

Facebook As A Campaign Tool During The 2012 Elections: A New Dimension To Agenda Setting Discourse

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Abstract

The social networking site Facebook has risen to become an important campaign tool for politicians while also raising new questions about how its use is reshaping the agenda setting paradigm. This research examines the extent to which the Facebook messages of presidential nominees during the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign were transferred to the online public on Facebook and, via a two-step flow, to the greater citizen's agenda. Findings demonstrate that in their political campaigns on Facebook, politicians are successfully transferring their first- and, to a

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lesser extent, second-level agendas to the Facebook public agenda, which largely mirrors the greater public agenda.

A decade after the advent of a Web 2.0 era, politicians have not been remiss to join the fray of online engagement and interactivity. When Barack Obama announced the start of his presidential bid in 2008, he did so on the steps of the Illinois Old State Capitol. Three years later, he announced his reelection campaign in an online video, signaling how dramatically the Internet had become a defining force in modern-day politics. Unlike past examples of presidential candidates' use of new media, such as Franklin D. Roosevelt's radio fireside chats of the 1930s or John F. Kennedy's use of television in the 1960s, the adoption of the Internet by politicians has occurred with swifter pace (Mehta, 2011).

From its use in everything from campaign fundraisers to attack ads, the Internet has become a game-changer for politicians, who have found a new avenue of reaching the public largely without the use of traditional media. An examination of the media's coverage of the 2012 presidential election found that at a time of diminishing reporting resources, many newsmakers found new ways to get their message directly to the public with little or no journalistic vetting (Sartor et al., 2012).

At the center of this new delivery method has been social media and the candidates' use of sites like Facebook and YouTube. In the run-up to the last presidential election, Obama's campaign posted nearly four times as much content as Romney's and was active on nearly twice as

many platforms (Sartor et al., 2012). Obama's digital content also engendered more response from the public: twice the number of shares, views and comments of his posts. "In 2012, in short, voters are playing an increasingly large role in helping to communicate campaign messages, while the role of the traditional news media as an authority or validator has only lessened," Sartor et al., concluded (p. 4).

This study builds on that premise through an examination of the ways social media is strengthening the influence of political candidates during electoral campaigns and thus potentially adding a new dimension to the agenda-setting process. Specifically, using the theoretical framework of first- and second-level agenda setting, this research examines the extent to which the messages of the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees during the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign were transferred to the Facebook public agenda. A content analysis of the Facebook posts of Obama and Romney shed light on the issues the politicians considered important. A comparison was then made of the issues that Facebook users considered important. Considering the research that shows that people who are politically active online are more likely to be politically active off-line and thus have great influence over their friends' political activity (Vitak et al., 2011), a comparison was then made with the Facebook public agenda and the greater public agenda (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Considering that the evolution of agenda-setting literature is traced to political campaigning and the salience of political messages on the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), new uses of social networking sites as media for disseminating political campaign messages seems espe-

cially apropos and presents new opportunities to gauge the saliency of the messages directly from the social media site itself.

Background

In general, the Internet has spelled a boon for people seeking information about political candidates. Researchers found that a majority of American adults went online in 2008 to keep informed about political developments and to get involved with the election. Further, not only did 60% of Internet users go online for news about political campaigns, some 38% talked about politics online over the course of the campaign (Smith, 2009). In essence, people find value in accessing the social networking websites of political candidates chiefly by the desire to seek information and interact (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008).

Considering the ubiquity of Facebook activity — used by 57% of American adults (Smith, 2014) and that 65% of those users aged 18-29 engaged Facebook in some form of political activity during the 2008 campaign (Smith, 2009) — this research uses the term “Facebook public agenda” to describe the vast and diverse sentiment of this online community. Not all Facebook users participate in Facebook political forums, of course, the same way that not all members of the public participate in the political process, but there is strong evidence to indicate that these Facebook comment threads are not merely discussion prompts by the candidates or that the candidate page is necessarily a gathering place for like-minded people. Research shows that there is a great deal of disagreement within the politicians’ Facebook pages (Camaj & Santana,

2015), suggesting that users are not automatically biased to the messages of the candidate and are often infusing independent streams of thought. Robust disagreement in these forums might indicate not just that the Internet can be considered a public sphere (Habermas, 2006), which some scholars have suggested (Ruiz et al., 2011), but that the online Facebook community, which has over one billion members (Fowler, 2012), might also be construed as a public sphere, which requires a diversity of opinions where people come together to discuss societal issues and influence political action (Habermas, 2006).

