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## International Twitter Comments About 2016 U.S. Presidential Candidates Trump And Clinton: Agenda-Building Analysis In The U.S., U.K., Brazil, Russia, India and China

Jane O'Boyle  
*University of South Carolina*

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INTERNATIONAL TWITTER COMMENTS ABOUT  
2016 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES TRUMP AND CLINTON:  
AGENDA-BUILDING ANALYSIS IN THE  
U.S., U.K., BRAZIL, RUSSIA, INDIA AND CHINA

by

Jane O'Boyle

Bachelor of Arts  
University of Michigan, 1981

Master of Arts  
College of Charleston, 2013

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Accepted by:

Carol J. Pardun, Major Professor

Leigh Moscovitz, Committee Member

Tara Mortensen, Committee Member

Marc Moskowitz, Committee Member

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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## ABSTRACT

Based on agenda-building theory, this study performs content analysis on 6,019 international Twitter comments about Trump and Clinton in the 10 days prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Even excluding bots and trolls, the preponderance of Twitter comments were positive about Trump and negative about Clinton, in the U.S., Russia, India and China. In the U.K. and Brazil, Twitter comments were largely negative about both candidates. Twitter sources and topics were also identified and explored to expand knowledge about the evolving role and effect of agenda-building in six nations, and around the world.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“A lie will travel around the world while the truth is still pulling on his boots.”

This adage is attributed to Massachusetts representative Fisher Ames in an 1821 article in *The North American Review* (although some credit Jonathan Swift from 1710:

“Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it”). At the time, of course, it took months for news to travel around the world. With digital technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it now takes only a few seconds. A social media comment or video can span time zones and borders faster than the speed of light, and with instantaneous effects on millions of people, whether they have boots or not.

Mainstream news that was generated on Twitter was one of the central elements of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and subsequent analysis reveals that many of the stories were largely manipulated or totally fabricated (Stone & Gordon, 2017, Howard et al., 2017). Republican candidate Donald Trump himself, among others, helped to drive the mainstream media agenda with his prolific use of the social media platform, and then propagated the notion that much of mainstream media news is “fake” (Lynch, 2016; Viner, 2016; Maheshwari, 2016). Media coverage before, during and after the 2016 election cited previously unexplored conflicts of interest and the increased effects of

“citizen journalists” in creating and perpetuating questionable news stories on social media (McIntire, 2016; McCoy, 2016). These stories and social media discourses gained credibility and traction, and doubtless affected national election results. A number of major media stories were generated by comments on Twitter--stories that were blasted on the headlines of mainstream media--that later were learned to have come from Russian sources or non-credible entrepreneurs in eastern Europe (Dwoskin et al., 2017; McIntire, 2016). Vonbun, Königslöw, and Schoenbach, (2015) had found that, during elections in particular, online media set the agenda for other mainstream media, replacing newspapers as the intermedia agenda-setters. One political reporter at *The Daily Beast* said it was vital to her job during the 2016 election: “If I’m not on Twitter for 30 minutes, I miss a story” (Manjoo, 2016, n.p.). This merits examination of sources on Twitter about the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, exploring their identity and topics, to elicit emerging elements and to expand knowledge of this relatively new phenomenon.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Journalists and scholars have been quick to undertake examinations and meta-analyses of the 2016 media coverage in this age of digital news feeds and national elections (Howard et al., 2017; Gottfried et al., 2017; Stone & Gordon, 2017; Chou, 2016; Lynch, 2016; Viner, 2016; Maheshwari, 2016; McIntire, 2016; McCoy, 2016). Media producers and writers published debriefing analyses on their election coverage, which had been much criticized for focusing on scandals and outrage instead of on policy and substantive issues. Recent academic studies have examined the tone and content of mainstream media about candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, which was predominantly negative all around (Patterson, 2016), even by reporters who traditionally

maintain objective tones in their news stories (Farhi, 2016), or whose biases may normally be reined in by their editors. “Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook give scribes a direct and unfiltered publishing platform, enabling them to address thousands or even hundreds of thousands of followers without a meddling editor standing in the way” (Farhi, 2016, n.p.). During the campaign, Twitter comments that ranked high in negative tones were more likely to be retweeted than were positive comments (Chou, 2016).

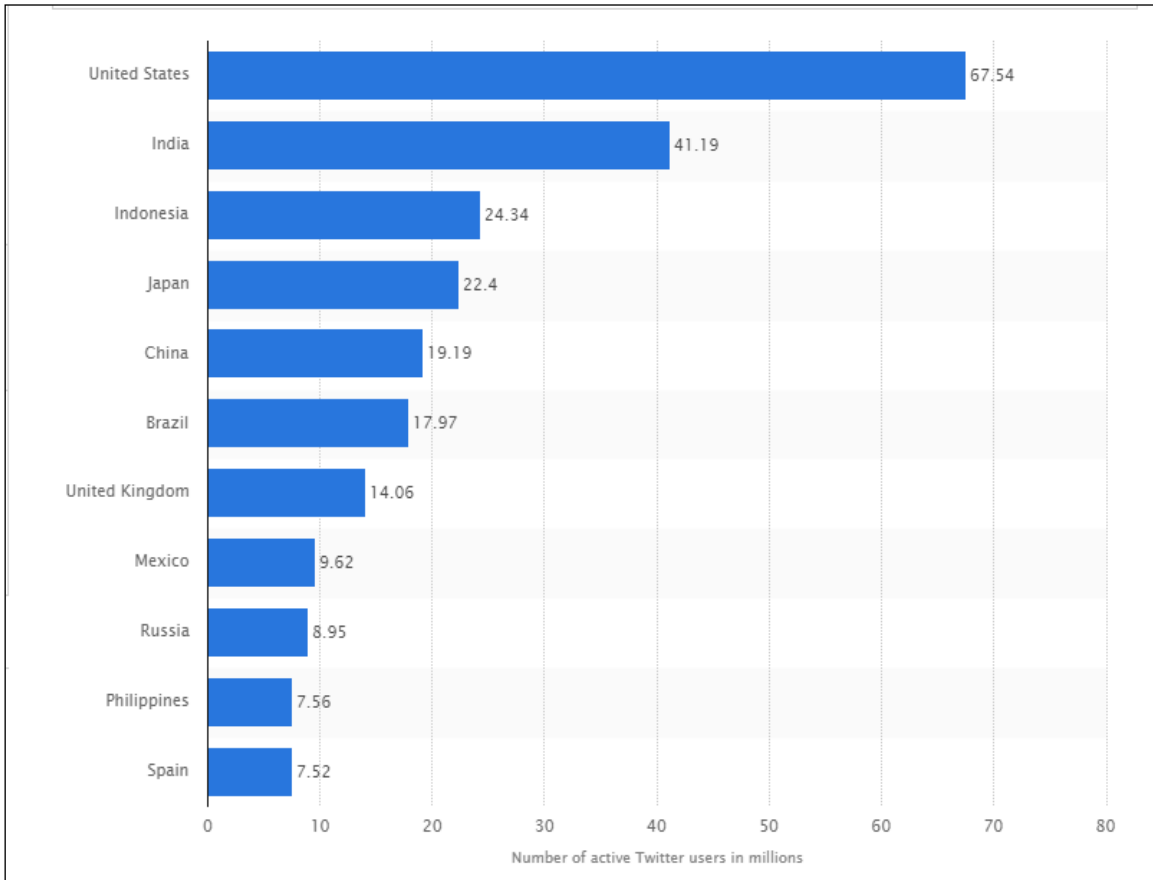
But in the new globalized parameters of media production, a wider lens is needed to put such media agendas into context. While Americans contend with a new president who says he hates the media (although he very ably manipulates it) and who sows distrust among media consumers, other nations, observing from the outside, bring their own cultural identities to such social media discourse and news agendas. Analyses of social media content in other nations could reveal commonalities and distinctions of the themes and topics during a contentious American election, such as whether one candidate received more frequent or more positive coverage than the other, whether any of the coverage was differentiated by native political infrastructures (for example, authoritarian China may have been more receptive to one candidate than was democratic India), or whether social media discourse generated alternative news agendas about the election than what was observed in American media.

