames appeared. The complete archive contains 333,911 tweets. Of those, 14,720 are from the magazines' accounts; the remainder are from other accounts and mention the magazines' usernames. DiscoverText provides metadata about the entire archive, including hashtag frequency, username mention frequency, and other details. Specific uses of these metadata are described below.

A stratified random sample was constructed from the archive of the magazines' tweets. The sample consisted of 10 percent of the tweets from each magazine's account, or 1,472 tweets. Two coders (the researcher and an undergraduate research assistant) analyzed the tweets. Following an initial reading, a codebook was developed and tested. The final coding system involved three variables: the *topic*, the presence and type of an explicit *call to action*, and the type of *link* used (if any). Each was manually coded for every sampled tweet. The possible *topics* included a straightforward list of subjects. *Calls to action* included items such as "click this," "retweet," "watch video," etc. *Links* were actual hyperlinks to the magazines' websites, other media websites, YouTube, and so on. Links alone did not constitute "calls to action"; the tweet had to contain text explicitly requesting a click or other specific action of the reader.

For each variable, intercoder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha) was as follows: topic, 0.81; call to action, 0.67; link, 0.93. While the alpha coefficient is low for call to action, the percent agreement for this variable was 97 percent, meaning that the low alpha coefficient is likely due to the extremely low frequency of calls to action, as seen in Table 5 below. The skew of this variable skews the alpha coefficient lower in turn, despite high percent agreement (DiEugenio and Glass 2004).

## Results

These political opinion magazines were active on Twitter at varying levels prior to the 2012 election. About half of their tweets concerned the election, with the other half focused on social issues, war and conflict, and a range of other topics. Election-related tweets most often addressed "horse race" aspects of the election. Links in tweets most frequently went to magazines' own online content, not to other websites, particularly in tweets about non-election topics. Right-leaning political magazines were somewhat more likely to link to other websites in all of their tweets. The sampled tweets rarely contained explicit calls to action; when these did appear, they were more likely to be in election-related tweets and were more often used by left-leaning political magazines. Finally, the magazines also used hashtags to live-tweet during events, to join ideologically defined conversations, to initiate conversations around their reporting, and to insert their views into issue discussions.

### *Description of Sample*

A randomly selected, stratified sample of 1,472 tweets — 10 percent of each of the magazines' tweets, drawn from the archive of 14,720 tweets — was coded. Table 2 shows each magazine's contribution to the sample.

[insert Table 2 about here]

The magazines' activity varied widely during the month. Table 2 demonstrates that left-leaning political magazines' tweets comprise two-thirds of the sample, while right-leaning magazines contributed only a third. This disparity is not unexpected, given the lower daily Twitter activity of the right-leaning magazines revealed in Table 1. Minor differences between these magazines' Twitter activity are explored below. However, a preview to alleviate concern about this disparity's effects on other findings: There was little difference in the style of tweeting between right- and left-leaning political magazines.

### *Topics of Tweets*

Predictably, much of these political opinion magazines' Twitter activity during this pre-election month discussed the election. Table 3 displays the tweets' topics.

[insert Table 3 about here]

About 57 percent of the sampled tweets concerned the election, with tweets about its "horse race" aspects (discussing "winners"/"losers," strategy, polls, etc.) competing with election-related "other topics" tweets for primacy. The election-related "other" category encompassed tweets that addressed election issues without one of the other foci coded. Other possibilities for election-related topics included "candidate positions" (about 15 percent of the sample; tweets examining a candidate's position on an issue); "candidate personality/character" (about 6 percent; tweets describing a candidate personally); and "party politics/political philosophy" (about 3 percent; tweets describing a party's issue position or the meaning of a political perspective during the election, e.g., explaining a candidate's "true conservatism"). These categories enabled the exploration of issues familiar to scholars of political journalism, as addressed in the Discussion section.

The magazines' remaining tweets addressed social issues, such as crime, same-sex marriage, and education (16 percent of the sample); war and conflict (about 15 percent); the economy (about 4 percent); and broad issues of party politics and/or political philosophy (about 3 percent). Finally, they tweeted little about themselves: Only about 4 percent of the sampled tweets included explicit self-promotion for subscriptions, awards, or other publicity.