Literature Review

The concept of agenda setting relies on the basic premise that every social system must have an agenda in order to prioritize its problems (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). While an agenda forms around an “issue” communicated in a hierarchy of importance, the media additionally have the power to make certain issues more salient by covering them more prominently. While first-level agenda setting suggests that the mass media tells the public what issues to think about (Cohen, 1963; McCombs & Shaw, 1972), attribute agenda setting – or second-level agenda setting – explains how the media, via an emphasis on certain object attributes, tells the public how to think about those issues (McCombs, 2005; Kim, Han, Choi, & Kim, 2012).

The agenda setting process, however, does not merely involve the transfer of object salience and attribute salience from the media to the public agenda, but it also includes the same relationship with a policy agenda (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). The agenda setting process thus is an ongoing competition among issue proponents to gain

the attention of the news media, the public and policy elites (Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Dearing and Rogers (1996) claim that agenda setting is inherently a political process and that as two opposing sides battle out an issue in the public arena, the mass media has traditionally acted as arbitrator.

Online Issue Agendas

This power relationship between political candidates, the media and the public agenda has arguably changed with the emergence of the interactive forms of communication on the Internet. New media have particularly affected how issues are communicated and discussed during political campaigns. Social networking sites have allowed politicians both unprecedented exposure and access to the voting populace (Gueorguieva, 2008; Williams & Gulati, 2009; Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010). Political candidates use these sites to convey coherent messages and maintain dense connections (Livne, Simmons, Adar, & Adamic, 2011). Research suggests that some candidates encouraged online interactivity primarily through text input (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006) and that Facebook has risen to become a viable tool for political communication between politicians and Facebook users (Woolley, Limperos, & Oliver, 2010). During the primary season leading up to Election Day 2008, for example, Facebook users created more than 1,000 group pages that focused on Obama and McCain. Woolley, Limperos and Oliver concluded that by 2008, "Facebook groups emerged as an influential forum for political expression" (2010, p. 646). A question unaddressed in the literature is the extent to which robust political campaigning online trans-

lates to robust political discussion in online forums and to what degree candidates can set the agenda of these online discussions.

Research has explored the extent to which traditional news media sources have an agenda-setting impact on the discussions taking place in online chat rooms and bulletin boards. An examination of online media coverage of four issues from five news media during the 1996 political campaign found that the frequency of electronic bulletin board discussions served as a surrogate for the public agenda (Roberts, Wanta, & Dzwo, 2002). In their content analysis of blog posts and mainstream media news stories during the 2004 presidential campaign, researchers found that the blog agenda was similar to that of mainstream media (Lee, 2007).

Studying the influence of Internet bulletin boards on newspaper coverage of the 2000 general election in South Korea, researchers found that newspapers influence Internet bulletin boards at the first level of agenda setting (Lee, Lancendorfer, & Lee, 2005). The authors concluded that although reciprocity appeared in a few time spans, the Internet funnels and leads public opinion as well as affects the coverage of other media. Questioning the agenda-setting and social influence of elite traditional media outlets among top independent political bloggers, Meraz found that the traditional media's agenda-setting power is not universal: "Traditional media agenda setting is now just one force among many competing influences. Unlike traditional media platforms, independent blog networks are utilizing the blog tool to allow citizens more influence and power in setting news agendas" (2009, p. 701).

Considering these ideas, the following hypothesis is

proposed:

H1: The salience of online issue agendas (first-level) of presidential candidates' Facebook posts will transfer to the Facebook public agenda.

Online Issue Attribute Agendas

In addition to the transfer of salience of certain issue agendas (first-level) from the media to the public, it has been hypothesized that certain attributes (second-level) made prominent by media will also become salient in people's minds (Golan & Wanta, 2001) and thus are often central to the reason why people support or oppose a given issue. In essence, this level of agenda setting is primarily concerned with how news media influence the way the public evaluates a topic by highlighting certain attributes prominently (Kim et al., 2012). As the media make certain attributes of an issue more prominent, the audience gives more weight to the same attributes when deciding whether or not to support the issue (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2002).