A wider study could also update research on agenda-building theory, whose studies have a large gap when it comes to journalists’ and media producers’ increasing reliance on Twitter for story ideas and sources. Therefore, the goal of this study was to examine the Twitter comments about both candidates in the U.S. and in five key nations

that are of prime importance to American diplomacy and international trade. Rather than examining candidates' tweets, this study examined tweets generated by others about the candidates. While President Trump has shown to be a prolific user of Twitter, this study aimed to identify the other sources who influenced his social media campaign—and Clinton's campaign--in order to assess whose influence emerged most frequently in international social media: was it citizen journalists, politicians, special interests, media companies, or international hackers? By identifying Twitter sources and tones within each country, new factors emerge to help identify trends in the American social media discourse that vary from those in other nations, ones which may have a different effect on building international media agendas. This study also generates new knowledge about the use of Twitter outside the U.S., in powerful and diverse sections of the world. In addition, this study probes the legitimacy and identified specific sources with the greatest reach in the Twittersphere, those that are most followed or retweeted by audiences.

Recent studies show the emergence of Twitter in setting the agenda for mainstream media: "Twitter has become a convenient tool for journalists to interact with possible sources and gather information from a vast pool of people without leaving the office or even picking up the phone" (Lewis, Zamith & Hermida, 2013, p. 39). In a separate study, these authors also found that non-elite sources had a growing influence with journalists through Twitter (Lewis, Zamith & Hermida, 2015). Oxford scholar Philip Howard and his colleagues published a study of how Twitter propagated "fake news" in U.S. states (2017). However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding how Twitter is employed in other nations, and whether the Twitter comments are replicated across

borders and across cultures. As such, this study focuses on some of the largest Twitter populations for closer examination.



*Figure 1.1*

Number of active Twitter users, in millions.

Source: 2016, Statista.com: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/242606/number-of-active-twitter-users-in-selected-countries/>

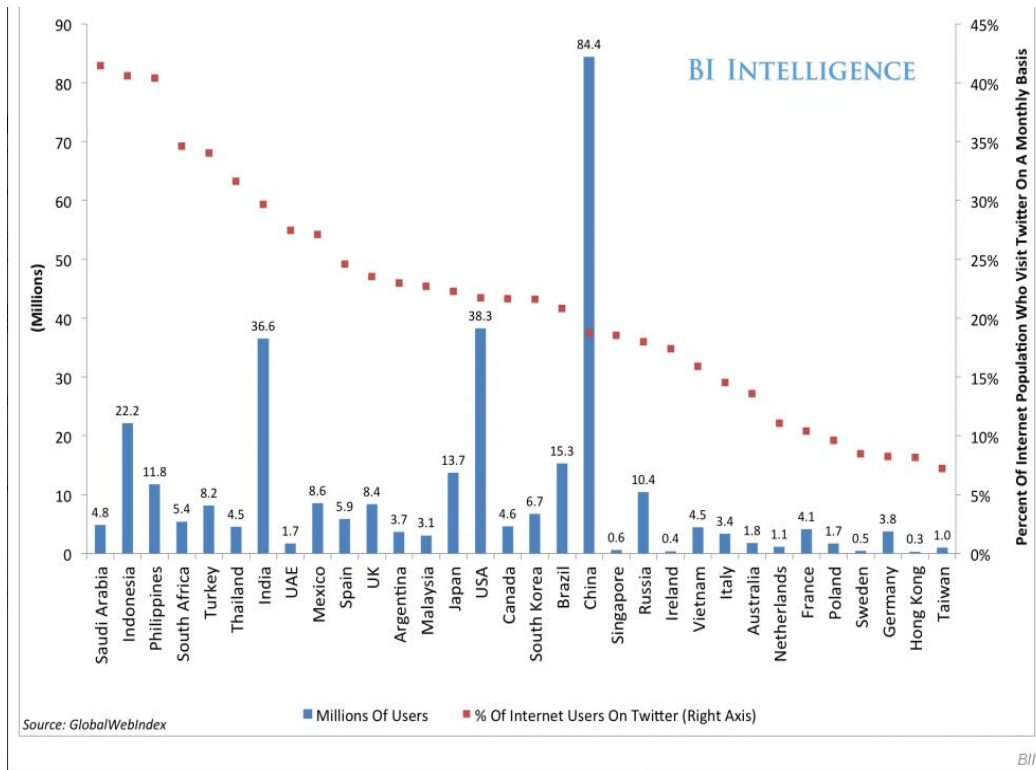


Figure 1.2

Countries ranked in order of % of Twitter users in their internet populations.

Source: Business Insider: <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-top-twitter-markets-in-the-world-2013->

Nations selected for this study include India, Brazil and the United Kingdom, due to their democratic infrastructures and their history of having elected women as leaders, which was a new issue in the 2016 American election campaign. Also, India and Brazil are woefully underrepresented in mass communications research, and their inclusion will help provide a foundation for growing awareness and knowledge of social media in those nations. Also chosen to study was China, due to its important diplomatic and commercial ties to the U.S. While China does not allow public access to Twitter, it is common practice for Chinese journalists to use Twitter in order to disseminate official news about

their nation (Chin & Abkowitz, 2016). This study will expand on knowledge about how those state-controlled media use Twitter in regards to news about the United States.