### *Frequency and Destination of Links*

The magazines included links in most tweets, as shown in Table 4. About 71 percent of their tweets included links to their own websites; about 9 percent linked to other websites.

About a fifth lacked a link. When tweeting about the election, however, the magazines' linking patterns were significantly different. Tweets about the election were twice as likely to *not* include links as non-election tweets, and were somewhat less likely to link to the magazines' own websites. Tweets on non-election topics did not offer more diverse links, but more frequently linked to the magazines' own sites. Partisan differences in link usage will be addressed below.

[insert Table 4 about here]

#### *Types and Frequency of Calls to Action in Tweets*

Only a few tweets included an explicit call to action. Almost 95 percent of the tweets lacked an overt instruction. Table 5 below indicates the types of calls to action that did appear. The magazines did little to spur specific actions among their Twitter audiences.

[insert Table 5 about here]

Further analysis of these calls to action reveals some significant differences in their use, however. Calls to action were significantly *less* likely in election-related tweets, as shown in Table 6 below. They were significantly *more* likely in tweets from left-leaning magazines, however, as is explored later.

[insert Table 6 about here]

#### *Frequency and Nature of Interactions on Twitter*

Of the sampled tweets, about 34 percent were interactions with other users, defined as a tweet responding to another user (usually beginning with @username) or a retweet of another user. About two-thirds of the interactions related to election topics; the remaining third addressed other topics. Numerous interactions contained links; about 34 percent of interactions included links to magazines' websites.

A *post hoc* analysis indicates that about 91 percent of the 498 interactions were retweets (RTs) of another user. These tweets began with RT or MT, for modified retweet, or were in quotation marks, another retweet indicator used by some Twitter applications. Coding the authorship of these retweets was beyond the scope of this analysis, but observations during coding suggest that many were magazines' retweets of their own staffers who posted from their own accounts about new online content they produced. Therefore, although the number of interactions appears high, many interactions did not involve members of the public. Some of the remaining interaction tweets were retweets of other users' *bon mots* during live-tweeting of events, especially during debates.

Only about 7 percent of interactions contained a call to action. The most frequently appearing instruction by the magazines in interactions was "read/click link."

### *Differences in Conservative and Liberal Magazines' Twitter Activity*

Left- and right-leaning magazines' Twitter activity was similar. There was no significant difference in the proportion of tweets each type devoted to the election. The overall distribution of topics was similar, with some variation in the proportion of tweets used to address war/conflict (mainly due to conservative magazines' tweets about Libya/Benghazi); conservative magazines also tweeted somewhat more about candidates' personality/character.

There was a statistically significant difference between the partisan magazines in their use of links, as shown in Table 4. Left-leaning magazines' links were more self-referential (i.e., less frequently taking users to other websites) than were right-leaning magazines' links. Left-leaning magazines were about six times more likely to include a call to action, as shown in Table 6; this difference was also significant. There was no significant difference in the proportion of interactions by left- and right-leaning magazines; 34.4 percent of the left-leaning magazines' tweets contained interaction, while 33.3 percent of the right-leaning magazines' tweets did so.

### *Magazines' Uses of Hashtags*

Hashtags are words or phrases in a tweet that are marked with # to indicate keywords or topics (Twitter 2013). Clicking on a hashtag brings up current tweets containing that hashtag from all Twitter users, beyond those a user follows. Hashtags facilitate conversations and are sometimes focal points of Twitter-wide "chats." Hashtags can be hard to understand out of context; they often reflect current news events, as when events are live-tweeted. However, overall trends in the magazines' hashtag selection are worthy of examination.

Table 7 shows hashtags used by the magazines, gathered and ranked using DiscoverText metadata.

[insert Table 7 about here]

Six magazines used the hashtag #debate[s] often enough for it to appear here. Magazines on the right and left used this hashtag to live-tweet the debates, as did users of all political persuasions.

Ideologically identified hashtags also appear here. The #p2 hashtag, used by "progressives" on Twitter, recurs for the left-leaning magazines. The #tcot and #tlot hashtags represent "Top Conservatives on Twitter" and "Top Libertarians on Twitter"; *National Review* and *Reason* respectively used these hashtags. All these hashtags insert the magazines' tweets into larger discussions on Twitter among these perspectives' adherents.