During electoral campaigns, political candidates and the media have traditionally battled each other to win over the public agenda. A study from the 1992 presidential campaign challenged the media-centric explanations of the agenda-setting influence of the media over the public after findings suggested that newspapers do not play the dominant agenda-setting role portrayed in some political communication literature (Dalton, Beck, Huckfeldt, & Koetzle, 1998). Tan and Weaver (2007) also examined the evolution of correspondences among the issue agendas of the mass media, Congress, and the public from 1946 to 2004. Of all three groups studied in this relationship, the public had

the least power. The findings reflected the results of an earlier study that found little support for the view that televised presidential debates address the public's primary political concerns. Candidates, journalists and the public appear to have their own separate issue agendas (Jackson-Beeck & Meadow, 1979).

Studies have investigated the impact of online ads during presidential elections to test their salience among the public. Golan, Kiouisis, and McDaniel (2007) examined the agenda-setting function of televised political advertisements and how the advertising agendas of Bush and Kerry impacted the public's evaluation of both candidates. They concluded that there is evidence for the transfer of affective attribute saliency between political advertising and voters' evaluation of issues. In Ragas and Kiouisis's 2010 examination of campaign ads during the 2008 U.S. presidential election primaries, they found evidence of first- and second-level agenda setting relationships between partisan news coverage and political activists groups. Citizen activist issues were most strongly related to partisan media coverage rather than to the issue priorities of Obama's online ads (Ragas & Kiouisis, 2010), signaling a rift between the candidates' message and its salience among the public. Similarly, online communication channels, such as partisan blogs, were found to be capable of transferring political issue agendas. Attribute agendas were also found likely to transfer, though not as strongly as at the first-level (Meraz, 2011).

Other research has pointed to the independent thinking of online users in their willingness to unreservedly express themselves (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012) and their inclination to not passively absorb agenda attrib-

utes. In their study of the influence of Internet bulletin boards on news coverage of the 2000 general election in South Korea, researchers found that while strong relationships existed for first-level agenda setting, weaker relationships existed at the second-level (Lee, Lancendorfer, & Lee, 2005).

Considering these ideas, a second hypothesis is proposed:

H2: The salience of online issue attribute agendas (second-level) of presidential candidates' Facebook posts will transfer to the Facebook public agenda.

Agenda Setting and the Two-Step Flow

Embedded within the agenda-setting process is the assumption that political elites influence the national agenda via a two-step flow of information, which highlights the role played by certain individuals in mediating messages from the mass media to the general public (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Katz, 1957). These individuals, known as "opinion leaders" and who are understood to know more about public issues by exposing themselves heavily to the mass media, play a crucial role in identifying emerging issues in the media and diffusing them among the public (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948). At the same time, people with lower levels of media exposure, knowledge and interest about specific issues turn to opinion leaders for information and advice (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Robinson (1976) investigated interpersonal influence in election campaigns and found that opinion leaders were different from others because of their social position or interest in a topic; they monitored the mass media more closely and more purposely than non-leaders.

Thus, in this model, information flows two ways, from the (media) messenger to opinion leaders, and from opinion leaders to the public. As Nisbet and Kotcher (2009) point out, opinion leaders not only help draw the attention of others to a particular issue but also signal how others should respond. This influence may occur by giving advice and recommendations, by serving as a role model that others can imitate or by persuading or convincing others (Nisbet & Kotcher, 2009; Weimann, 1994).

Several studies have examined the extent to which opinion leaders mediate the agenda-setting influence between the mass media and the public. Brosius and Weimann (1996) focused their research at the intersection of the agenda-setting process and influential individuals in order to better understand the flow of issues, concerns and themes between the mass media and the public. They argue that opinion leaders, through social discourse, personal contacts and social networks, can collect, diffuse, filter and promote the flow of information. Weimann's (1994) research suggested that opinion leaders identify emerging public issues faster than others and are thus early recognizers or adopters of these issues. Interpersonal communication also serves as an amplifying mediator of the agenda-setting influence of mass media on their audiences (Weaver, Zhu, & Willnat, 1992; Shaw, 1977).

Online environments have changed the structure of political communication by further empowering opinion leaders. The interactive nature of the Internet has not only made it a new channel of information where people, including political elites, spread their message but has further allowed people to communicate with each other about that message. Norris and Curtice applied the two-step flow

theory to the online communication efforts by political campaigns (2008). They point out how information can flow to the public via more specialized outlets, such as messages issued by parties and candidates on websites. These messages can be expected to reach a limited niche audience consisting of party supporters and campaign workers.