Finally, Russian entities were found to be the sources of certain media stories that favored one American candidate over another, and the election is still being investigated by the FBI to see how the Kremlin may have influenced this campaign (Nakashima, Demirjian & Barrett, 2017). The Office of the Director of National Intelligence published a report in 2017 which concluded, in part: “Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him....Moscow’s influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends cover messaging operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third party intermediaries, and paid social media users or ‘trolls’” (2017, p. ii). Some researchers and media companies have identified that one such tactic included the use of “bots,” automated social media accounts that are programmed to interact with other users under false identities (Timberg, 2017; Albright, 2016). This study includes Twitter comments from Russia in order to identify the types of sources, its leading opinion-makers and to identify if the sources and tones were similar to other nations, particularly the United States.

Not every mainstream story is generated on Twitter, of course. But in this political event of 2016, it seemed that many were, more than in the past. The news media itself became as much the focus of attention as the elected candidate, Donald Trump. Communications scholar Robert Fortner said “all international communication is political in one way or another...because they cross the boundaries of nation-states, and because

uncontrolled information threatens monopolies of knowledge used as the basis of political power” (1993, p. 8). In the age of Twitter, international communication is even more politicized. Social media once was hailed as the technological vehicle to spread information to the people, to break up monopolies of knowledge. Instead it may prove to be the vehicle that effectively spreads uncontrolled misinformation across boundaries in the pursuit of political power.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this quantitative study was to study the comments, topics, tones and sources by obtaining statistical results from content analysis of random Twitter comments in six nations in the days prior to the election. This study employed literature from agenda-building to identify variables and to form the basis for research questions, such as which sources in each nation were most often tweeted and retweeted regarding Trump or Clinton, and what were the most common topics of tweets for each candidate in each nation (e.g., events, polls, policy stands, subjective attributes, affective attributes). Moreover, results may show distinctions of agendas in nations where media are tightly controlled by the government, in Russia and China. Women as leaders may also appear in media agendas: Brazil and India are two emerging democracies that have elected women as leaders, although one of them (Dilma Rousseff of Brazil) was quickly impeached and removed from office in 2016 (Romero, 2016). While these countries, as well as the United Kingdom, have elected women as leaders, the United States remains one of the few democratic world powers that has not elected a woman president, although the 2016 election came close.



This dissertation adds to research on international communication and on agenda-building, by identifying influential media sources in the U.S. and five other nations, with implications for future research on agenda-setting, social media, political and international communication and public diplomacy.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study expands knowledge about international communications; to date, there are few studies that compare the news media of several countries, and none that examine the social media news feeds used by multinational journalists and consumers. Golan and Himelboim (2016) cited the need for expanded studies into international news media. In the age when “fake news” is generated online by teenagers in Macedonia and runs rampant across the U.S. (McIntire, 2016), and international diplomacy may be balanced on the Twitter feed of the American president himself (Lynch, 2016; Isaac & Ember, 2016), it is vital to understand the sources and practices employed on Twitter by international sources. Most important, this study significantly broadens researchers’ knowledge of the evolving nature of agenda-building and intermedia agenda-setting in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Previous research focused on the theory using print and broadcast news media. This study pursues multiple new avenues presented by the speed and scope of news on social media, including its effects on mainstream media, from sources within and outside the U.S. Furthermore, to date, there is minimal communications research about the nations in the scope of this study. Guo and Vargo (2017) suggest “the investigation of intermedia agenda setting between news media in different countries can greatly enrich our understanding of international news flow and, ultimately, international relations” (p. 503). While the literature reveals several studies about China, the U.K. and

the United States, virtually no studies exist regarding the international roles of social media in Brazil, India and Russia. Because of the scope and the subjects, findings in this study fill gaps in knowledge about political communication, public diplomacy and international relations, as well as expand communications scholarship in a redefining era for agenda-building and social media.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is rooted in agenda-building theory, which evolved from McCombs's and Shaw's original 1972 agenda-setting research. Their study of the 1968 U.S. presidential election revealed that the topics named by American voters as having greatest importance were the same ones that were most covered by the news media: there was a correlation between news media content and public opinion. Cobb and Elder (1972) observed that when groups or organizations desired the attention of policy makers, they used the media to highlight their issues, particularly as sources for news reporters. McCombs and Shaw had studied the news media agenda effects on the public and policy making; Cobb and Elder examined the effects of sources on news media producers. Agenda-building is the appropriate theory for this research because one of this study's goals was to identify Twitter sources and topics that influence other media producers on the topic of the presidential election.

Herbert Gans is a sociologist who focused on who, or which special interests, were feeding the media with stories, declaring that sources "do the leading in the tango" of journalists and their sources (1979, p. 116), meaning that journalists largely use

exactly what sources provide, in the ways the sources intend. In the age of Twitter, an overwhelming barrage of source material is delivered to journalists by the minute, to journalists who must produce streaming news content more quickly than ever before. The time has come to examine more thoroughly the content of Twitter due to its influence in building a global media agenda.

Past studies about agenda-building also have focused on public relations sources, on lobbying organizations as well as on politicians (e.g., Tuchman, 1978; Manning, 2001). For example, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) outlined what they perceived as a five-level model of influences in building a media agenda. These “hierarchies of influence” include the journalist’s own knowledge, background, interests and innate or overt biases, the routines of the practice (including use of public relations contacts, political sources, and important friends), policies of the media organization, and social institutions and social systems. Twitter and other social media have entered the realm of each of these levels.

Cobb and Elder (1972) and Dearing and Rogers (1996) defined agenda building as the ways in which issues are created and how they command or fail to command the attention of decision makers, almost as an alternative to democracy wherein more of the population is able to participate in policy discussions in the media. Lang and Lang (1981; 1983) described a reciprocal loop that builds the media agenda – from the original story and its frames, to audience interpretation and then back to the agenda-building journalists. For the current study, the reciprocal loop would be the media producers and feedback on Twitter. Some agendas are determined by political-cultural values through which the importance is judged by virtue of their proximity to consensus (Shoemaker &

Reese, 1991). In the case of Twitter, messages are more accessible than ever for global populations, and the scale and parameters of “consensus” may be changing as a result. McCombs, Shaw and Weaver (1997) elaborated on intermedia agenda-setting, finding that people now shop for the agendas that mirror their own views.