News events are also visible among these hashtags. Hashtags like #Sandy (for Hurricane Sandy in October 2012) and #Occupy (for the Occupy Wall Street movement) allow these magazines to enter wider Twitter discussions of these events and associated concerns.

*The Nation* also engaged with the hashtag #StopAndFrisk around its release of an audio recording of a New York City stop-and-frisk incident that demonstrated discriminatory police practices. The hashtag organized discussion and invigorated conversations around the issue.

In summary, the magazines used hashtags to participate in real-time news events and ideologically oriented conversations, to comment on issues, and to promote conversations around their content.

## **Discussion**

This study examined how political opinion magazines used Twitter before the 2012 presidential election to communicate with their audiences. It also sought to connect specific components of tweets' content with stages of the frame alignment process recognized in social movement mobilization research to examine whether these tweets appear to have the potential to advance this alignment among audiences. The analysis found that political opinion magazines have a wide range of activity on Twitter, and their tweets demonstrate interesting patterns worthy of further exploration. These magazines' Twitter habits may also influence their sustainability in today's changing journalistic environment.

Taken as a whole, the political opinion magazines' tweets studied here contain some features that might support frame alignment processes – and, thus, mobilization – among their Twitter followers. However, there are also ways in which their tweets fail to utilize aspects of Twitter that might aid frame alignment; this failure might affect not only these magazines' ability to mobilize audiences into their political perspectives via Twitter, but also their long-term status as influencers in an age of digital media and politics.

As delineated above, the frequency of a political opinion magazine's tweets, their coverage of a diverse variety of topics, their inclusion of links, and their use of hashtags all could support different components of the frame alignment process among the audience. The first and last of these measures – frequency and hashtag use – varied greatly among the magazines included in this study. Some magazines tweeted over 10 times per day and some barely once per day, as shown in Table 1; some magazines used a broad selection of hashtags frequently and some used none, as shown in Table 7. These disparities likely reflect differing levels of commitment of resources to Twitter usage, and perhaps also differing levels of familiarity with ways to build large audiences on Twitter.

However, two Twitter features corresponding to potential frame alignment that here appeared more promising were the diversity of topics in tweets and the inclusion of links to additional information, particularly links to magazines' own online content. Though election commentary was the most frequent topic, the magazines also addressed numerous other topics, especially social issues, war/conflict and foreign relations, and the varied topics within "other." Additionally, tweets frequently included links to support interested users' desire to explore further. While about 66 percent of the magazines' election-related tweets linked to their own websites, about 80 percent of their non-election-related tweets did so, which demonstrates the magazines' potential to encourage users' adoption of the magazines' perspectives on all topics.

These tweets lacked some components that could potentially advance frame alignment processes, however. These missed opportunities include their failure to interact frequently with their Twitter audiences, their lack of explicit calls to action, and the absence of distinctive styles reflecting political perspectives. Only 10 percent of these magazines' Twitter interactions were actual dialogue beyond retweets. They did not generally seek to discuss the magazines' political

paradigms with individual users. Additionally, the magazines didn't often ask their audiences specifically to *do* something. Even calls for relatively insubstantial actions, like "click" or "watch," were used rarely. As such, these tweets largely lacked an urge toward (inter)action regarding the magazines' political perspective and goals.

Furthermore, the magazines' tweets did not consistently convey a sense of their unique political perspective through style and content, at least through the variables included here. The left- and right-leaning magazines in this study seemed to express themselves on Twitter similarly, with little differentiation among their uses of features of Twitter. These magazines' tweets contained very little sense of the general philosophy or even the party preference underlying each magazine's Twitter content, with only 6 percent of the sampled tweets referring to party politics or specific political philosophies. With regard to the possibilities of interactions, calls to action, and political/stylistic distinctiveness, these political opinion magazines' tweets represent some missed opportunities to potentially advance audiences toward frame alignment and mobilization.