If those activists in turn discuss the information they have derived from these sources with a wider general public, however, that information may then reach a larger audience via a two-step process. Messages percolate downwards from party managers through activists to the mass electorate. (p. 6)

Evidence regarding the homogeneity of the discussion in online political forums, however, questions the degree to which political campaigns are able to set the attribute agenda of issues (Wilhelm, 2000; Ancu & Cozma, 2009). Fernandes, Guircanu, Bowers and Neely concluded that "Facebook is used as a venue where supporters can organize on a local level and exhibit their support for their candidate as well as frustrations they have with the opposing candidate" (2010, p. 671). A content analysis of the Facebook wall comments in the U.S. House and Senate races during the 2006 elections suggested that young voters who accessed candidates' Facebook walls were mostly interested in establishing a relationship with candidates and fellow supporters but that, at times, were also interested in engaging in lively political discourse with supporters of opponents (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Other studies similarly found that participants who engaged in Facebook political discussions also cross-posted on opposing candi-

dates' Facebook walls (Camaj & Santana, 2015; Robertson, Vatrapu, & Medina, 2010).

Moreover, research suggests that political activists are more likely to use the Internet for political activities and thus might have an influence on the broader online users. As Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo (2002) point out: "If the news media influence the perceived importance of issues held by the public, perhaps Internet users, thus, may use the news media as a guide to the important issues that need to be discussed on EBBs (electronic bulletin boards)" (p. 453).

Social networking sites might provide similar channels for a two-step information flow as well. People who engage in political activity via social networking sites are also active in other forms of offline political engagement. For example, Vitak et al. (2011) found that during the 2008 U.S. presidential election, political activity on Facebook, such as posting a politically-oriented status update or becoming a "fan" of a candidate, was a significant factor in predicting other forms of political participation. Analyzing the role of Twitter in politics, Cha, Haddadi, Benevenuto, and Gummadi found that the most influential Twitter users could hold significant influence over a variety of topics. The top Twitter users had a disproportionate amount of influence. They found that "influence is not gained spontaneously or accidentally, but through concerted effort. In order to gain and maintain influence, users need to keep great personal involvement" (2010, p. 17).

Considering these ideas, a third hypothesis is proposed:

H3: There will be a correlation between the Facebook public issue agenda (first-level) and the over-

all public's agenda.

Method

The Data

Messages posted on the 2012 presidential candidates' Facebook pages were analyzed using quantitative content analysis (Holsti, 1969). This study focuses on the two major party nominees, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney.

Sampling

The sampling frame for this study was the general election campaign, usually from Labor Day through Election Day, September 1 through November 6.

Candidates posted messages on their Facebook walls, thus creating threads where people could respond. Two samples were collected. First, all messages posted on each candidate's Facebook pages were collected and analyzed. Candidates' messages were often short and accompanied by a picture or a link. A total of 539 posts were collected, 181 on Obama's page and 358 posts from Romney's page. Though Romney had nearly double the number of posts as Obama, the average for each candidate was about three posts per day.

The second set of data came from comments posted by Facebook users on both candidates' pages. Given the high volume of such comments, the sampling period was reduced to a randomly constructed week following suggestions that a constructed week is the most effective method of sampling online content (Hester & Dougall, 2007). Vergeer and Hermans note some unique characteristics of social media that present challenges for analysts, such as the asynchronous nature of online discussion and the fact

that such discussions tend to be “less structured and more emotional than professionally produced content” (2008, p. 42). To that end, they recommend sampling message threads rather than individual messages. Thus, seven dates from the sampling period were randomly selected to represent a constructed week. One thread post for each day from the constructed week was selected based on the highest number of comments. From each thread, a randomly selected block of 50 consecutive comments were selected and analyzed. The total sample size was 699 comments, 350 from Obama’s page and 349 from Romney’s. For both sample sets, the unit of analysis was the individual message.

Coding procedure

A comprehensive codebook for four coders was created to provide the operational definitions of the categories and examples to aid in making judgments. Reliability was established based on Krippendorff’s alpha (individual variables ranged from .67 to 1.0). A lower than conventionally accepted level of agreement was deemed acceptable considering this study’s tentative nature (Krippendorff, 2004).

Measures

Issue agendas were identified as posted messages that dealt with substantive policy issues, campaign issues, or non-political matters. Substantive issues included policy-related issues while campaign issues were more procedural campaign matters, such as election polls, political advertising and campaign events. Next, if a message was coded as a substantive issue, the specific issues were coded separately.