### **Intermedia Agenda-Setting**

Many scholars have written about intermedia agenda-setting (e.g. Vonbun et al, 2015; Brandenburg, 2002), which is when a story from one news outlet carries over to a different kind of news outlet. Studies have shown, for example, that elite newspapers (e.g. *The New York Times*) produce stories that were later covered by national television news programs (e.g., *The NBC Nightly News*). Gruszczynski and Wagner (2016) identified a newer phenomenon called agenda-uptake, which is the media’s new abilities to react quickly to information-seeking behavior: “Agenda-setting endures in a fragmented era, but it is ensconced in a larger set of dynamic, sometimes fleeting, relationships between the agendas of the mainstream media, new media, and public, with effects that reflect the oft-fleeting nature of the modern news cycle. Agenda-uptake applies and expands on..intermedia agenda-setting...and articulates the dynamic relationships between the agendas of different types of news media” (p. 20). This study explores the dynamic relationships in the age of Twitter news feeds and how they affect the fleeting news cycles around the world.

Before Twitter, a media source was rarely an everyday citizen—or someone posing, unverified, as a journalist--which is why there needs to be more research on agenda-building in the age of social media. Studies are emerging about Twitter users, such as Segesten and Bossetta (2017) who examined the 2015 British elections. Their

study found that U.K. citizens used Twitter as a tool for mobilizing action, more than the political parties did, but they did not examine the citizens' role in propagating online news stories. Twitter enables anyone, anywhere, to quickly take off as an internationally acclaimed source, with or without media credentials. The lines between professional journalist, engaged citizen and online prankster are difficult to discern on the internet, especially across international datelines. In addition, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) concluded that the agenda-building process has an important fifth step, which is "cultural considerations." If it is an American news outlet, for example, the journalist will put a story into context that will be appreciated and understood by the ones who will consume it in America. A news outlet in another culture may present a story in a way that makes sense to that international setting: change the tone, exclude certain details, and so forth. But the cultural context may be misconstrued by other nationalities, all of whom are still learning to negotiate credibility and effective news on Twitter.

This researcher performed a study in 2016 which examined how often the Twitter feed from television talk show host Ellen DeGeneres was picked up by news media in other formats. It was found that, in one year, television news shows at ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox broadcast 251 Twitter comments from "The Ellen Show," which included clips from her TV program. In addition, local TV and radio news websites used DeGeneres' Twitter feed 1,291 times in that year (O'Boyle, 2016). Other research has found that emerging media (such as political blogs and partisan news websites) are now more likely to set the agenda than traditional news outlets (Meraz, 2011; Vargo & Guo, 2016).

Mainstream news media are picking up on stories from entertainment media and partisan websites, and content analysis of other Twitter data may reveal how much some of them

are relying on content from individual consumers for news stories. Twitter encompasses a sort of conflation of intermedia agenda-setting and agenda-building, which is another reason it merits further study. McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas (2000) clarified attribute agenda-building, which they called second-level agenda-building. By then, agenda-setting already had been separated into two levels, including attribute salience. McCombs, Lopez-Escobar et al. (2000) revealed that such attribute salience was part of agenda-building as well. Their research concluded that agenda-building went beyond mere object salience transfer (or first-level agenda-building) and also introduced attribute salience to journalists (second-level agenda-building). This attribute salience may be subjective (focusing a news story on issues, a politician's integrity or personal history), or this attribute salience may be affective (inserting a positive or negative valence or tone into story details). The authors describe how attribute salience influences object salience in agenda-building, and this has been confirmed in a number of more recent studies. For example, Kioussis et al. (2006, 2009) found that attribute salience made a difference in the media agenda during statewide elections in the U.S. Positive and negative tones often exist in news sources, whether the journalist acknowledges them or not. Agenda-building of attributes starts with where a journalist obtained the information, and that place is more and more often on Twitter. Who is using Twitter? What are Twitter comments saying or showing in pictures? How popular are the comments and commentators (i.e., how much are they "retweeted)?" How much of Twitter is reaching and being recycled by mainstream media on Twitter?" Denham (2010) argues that agenda-building is a constant negotiation between sources, and more studies are needed.

Barack Obama was the first U.S. presidential candidate who relied on Twitter to maximize his campaign exposure and platform, in 2008 and 2012 (Kioussis et al., 2015). In 2016, the landscape shifted to emphasize social media—and particularly Twitter—more than any presidential campaign in history. Twitter entered a new stage of influence on mainstream media, not only by its use and participation by the candidates themselves, but by others who manipulated all the media channels, who generated messages that mainstream outlets were using “fake news” and unidentified sources which, in many instances, they were themselves. Candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump are strong topics to measure as they were well-covered by media in multiple countries, allowing for a compare and contrast of Twitter sources and content on an international scale. Other researchers may examine the texts from the candidates themselves, but this study focuses on the messages and influence of others, and how they varied from one part of the world to the next.

### **Agenda-building and International Media**

When it comes to agenda-building in international relations, some agendas are created by the cultural and political distance between nations as reflected in the media’s organizational needs and values—i.e., trying to gain readers through engaging and entertaining stories (Gitlin, 1980; Chang, 1998; Entman, 2008). The success of media stories often relies on story relevance, audiences, and political and communication skills (Bennet, 1990; Entman, 1993; Pan & Kosicki, 2003; Sheafer, 2001). Sheafer and Gabay (2009) found that the success of one country in promoting its agenda in foreign media “is a function of the cultural and political congruency between itself and the target country” (p. 463). They found a high correlation between the U.S. government agenda and the U.S.



media, as well as the U.K. government and the U.K. media (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009), indicating there is significant influence from individual governments over their own media. “The more the initiated event correlates with news media values (e.g., dramatic, emotional, and negative events) the more the initiator succeeds in promoting its agenda” (p. 463). In addition, “news media do tell people what to think by providing the public with an agenda of attributes—a list of characteristics of important newsmakers” (Wanta, Golan & Lee, 2004, p. 364.); Wanta, Golan and Lee (2004) found news coverage about another country has direct influence on U.S. public opinion of that country, and also that news about many nations, such as India, was virtually non-existent in the U.S. for many years.

Wanta and Hu (1994) found that agenda-building is comprised of the choices made by journalists to cover some issues over others, and they studied how these choices were shaped by outside forces, such as politicians and corporations and, now, by Twitter conversations (Parmelee, 2014). International news exposure was found to be significantly related to positive feelings about a target nation (Salwen & Matera, 1992). Ramanathan (2016) identified a “vulture mentality” in international news media when reporting on crises in developing countries, but found that international media were less biased when reporting about a country not their own. Guo and Vargo (2017) found that online news sources covered wealthier nations more frequently than less economically powerful ones. This study examines how Twitter plays a role in various international media settings. Media discourse is determined by the dominant culture and therefore “presents the news within a framework of certain values” (Kennedy & Hills, 2009, p. 75), so it is important to interpret the meaning of the journalists’ choice of sources between

nations. For example, there have been legislative and judicial demands to investigate the role of Russia's intervention in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. One popular Twitter account called Patriot News was operated out of Great Britain by an avowed proponent of Russia President Vladimir Putin, and declared its mission was to spread "devastating anti-Clinton, pro-Trump memes and sound bites" (McIntire, 2016, n.p.). Another Twitter source called "Just Trump It" also was operating out of Russia, according to the Atlantic Council Institute (McIntire, 2016, n.p.). This study examines the tones and sources of Twitter messages about both American candidates from Russia, and from other nations, providing formative research that may or may never emerge from investigative committees or federal agencies. Certainly, in 2016, the Twitter stories about the presidential campaign were dramatic, emotional and negative. This study examines how these attributes varied from one nation to the next, and whether messages may have crossed borders because they were more dramatic and emotional.