It is also worth noting that the most frequent form of election commentary in the magazines' tweets was discussion of the election's "horse race" aspects. Instead of enacting Navasky's more comprehensive vision of political opinion magazines' purpose — the crafting of larger explanatory frames and narratives for politics — these tweets mirrored trends in mainstream political journalism toward focusing on polling data, strategy, and other game-like aspects of campaigns (e.g., Farnsworth and Lichter 2011). This finding was somewhat disappointing, as it suggests political opinion magazines are failing to replicate their historical role as opinion leaders through this new medium, and instead are repeating patterns of coverage dominant in mainstream journalism. However, it was also somewhat surprising and reassuring to find little critique of candidates' personality or character within these tweets, contrary to the results of Lawrence et al. (2013) regarding mainstream journalists' tweets during parties' conventions. Political opinion magazines might further differentiate their unique contribution to political discourse on Twitter by developing distinctive political narratives and continuing to offer framing that avoids commentary on politicians' personalities.

Given this analysis, the ability of the tweets by these political opinion magazines to support the frame alignment process appears to be variable at present. If these magazines' staffs and publishers would like to see specific political goals accomplished — and also would like to build and maintain a passionate audience — then it is critical they support the initiation and invigoration of their own frame of politics among their audience. Strengthening the components of the tweets delineated above as potentially supporting frame alignment could better engage and even mobilize audiences who are intrigued by these magazines' perspectives.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

This exploratory study on political magazines' Twitter activity contains some limitations that offer intriguing directions for future research. The study, which includes only U.S.-based magazines, includes a small sample of the magazines' tweets and did not analyze tweets by other users who mentioned the magazines. Further analysis of those tweets would reveal more of the nature of conversations around these magazines' Twitter activity. A content analysis

incorporating specific frames of politics applied in the tweets would also be useful, though perhaps difficult to craft so that frames could be recognized in 140-character documents. Such an analysis might better capture distinctive elements of the style and content of these magazines' tweets than did the measures used here.

Furthermore, though this study attempts to connect specific features of Twitter activity to portions of the frame alignment process described in social movement research, the study does not test the effect of engaging with these magazines' tweets on Twitter users' political activation. Existing social movement research suggests mobilization requires these frame alignment processes, however, and so if these magazines (intentionally or not) are tweeting in ways that promote frame alignment among their audience, mobilization may occur. Future research should test whether Twitter content and participation can enable frame alignment and support eventual mobilization into a social movement.

### **Conclusion**

As a whole, this study suggests that political opinion magazines engaged with Twitter during the 2012 presidential election to produce a wide variety of Twitter content, focused in large part on the election but also incorporating other topics to establish their authority on political and social issues. Analysis of specific characteristics of their tweets implies that the magazines' Twitter activity may have some success in initiating frame alignment processes — and hence, political mobilization — among their audiences, but that the magazines have underutilized some aspects that offer potential for frame alignment via Twitter.

All of these magazines need to mobilize readers around their political perspectives in such a way that they also generate loyalty to their publications. The magazines should focus on the aspects of their Twitter usage that may best contribute to such mobilization and develop their usage of the medium accordingly. Distinctive, effective use of the elements of Twitter identified here could better activate audiences, contribute to action on behalf of the magazines' political goals, establish the magazines' unique voices and paradigms, and initiate conversations around political issues. In addition to sustaining these political opinion magazines through the shift to digital media, savvy use of Twitter and other social media could also support citizen conversations essential to democracy — a goal all of these magazines would undoubtedly appreciate.

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## Tables

Table 1  
*Magazines' Circulation Data and Twitter Activity*

Magazine	Political Perspective of Editorial Content	Primary Twitter Account	Circulation*	Twitter Followers†	Tweets/Day Average†
The American Conservative	Right	@amconmag	8,000	3,780	3.3
American Prospect	Left	@theprospect	45,000	11,247	7.8
Dissent	Left	@DissentMag	9,000	5,234	1.4
Human Events	Right	@HumanEvents	35,943	23,148	7.4
In These Times	Left	@inthesetimesmag	20,000	6,643	4.6
Monthly Review	Left	@monthly_review	N/A	733	0.5
Mother Jones	Left	@motherjones	166,863	159,982	38.8
The Nation	Left	@thenation	141,476	190,733	10.8
National Interest	Nonpartisan	@TheNatlInterest	N/A	3,783	3.9
National Review	Right	@NRO	165,044	34,974	2.9
New Internationalist	Left	@newint	50,000	7,980	2.1
The New Republic	Left	@tnr	39,314	26,673	21.5
Newsmax	Right	@Newsmax_media	185,772	19,789	6.1
The Progressive	Left	@theprogressive	47,000	16,393	2.1
Reason	Right	@reason	50,000	92,376	11.4
Weekly Standard	Right	@weeklystandard	106,138	56,198	10.8

\* Most recent data available from Alliance for Audited Media, media kits, or other reliable online sources. May combine print and digital, and may be approximate. N/A: not available.