The list of issues included

- political issues (national security, terrorism, crime and justice, drug related issues, gun control, role of government, and foreign policy);
- issues pertaining to economy (poverty/living standards, unemployment/jobs, the middle class, student loans, energy policy, gas prices, housing/mortgage, national debt/deficit, taxes, and global economy);
- and social issues (women's issues, race/ethnicity issues, same-sex marriage, veterans health care, social security/Medicare, education, environment/global warming, and immigration).

This strategy was followed to code candidates' thread posts and citizens' comments on those posts.

The final list of issues used in the analysis were condensed into 15 issues that included national security, crime and justice, role of government, foreign policy, living standards, unemployment, energy, national debt/deficit, taxes, women issues, minority issues, gay rights, health care, education and environment.

Candidate attribute agendas were measured through the issue valence (positive-negative) emphasized in the candidate Facebook posts. To detect the positive or negative valence of the issues, candidate posts were coded for candidate self-promotion (positive valence) and attacks against opponent (negative valence).

Facebook attribute agendas were measured through three different approaches. First, Facebook comments were coded if the comment replied to the message posted by the candidate and if the comment expressed agreement or disagreement with the message.

A further measurement included two other categories: if the comment expressed support or opposition for the *candidate* (or his running mate) on whose Facebook page the message appeared; and if the comment expressed support or opposition for the *opponent* (or his running mate) of the candidate on whose Facebook page the message appeared. Another implicit form of support with the candidate was coded through the number of citizens' likes and shares of messages in candidate threads.

Finally, to compare the Facebook public agenda with the overall public agenda, data was taken from Pew Research Center's annual survey of policy priorities (2012). Pew researchers interviewed a national sample of 3,019 adults about which issues they considered most important from September 12-16, 2012, roughly in conjunction with the start of the data collection of the current research. In the survey, all participants were asked: "In making your decision about who to vote for this fall, will the issue of [insert item] be very important, somewhat important, not too important or not at all important?" Interviewers were instructed to remind respondents, if necessary, that the question was not about their position on each issue but rather on how important each issue was to them (Pew Research Center, 2012, p. 9).

Results

The first research hypothesis predicted that the salience of online issue agendas of presidential candidates' Facebook posts would transfer to the Facebook public agenda. Overall, the top-ranked issue of Facebook commenters matched the top-ranked issue proposed by each candidate. Commenters on Obama's wall agreed with

Obama that “Living Standards” was the top issue facing the public. Commenters on Romney’s wall agreed with Romney that “Unemployment” was the top issue.

While the ranking of other issues varied in order of importance from the candidates and the commenter, many issues closely matched. For example, the fourth most important issue for both commenters and Romney was “National debt/Deficit.” At the other end of the spectrum, the issue of “gay rights” was considered the least important issue for commenters on Romney’s wall. Other issues were somewhat divergent; where commenters on Romney’s wall considered “National Security” the second most important issue, it was the seventh most important issue for Romney. Obama’s wall saw similar results. The issue of “Unemployment” was considered of high importance to Obama’s commenters as well as Obama. “National security” was considered the fourth most important issue by both commenters on Obama’s Facebook wall and Obama. On the other end of the spectrum, the issue of “Environment” was considered of little importance to commenters and Obama. As with Romney, some issues were divergent; where Obama considered “Education” the second most important issue, commenters on his Facebook wall considered it the sixth most important issue.

Overall, strong Spearman’s Rho correlation coefficients in all categories indicated a strong relationship between the presidential candidates’ agenda and Facebook commenters’ agenda. Obama’s agenda correlated strongly with the agendas of commenters on his wall ($\rho=.707$, $p<.01$) while Romney’s agenda also had a moderately strong relationship with the agendas of commenters on his wall ($\rho=.594$, $p<.05$). Thus H1 was supported.