Second-level agenda-building examines the salience of affective attributes such as positive, negative and neutral tones, story frames that can influence public opinion. Many scholars have found that this type of agenda-building often makes its way into the media agenda, such as Kiousis and Wu (2008) who found that the efforts of public relations counsel was associated with a decrease of negative news coverage regarding affective attributes about a foreign nation. This second level is explored in this study as well, and reveals sources who influenced negative media coverage about the U.S. in other nations. Golan and Himelboim (2016) noted how social media provide world governments with a platform to disseminate news directly to the public. They used World System theory to study how this has undermined the traditional one-way flow in Russia, China, and the

Middle East, and how non-institutional sources on social media bridged news sources and audiences in a way that was once the sole purview of elite news sources. This study explores sources and content from multiple countries to expand on such knowledge. For example, it is acknowledged that Chinese government authorities block Twitter from its citizens, but they permit journalists to use the feed in order to specifically disseminate positive images and stories to overseas media (Chin & Abkowitz, 2016). As such, the tones and topics of Twitter comments about the U.S. election from China will serve as an insightful lens into the goals of its government regarding the leadership of its rival world power.

### **Agenda-Building on Social Media**

Like Facebook, Twitter was created in the late 2000s and took off around the globe after the introduction of the smartphone in 2007. Scholars are still catching up with Twitter studies, many of which focus on adoption, technology, and some about politics and social movements (e.g., Fahmy et al., 2012, on the Egyptian uprising), and qualitative studies on how journalists use Twitter as a news source (Parmelee, 2013; 2014). Some scholars have found that social media such as Twitter is changing the traditional roles and practices of journalists (Bruno, 2011; Hermida, 2010, 2012; Holton & Lewis, 2011; Lawrence et al., 2013; Molyneux, 2015). Many news companies now encourage or even require their reporters to use Twitter as part of their professional responsibilities (Lawrence et al, 2013; Gleason, 2010; Greer & Ferguson, 2011; Lowery, 2009; Picard, 2009). Some researchers have found that journalists often use Twitter more frequently for expressing opinions, editorializing, and personal insights rather than for straight news-reporting (Lawrence et al., 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Hermida, 2010). Lee et al. (2016)

examined the political ideologies of journalists in South Korea and found that reporters from liberal media outlets used Twitter with much more frequency than those from conservative media organizations, and they used it not only to convey news but to interact with the public even more than to interact with their friends.

The 2016 American election saw the insurgence of conservative social media “bots,” programs that automatically retweeted Twitter comments by the thousands, from conservative sources such as Fox News’ Sean Hannity, GOP strategist Karl Rove, Senator Ted Cruz, and a small army of independent conservative activists (Timberg, 2017; Albright, 2016). These automated Twitter accounts are generally used by conservative sources, and are known to be used in at least 17 countries, creating what was called by Oxford Internet Institute professor Philip N. Howard as “a synthetic conversation” instead of a real public conversation, one that makes it “very difficult to know what consensus looks like” (Timberg, 2017, n.p.). Even before Election Day 2016, one study had found that about 15% of Trump’s social media followers were bots (Fox-Brewster, 2016) and another study had found that 33% of Trump’s positive hashtags were generated by bots, compared to 22% of Clinton’s positive comments (Kottasova, 2016). Many of these tweets from bots commonly are deleted within hours or days—up to 20% of them—and are no longer accessible, making it difficult for researchers to reproduce results (Liu, Kliman-Silver and Mislove, 2014). However, researcher Howard said: “If you removed all the bots, it would seem that Trump is still more popular and has more traffic” (Kottasova, 2016, n.p.). Some have suggested that Russia used social media in this way as a dangerous new route for manipulating public opinion and undermining the credibility of democratic governments (Calabresi, 2017).

Much of the 2016 election media agenda was dominated by events relating to an email hack of Clinton's campaign manager as well as of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) during the summer, some of which were published widely and reflected party in-fighting, as well as donations from foreign individuals. *The Washington Post* reported that Russians were responsible for the hacks, although a Romanian hacker called "Guccifer 2.0" tried to take the credit and draw attention away from the Russians. But independent research firms quickly confirmed it was the Russians behind the hack, and that it was they who gave the email files to Wikileaks (Vitkovskaya, Granados & Muyskens, 2017), although founder Julian Assange denied the source was Russia. On October 7, a video emerged from "Access Hollywood" of Trump making lewd comments about women; within an hour, Wikileaks released thousands of new emails that had been stolen from John Podesta, Clinton's campaign manager.

However, Benkler, Faris, Roberts, and Zuckerman (2017) found that the 2016 election media agenda was driven not by Russians but by Breitbart News, whose influence created a common mainstream media agenda that reflected Trump's preferred themes, particularly immigration topics, attacks on Hillary Clinton, and misleading messages (or "fake news") about the integrity of all media that opposed him. Fake news are stories that distort or invent facts, and are usually created by websites or producers to appear credible at face value. Fake news was shown to influence partisan media in 2016 (Silverman, 2016; Vargo, Guo & Amazeen, 2017). Other studies have indicated that digital tools such as Twitter need further study to advance knowledge of information subsidies (Waters, Tindal & Morton, 2010) and its function as an agenda-building tool in elections (Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010). This study explores the information

subsidies—from Breitbart and beyond--during the 2016 election as they appeared on Twitter, to expand research beyond the effects of partisan media, but also to examine how agenda-building on Twitter reaches a global audience. Previous agenda-building studies have not focused enough on the international implications of such information subsidies on Twitter.

### **International Twitter Comments and Cultural Context**

Some studies have examined agenda-building using the principle of public diplomacy. Park and Lim (2014) examined public diplomacy through social media in South Korea and Japan, and network analysis revealed Japan had more diverse sources but that Korea more successfully engaged the public on social media. Twitter provides insight into the varied social media practices of each culture in their respective feeds. Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1993) described distinctions between high-context cultures that rely on subtlety in communication messages--as their citizens have societal values that are collective in nature--and low-context cultures, which value individualism above all else and need messages to be clear and explicit. The nations represented in this study represent both types of cultures, and analysis of Twitter use about the same topic may add to knowledge about the effects of boundless social media on existing cultural structures. For example, Twitter itself is a decentralized low-context environment, where trust is not built up over time and messages are often rapid and explicit. But it may be a place where a low-context culture such as the U.S. finds itself acting as a collective, rising up together as a Twitter population to address a particular social issue, one that also crosses borders and merges with a similar movement in another nation, creating group identities that would not exist without social media. This study explores whether the Twitter

environment encourages more independence or interdependence among citizens of the globe, who may or may not be stakeholders in the issue of focus.