† Twitter followers and tweet frequency from time of data gathering in October 2012. Frequency calculated using *howoftendoyoutweet.com*.

Table 2  
*Magazines' Tweets in Sample (n=1,472)*

Magazine	Frequency	Percentage of Sample
Mother Jones	321	21.8%
New Republic	171	11.6
The Nation	165	11.2
American Prospect	157	10.7
Reason	148	10.0
National Review	146	9.9
The Progressive	93	6.3
American Conservative	80	5.4
Weekly Standard	60	4.1
Human Events	41	2.8
New Internationalist	36	2.4
Newsmax	18	1.2
In These Times	15	1.0
National Interest	11	0.7
Dissent	8	0.5
Monthly Review	3	0.2
<i>Left-leaning magazines</i>	969	66.3
<i>Right-leaning magazines</i>	493	33.7
Total	(n=1,472)	

Table 3  
*Topics of Political Magazine Tweets (n=1,472)*

Type	Frequency	Percentage of Sample
Election commentary: horse race	251	17.0%
Election commentary: other topics	241	16.4
Social issues	235	16.0
Election commentary: candidate positions	218	14.8
War/conflict and foreign relations	130	8.8
Other	103	7.0
Election commentary: candidate personality/character	93	6.3
Magazine self-promotion	61	4.1
Economy	53	3.6
Election commentary: party politics/political philosophy	45	3.1
Party politics/political philosophy	43	2.9
Total	(n=1,472)	100
<i>All election commentary topics</i>	<i>845</i>	<i>57.8%</i>
<i>All other topics</i>	<i>617</i>	<i>42.2</i>

Table 4  
*Magazines' Use of Links in Tweets*

	Link to Magazine's Own Website	Link to Other Website	No Link Included
Entire sample ( $n=1,472$ )	71.4%	8.7%	20.0%
Election topics ( $n=848$ )	65.7%	8.8%	25.5%
Non-election topics ( $n=625$ )	79	8.5	12.5*
Left-leaning magazines ( $n=969$ )	74.0%	6.8%	19.2%
Right-leaning magazines ( $n=493$ )	65.7	12.4	21.9**

\*  $\chi=39.478, p < .001$  (2-tailed).

\*\*  $\chi=15.973, p < .001$  (2-tailed).

Table 5  
*Types of Calls to Action in Magazines' Tweets (n=1,472)*

Type of Call	Frequency	Percentage of Sample
None	1,051	94.6%
Respond to magazine self-promotion	26	1.8
Read/click link	26	1.8
Watch/listen to multimedia	14	1.0
Attend/participate in event	10	0.7
Vote in election	3	0.2
Total	(n=1,472)	100.1*

\* Rounding error.

Table 6  
*Magazines' Use of Calls to Action in Tweets*

	No Call to Action	Contains Call to Action
Entire sample ( $n=1,472$ )	94.6%	6.4%
Election topics ( $n=848$ )	97.6%	2.4%
Non-election topics ( $n=625$ )	90.6	9.4*
Left-leaning magazines ( $n=969$ )	92.5%	7.5%
Right-leaning magazines ( $n=493$ )	98.8	1.2**

\* Corrected  $\chi=34.169$ ,  $p < .001$  (2-tailed).

\*\* Corrected  $\chi=24.284$ ,  $p < .001$  (2-tailed).



Table 7  
*Top Four Hashtags Used More than Once in Sampled Tweets (n=1,472)*

Magazine	Hashtags in Rank Order of Use
American Prospect	rumble2012, debate
Mother Jones	musicmonday, sandy, vpdebate, longread
The Nation	debate, p2election, StopAndFrisk, Sandy
National Review	debates, Sandy, VPdebate, tcot
New Internationalist	youth, NI, Occupy
The New Republic	election2012, debate, election
The Progressive	prog12, debate, p2, climatechange
Reason	debates, Poll, tlot, p2
Weekly Standard	Election2012

Magazines not listed either used no hashtags during the archived time period or used none more than once.