Table 1
Issues Emphasized by Presidential Candidates and Commenters on Facebook

	Public opinion	Facebook Commenters	Commenters on Obama Wall	Commenters on Romney Wall	Obama Wall	Romney Wall						
%	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>N</i>						
<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>	<i>Rank</i>						
National security	7	38	2	11	4	27	2	10	4	7	9	
Crime & Justice	0	11	1	13	1	9	4	10	0	10	0	12
Role of Government	0	11	8	10	3	8	5	9	0	10	9	7
Foreign Policy	60	7	15	7	6	6	9	6	4	8	8	8
Living standards	87	1	23	5	17	1	6	8	13	1	35	2
Unemployment	83	2	65	1	15	2	46	1	13	1	91	1
Energy policy	55	8	9	9	3	8	6	8	6	7	18	3
National debt/Deficit	68	5	26	4	12	3	14	4	3	9	17	4
Taxes	66	6	20	6	7	5	13	5	11	3	18	3
Women's issues	46	9	4	11	3	8	1	12	8	5	4	10
Race/minority issues	41	10	13	8	5	7	8	7	0	10	1	11
Gay rights	0	11	1	13	1	9	0	13	3	9	0	12
Health Care	74	3	30	3	11	4	19	3	7	6	13	6
Education	69	4	13	8	6	6	5	9	12	2	14	5
Environment	0	11	2	12	0	10	2	11	0	10	0	12

Table 2

Spearman's Rho Correlations between Candidate Agenda and Commenters' Agenda on Facebook ($N=15$)

	Obama agenda	Commenters on Romney Wall	Romney Agenda	Public Opinion
Commenters on Obama wall	.707**	.807**	.767**	.918**
Obama agenda		.420	.718**	.831**
Commenters on Romney wall			.594*	.675**
Romney agenda				.819**
Total FB Commenters				.840**

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

The second research hypothesis predicted that the salience of online issue attribute agendas of presidential candidates' Facebook posts would transfer to the Facebook public agenda. Nearly half of Facebook users (48%) expressed disagreement with the message of both candidates; about 34% agreed and 18% neither agreed nor disagreed. The extent to which both candidates saw either disagreement or agreement among those commenters in their posts was evenly split. Of those Facebook users who replied to Romney's post (11.6%) — meaning instead of merely posting a comment, their comment was a direct response to the candidate's message — about 25% disagreed with his message; among those who replied to Obama's post (11.3%), about 23% disagreed. The percentage of com-

Table 3
Agreement vs. Disagreement among Commenters in 2012
who Replied to Candidates' Threads

	Obama	Romney	Total	χ^2
Total Reply	1.3%	11.6%	23%	.040
Agree	16%	18%	34%	1.476
Disagree	23%	25%	48%	
Both	2%	2%	48%	
Neither	9%	6%	14%	

Note. *= $p \leq .05$, **= $p \leq .00$

menters who agreed with each candidate in a direct reply to the candidate's message was somewhat lower than those who disagreed. About 18% of Romney's commenters agreed with the candidates' messages while 16% of Obama's commenters agreed with his posts.

Further, assuming the number of "likes" and "shares" can be construed to be a gauge of agreement with candidates' messages, Chi-square analyses showed that there was a significant difference each candidate received. Overall, Obama had a higher number of "likes" and "shares" than Romney. Collapsing the numbers into 12 categories, from "0-1,000" to "more than 10,0001," the latter category was dominated by Obama; just over half (54.1%) of Obama's "likes" numbered over 10,000 while 32.7% of Romney's "likes" were in this category ($\chi^2 = 51.42$, $p < .000$, $df = 11$). Obama also saw a higher number of "shares" with 1.1% in the largest category compared to Romney's 0% ($\chi^2 = 120.53$, $p < .000$, $df = 9$). Thus, H2 was only moderately supported – for about one third of Face-

Table 4
People's Engagements with Candidate's Thread Posts on Facebook

	Comments			Likes			Shares		
	Obama (N=181)	Romney (N=358)	χ^2	Obama (N=181)	Romney (N=358)	χ^2	Obama (N=181)	Romney (N=358)	χ^2
Up to 1000	16%	38.3%	42.714***	6.6%	18.2%	51.242***	9.9%	45.8%	120.529***
1001-10000	43.1%	39.1%		8.3%	18.4%		43.1%	40.5%	
10001-20000	24.9%	14.5%		2.2%	3.1%		14.4%	9.2%	
20001-30000	10.5%	4.2%		4.4%	.6%		13.8%	2.8%	
30001-40000	5%	1.7%		6.1%	3.1%		8.3%	1.1%	
40001-50000	0	.6%		3.9%	5%		4.4%	.3%	
50001-60000	.6%	.3%		2.8%	2.2%		2.8%	0	
60001-70000	0	.6%		2.2%	4.5%		1.1%	0	
70001-80000	0	.3%		2.2%	5.3%		0	0	
80001-90000	0	0		2.8%	3.4%		0	0	
90001-100000	0	0		4.4%	3.4%		1.1%	.3%	
100001-1000000	0	0		54.1%	32.7%		1.1	0	

Note. ***p<.000

book users (34%) but not supported for nearly half (48%).