There may be some limitations to studying Twitter, but it does have advantages over other platforms such as Facebook (which is private), and Snapchat and Instagram (which do not have hyperlinks or the capacity to share or “retweet” messages, images and websites). Twitter effectively provides infinite exponential exposure for a story well before the “truth has pulled on his boots.” However, Twitter users are a self-selecting group and may not be representative of the nations or their media. Twitter is a platform that allows for public access and analysis, but there is room for manipulation that may not be easily identified, as mentioned earlier about the “bot” accounts that are quickly deleted after posting messages. The self-reported identities and motivations of actual users on Twitter also present a challenge. There is a public profile on Twitter which identifies who each user is, with a small biography. For the most part, journalists are identifiable on Twitter because it is in their professional interest to be straightforward. Journalists want a lot of followers, they want to show their bosses how popular they are, and to introduce a story that may gain traction and get picked up by other media (Parmelee, 2014). Some journalists are better known (and respected) than other journalists but lesser-known news writers from smaller markets are talented and also have large followings. A potential weakness of studying Twitter based on agenda-building is the fact that there may be other, simultaneous channels through which news stories are created and proliferate. And, of course, professional journalists have a roster of reliable sources and public officials who are not reached through Twitter. In other words, journalists who build the agenda have many sources other than Twitter and various social media.

Another challenge of examining Twitter is the “echo chamber.” McCombs and Shaw (1997) described how consumers started to seek out the news they prefer to hear from a selection of cable channels, news that agrees with their own perspectives. The arrival of social media in the late 2000s created even more of a personalized news feed for every individual who wants to block out stories they won’t like. This condition may reveal that the agenda-building that occurs on Twitter is mainly a feedback loop in a filtered bubble, with little or no exposure to followers who are not like-minded. In fact, a recent study by MIT Media Lab found that 20% of all election-related Twitter comments about the election came from people who only “follow” Hillary Clinton or who only “follow” Donald Trump, not both of them (Chou, 2016). This same study found that Trump followers on Twitter largely made many more comments than Clinton followers. By adding a larger international component to this study, such filters are more easily revealed, in addition to insights about American agendas in media systems around the globe. Of course, this particular shortcoming is not restricted to Twitter studies—this limitation would occur in studies of television news broadcasts as well as print news.

Twitter is sorely in need of more academic studies. Other studies in agenda-building, in the era before Twitter, had to rely on data such as press release content analyses and journalist interviews. Social media and digital tools that seek out keywords for analysis enable researchers to expand on knowledge of this theory. Agenda-building is evolving as new media evolves, as the public not only chooses its preferred media outlets but also participates in them. Twitter feeds and news sites engage consumers; indeed, they recruit consumers as (unpaid) sources of news and features. Someone who photographs an alligator on the street may see it blasted on national media the next day,



then transformed into a Twitter meme about Hillary killing animals to make new shoes. The extent of citizen-generated content can be compared and contrasted with its re-use (retweets) by journalists, in the U.S. and in other countries who also use Twitter for agenda-building. This is only one aspect which can be explored within the many research opportunities afforded by Twitter. There may be limitations to Twitter data—including the simple fact that randomized samples will be a small proportion of the total—but it is a rich resource for agenda-building studies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Twitter *demands* study based on agenda-building, to build knowledge about news-making as well as knowledge about the theory itself.

### **Research Questions**

Donald Trump always has had more Twitter followers (17.1 million) than Hillary Clinton (11.6 million) (Twitter.com, 2016). The Shorenstein Center on Media at Harvard's Kennedy School (Patterson, 2016) and the MIT Media Lab (Chou, 2016) found that mainstream American news coverage—print, broadcast and digital--of both Clinton and Trump were “overwhelmingly negative in tone and extremely light on policy” (Patterson, 2016, p. 1). Trump's coverage was 77% negative, and Clinton's coverage was 63% negative. The Shorenstein study found that the press was not necessarily biased in favor of liberal positions, but that it was biased in preference of negative tones. The coverage of Trump was always greater than coverage of Clinton, throughout the 2016 campaign. The Shorenstein study also found that most topics in the news were about the “horserace,” i.e., who was ahead in the polls (42% of stories), followed by other topics (personal qualities, leadership experience, 24%), controversies (17% of stories) and policy stands (10%). This was in keeping with studies of

mainstream media sources in previous presidential elections. The author proposed that negative coverage has a leveling effect that opens the door to “charlatans” and indiscriminate criticism that can blur the distinctions between earnest politicians and pretenders, between issues of valid concerns and inconsequential ones—the proliferation of false equivalencies. Another Harvard study examined both mainstream and social media coverage of the 2016 presidential candidates and found largely negative stories about both candidates, but that the media agenda itself focused mostly on Trump’s signature issue, immigration, and that the leading media of conservative consumers were highly partisan and relatively new media outlets, such as InfoWars, Fox and Breitbart (Faris, Roberts, Etling, Bourrassa, Zuckerman & Benkler, 2017). Negative news erodes trust in the press, currently at its lowest level since such polling began decades ago (Patterson, 2016).

While it may be true that American Twitter users shared the same tones as mainstream media, it may be different for users in other countries. For example, Russia is being investigated by multiple agencies for having used Twitter commenters to cast favor on candidate Trump (Rupar, 2017), thus the tones may be more positive for Trump in that nation. This study will examine whether Twitter comments were negative, neutral or positive, and compare the differences between the six nations.

The MIT Media Lab “Electome” post-election study in 2016 revealed that overall negative comments were more likely to be retweeted than were positive comments (Chou, 2016). The study found that the correlation of negative words in stories shared by Donald Trump followers were three times more frequent than non-Trump followers. However, Donald Trump followers also were less likely to follow mainstream media

Twitter feeds, meaning the online world of Trump fans did not interact with mainstream media online as much as Clinton followers did. Most research on international media coverage are studies based on framing theory and that focus on issues relating to terrorism and war (e.g., Elena, 2016; Yarchi et al, 2013), on natural or man-made disasters (e.g. Jiminez-Martinez, 2014; Wang et al, 2013; Pal & Dutta, 2012; Kim & Lee, 2008), and a very few focus on cultural distinctions between media sources and subject nations (e.g., Ramanathan, 2016; Sobel, 2015). The MIT post-election study identified the most common topics among Clinton and Trump followers, which were 1) gun rights 2) racial issues 3) immigration 4) terrorism 5) jobs 6) economy and 7) education. Some of these topics—e.g., immigration, terrorism—may be of greater interest in international markets. However, post-election news media and law enforcement suggest that some Twitter users attempted to influence American people and the election results.

Ramanathan (2016) found that international news coverage from a proximal or same-language nation contained more positive tones than neutral tones. While studying multi-national news coverage of several Malaysian airlines accidents, the author found that local and international media “do reflect and mirror the various cultural factors that impinge upon the production and dissemination of news” (p. 32). Joye (2009) found that western media were more apt to normalize portrayals of inequalities among global cultures, thereby consolidating global power hierarchical relations. Walter (2016) reported on the characteristics of European countries and the propensity of EU member nations to report about one another. She found that countries that had proximity or that spoke the same language were more likely to report about each other. This has not been examined in relation to social media, nor on a more global parameter. Considering that

the English language is spoken in the United States, further examination may show that Great Britain will have the next largest volume of tweets about Trump and Clinton and the 2016 election. Like the United States, India is a former British colony and has an English-speaking population of more than 250 million people, in what is now the world's largest democracy (*Times of India*, 2010). This number may be only a small portion of India's total population, but it is far greater than the English-speaking population of Great Britain (63.2 million). In spite of being a "high-context" nation (Hofstede, 1993; Hall, 1976), India may demonstrate proximity with the U.S. through the volume and number of Twitter comments about the American presidential candidates in 2016. Indeed, a recent study by this author revealed that government sources and diplomats largely and positively tweeted about India and the U.S. during reciprocal state visits in 2014 and 2015, as much as or even more than mainstream media did (O'Boyle, in press). The present study will expand on cultural aspects of international agenda-building by examining the effects of language on social media content. In addition, this study examines sources on Twitter from each nation, to further explore the influence of government representatives and others in the agenda reflected in social media.

Like language, political events and media influences in each nation contribute to the agenda, in nations where Twitter comments from any source can be retweeted, acquire legitimacy and subsequently influence other mainstream media. There is a gap in research when it comes to social media and international agenda-building. For example, a democratic nation which has had women elected as leaders (such as India, Great Britain, and Brazil) or those from member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) may have different social media agenda than an authoritarian regime such as

China or Russia. Fisk, Fitzgerald and Cokley (2014) explored international media frames about nanotechnology innovations and found that Asian media focused on the health benefits and economic benefits of such research, while American media focused on its benefits for the environment, and British media focused on risks such as cancer and lung diseases associated with nanotechnology. Most research has focused on international agenda-building in print and broadcast media. Wang, Lee and Wang (2013) wrote about how China media has both political and economic incentives when they report on international news, particularly because the Chinese government is “keen to promote the image of China in the international arena...to build up soft power and to counter perceived dominance in international communication by western media organizations” (p. 897). Xiang (2013) found that international English-language social media largely depicted China as a rising economic and technological power, comprised mostly of retweets from mainstream media agenda-setters in the U.S. and U.K., largely positive or neutral except for a few mentions of authoritarianism, human rights and pollution. But in China itself, as found by Zheng and Huang (2016), international news is still tempered by ideological policies of the state.

Park, Wang and Pinto (2016) used indexing theory to compare the content of German and American media about post-Fukushima nuclear news, and found that German news focused on the themes of increasing safety regulations and establishing non-nuclear energy sources, while Americans focused not on diverse debate but on themes of natural disaster and failure of Japanese infrastructure. This media coverage mirrored each government’s views and respective politics regarding nuclear power. The researchers recommended that American journalists use more foreign sources in their

reporting, to deepen perspectives and to provide more balanced political debate. Park and Lim (2014) used network analysis to compare social media public diplomacy from Korea and Japan, and found that Japan sources used more images and videos on social media than they did text, and that both countries' communications were engaged largely by non-natives, in particular by those in Europe and the U.S. Golan and Viatchaninova (2014) compared the contents of the Russian government's advertorials (editorials as paid advertisements) in major Indian and American newspapers, and found that the most prominent agenda these propagated were related to economics, international relations, and arts and culture. The Russian government emphasized its global power more frequently in Indian newspapers than they did in the American papers, and the authors found that such print advertisements—even though they are paid media—are capable of being adapted for different nations and therefore play a vital role in a government successfully framing its policies to international audiences. Among its many media services, Twitter is now also a platform for placement of such “paid editorials” and propaganda, and this study may expand on previous research regarding government agendas created for international audiences.

In addition, images are sometimes used on Twitter posts, and they are processed more quickly than words. For example, in the 2008 presidential primary, Hillary Clinton tweeted a photo of her opponent, Barack Obama, wearing a turban (Grabe & Bucy, 2009), which implied he may be of African or Muslim heritage. Such image “bites” are as persuasive as words, or even more so, on Twitter. Grabe and Bucy (2009) suggest that future research should focus on coding images of politicians for character frames that include “the ideal candidate” (photos including symbols of patriotism, or candidates

hugging children) “the populist campaigner” (showing celebrities or large audiences), or the “sure loser” (finger-pointing, small crowds). These image characteristics are equivalent to story tones as candidates fight for control of the media tones and topics. While this study gathers data about the frequency of images used in Twitter comments, it does not code the image contents themselves for affective variables. They are included here because Twitter messages are brief; accompanying images may serve to affect the overall tone of the messages.

The Oxford Internet Institute published a data memo in 2017 that examined hashtags and links on 7 million Twitter comments in the U.S. during the ten-day election period. They found that American Twitter users shared as much “junk news”—polarizing, conspiracy and false information—as they did legitimate mainstream news stories. It was also learned that Russia operated hundred of fake accounts on Twitter and Facebook that clearly propagated positive information about Trump and pushed unverified stories from Wikileaks about Clinton (Dvoskin et al., 2017; Fandos & Shane, 2017). Building on this knowledge, this researcher studied the Twitter content of six nations, using actual content analysis rather than hashtag analysis with digital data programs, and extended the sample to reach around the globe into several nations and their Twitter populations. Content analysis also allowed for measuring the tones of the comments with greater detail and reliability than previous Twitter studies. As an exploratory study of agenda-building on Twitter from around the world during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, this researcher posed the following research questions:

*RQ1: Who are the predominant sources in the U.S., U.K., Brazil, Russia, India and China that posted the most frequent Twitter comments about candidates Trump and Clinton in the ten days prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election?*

*RQ2: What is the nature of the content of these Twitter comments about Trump and Clinton, in terms of topics, images and tones?*



## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The international agenda-building about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was studied through content analysis of Twitter comments from six nations: the U.S., U.K., Brazil, Russia, India and China. The Twitter comment (or tweet, including any featured image) was the unit of analysis, and the content analysis was the counts of key categories and measurements of the variables, which are described below. The analysis focused on manifest content, such as sources and topics, as well as latent content, looking for affective tones by using variables such as mentions of “liar” or “crime.” Content analysis for Twitter includes form attributes or what Neuendorf (2002) calls “formal features,” message elements that are unique to the communications platform, such as hashtags, abbreviations and images.