The third hypothesis predicted a relationship between the Facebook public agenda and the overall public's agenda. The opinions of Facebook commenters had a strong correlation to the public's opinions ($\rho^3.675$, $p<.01$). Comparing data from the Pew Research Center, which asked registered voters about the issues that were "very important" to them, with the issues emphasized as important to Facebook users, there was a strong linear relationship between public's agenda and the agenda of Facebook commenters on Obama's wall ($\rho=.918$, $p<.01$) as well as Romney's wall ($\rho=.675$, $p<.01$) [See Table 2]. Thus, H3 was supported.

Discussion

This research sought to examine the extent to which Facebook has become an important campaign tool for politicians while also raising new questions about the extent to which the agenda setting paradigm is being reshaped. As Roberts, Wanta and Dzwo point out, the Internet has allowed for messages to be disseminated instantly. "This raises the question as to whether the agenda-setting theory is as tenable an application in the age of new media as it has been in the age of mainstream media" (2002, p. 453).

This study was primarily interested in the transfer of issue salience and issue attribute salience from the 2012 presidential candidates' Facebook pages to the Facebook public agenda, and by extension, to the overall citizens' agenda. Results showed that there was a correlation between the presidential candidates' agenda and Facebook commenters' agenda, indicating a transfer of salience.

Overall, correlations of the politicians' messages and the agenda of Facebook users indicate that politicians are successfully telling the Facebook public what to think about and, by using the social networking site, providing them a platform in which to talk about it.

Issue attribute salience transfer from the presidential candidates' to the Facebook public agenda, however, was, while significant, not as pronounced as the issues in general. The finding that nearly half of Facebook users expressed disagreement with the messages of both candidates shows that while the politicians were successful at telling people *what* to think about, they were less successful at telling them *how* to think about it. This might be a function of people's ability to cross-post on the Facebook walls of both candidates. This finding is consistent with other research that has found that while strong relationships may exist for first-level agenda setting, weaker relationships exist at the second-level (Meraz, 2011; Lee, Lancendorfer, & Lee, 2005). People's inclination to express disagreement on a presidential candidate's Facebook page also indicate that people were not merely visiting the Facebook pages of their preferred candidate to engage with like-minded supporters, contradicting suggestions that online forums were mainly tools where people with similar opinions or political affiliations congregate (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Wilhelm, 2000).

Finally, tentative findings suggest that there is evidence of the transfer of saliency between the Facebook agenda and the public agenda, though it not clear which way this information is flowing. The two-step flow model could explain how messages might be flowing from politicians on Facebook to Facebook opinion leaders to the pub-

lic at large. Still, this research cannot definitively claim that there is a direct, causal connection between the agendas of politicians on Facebook and the overall public agenda because it did not control for other media-message exposure among the public or consider those members of the public not on Facebook. Nevertheless, the finding that the opinions of Facebook commenters had a strong correlation to the overall public's opinions should be catalyst for future research that seeks to make a more direct relationship between the salience of messages flowing from politicians to the public, or vice versa, using social media platforms.

Facebook, researchers have concluded, is more than merely a platform for spreading messages; its interactive component and its social nature is key in message salience (Bond et al., 2012). Indeed, audience participation on Facebook appears to also influence the news agenda of the traditional agenda-setter (Jacobson, 2013). In short, social influence makes a significant difference in political mobilization. From urging voters to use social media to check voter-registration deadlines, polling-place locations and ballot issues, presidential candidates in the 2012 election found Facebook an indisputably useful tool in spreading their message.

The idea that Facebook can serve as a new medium for politicians to set their policy agenda during crucial election periods and absent the traditional media should be of interest to both politicians and scholars in emerging discussions about the role that new media is playing in shaping public opinion. Among the practical consequences of the findings of this research are the benefits that either party can enjoy by adopting an issue during a campaign.

This research demonstrates that there are clear dividing lines between what each party candidate considers an important issue. Research in this area found that emphasizing a particular issue by one party had practical consequences for the support of the electorate. Democrats, for example, have an electoral advantage when problems and issues associated with social welfare and intergroup relationships are salient; Republicans have an advantage when issues related to taxes, spending and the size of government are high on the public agenda (Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003). The findings are consistent with the agendas emphasized by both candidates in this research.

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