The nations under study were selected based on volume of Twitter users (see Figures 1 and 2 on page 6 and page 7), as well as by their ranking among the world’s largest economies and by representing both democratic and authoritarian governments. The democratic governments aside from the United States (i.e., U.K., India and Brazil) have also elected presidents in the past who were women, and this was a novel characteristic of the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. Russia was included as it is the

focus of U.S. federal investigations for potentially using social media to influence the American election.

As this particular agenda-building would have been made in the language of Americans, this study is limited in scope to Twitter comments made in the English language. This is true for all the nations under study, as coding in other languages is not only cumbersome, but non-English tweets might limit the capacity for the content to cross borders and cross cultures, and may fail to influence the international media agenda. This language restriction to English may be a minor limitation and, for this study's purpose, the sample is still quite revealing. Other studies of social media in international environments have examined English-only comments because it is the dominant language of social media around the world. For example, Xiang (2013) looked at how international social media in the English language—including Facebook and Twitter--framed images of China to the global public. Gurman and Ellenberger (2015) studied English-language international tweets for a study in crisis communication after the 2010 Haiti earthquake. The use of English language facilitates the potential reach of comments for this particular event, i.e., someone's comments in English are more likely to be read by actual Americans. Twitter is a very limited platform however (only 140 characters) and does not require perfect language skills, so non-native speakers may feel it is easy to post a message or even merely a candidate's name with an exclamation point. Park and Lim (2014) found that Japanese users of Facebook often used English language, as those users were "targeting domestic users along with the foreign public on social media" (p. 91).

## Data Collection

The data for this study encompass Twitter comments, sources, message contents and tones for a total of 6,000 Twitter comments in a 10-day period, leading up to the 2016 election. This data were compiled and randomly selected by Sysomos Media Analysis, a social intelligence engine that collects data from online social media around the world (Jang, Park, & Lee, 2016). This study focused on individual tweets produced between October 30 and November 8, 2016. Originally, the target sample dates ran through November 9, but pilot coding revealed that every tweet after Election Day (November 8) was positive in tone for Trump and negative for Clinton, as this reflected the election results. Including the day after the election skewed the overall tones in favor of Trump, so the sample was changed to exclude November 9. These dates immediately before the election date (November 8) were when Twitter volume was high, and excluded post-election coverage of Trump's victory. Other coding adjustments made after the pilot coding are discussed in the sections below.

Only English language tweets that contained the keyword "Trump" or "Clinton" and that originated from the six nations under study (U.S., U.K. Brazil, Russia, India, China) were included in the search. Retweets themselves were excluded, as the study aimed to examine which sources were creating the agenda, not duplicating one from other sources. Thus "and NOT RT" was included in the keyword search on Sysomos. Five hundred tweets were selected from each country using the keyword "Trump," and five hundred more were selected from each country using the keyword "Clinton." The selection of random sub-samples for analysis came from the approximate tallies listed in Table 3.1

Table 3.1

*Number of Twitter Comments for Each Candidate*

<i>About:</i>	Trump	Clinton
United States	12,888,880	6,093,110
United Kingdom	675,900	291,200
India	184,330	103,510
Brazil	324,600	11,400
China	27,700	15,100
Russia	18,400	11,400

Using systematic sampling, a manageable quantity from each country of 500 tweets about each candidate was selected, to reach the goal of 6,000 total Twitter comments posted about the candidates in the days immediately prior to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Sysomos generated a random sample of 3,000 tweets for each keyword in each country, which were downloaded into Excel files. The researcher chose every sixth tweet from this sample for the random sample of 500. It was observed that approximately 10% of Twitter accounts and comments had been deleted or suspended. These and any unrelated comments were excluded and randomly replaced from the Sysomos sample of 3,000. The researcher discovered that excluding “RT” for retweets in Russia also excluded original tweets from *Russia Today*, now known as *RT*. Thus, the sample for Russia was downloaded into Excel in its entirety, and the random sample excluded retweets by hand. A handful of extra comments were coded from each country, in the event that more were eliminated as unrelated or the researcher was unable to find their links. Thus, some nations have a few more than 1,000 and the grand total of this study is 6,019. The sample was a very small proportion of actual Twitter comments, and

also not reflective of the preponderance of Twitter comments about Trump, which were roughly double the frequency of Clinton comments. But this does not detract from the goal of this study, to identify the sources who set the media agenda, and to provide the foundation for future research into the effects and behaviors caused by repeated exposure and media frames.

The sample size of 6,019 was large enough to perform content analysis on the overall components of frequent Twitter comments in this period. Xiang (2013) had performed content analysis on 4,250 international social media comments about China. Gurman and Ellenberger (2015) examined 2,616 tweets around the world for their study about Haiti earthquake messages. Lee, Kim and Kim (2015) analyzed content in 494 tweets in their study of Korean journalists' topics. Other recent studies, such as the Oxford Internet Institute study of Russian propaganda (Howard, 2017), examined millions of tweets using automated coding systems, which was limited to those tweets that contained selected hashtags, and sources were identified through their URL addresses by the program Streaming API. The present study was not limited to hashtags, and examined sources through their actual profile pages, providing greater detail, validity and reliability about thousands of users in several countries.

The tweets for this study were downloaded from Sysomos into Excel. Coders used the embedded link in one Excel column to copy and then "Paste and Go" directly to the Twitter comment online, which showed the tweet as it originally appeared, including attendant images, links, comments, number of retweets, and so forth. Coders clicked on the user name to observe the profile page, the user's other comments and number of followers, and email address or website. This information helped confirm an

individual's or a company's identity and authenticity, which was most often clearly evident.

### **Coding Variables and Analysis**

Quantitative analysis allows for isolating variables and relating them to the magnitude and frequency of relationships with highly reliable and valid measures. The context variables were determined by the research questions; variables here include the individual nations as well as the keywords "Trump" and "Clinton." Substantive and affective variables for coding were determined by previous content analyses and other studies, which are described in the sections below. In addition, the researcher and a second coder performed pilot coding and examined 500 Twitter comments representing each country under study. The pilot coding helped make slight adjustments to the final coding instrument, as also noted below.

### **Individual Sources**

Analyzing sources is key to this study, as this variable will determine who is building the agenda on Twitter for this particular event. For an individual or solitary source, this would mean a typical consumer or unaffiliated "citizen," or a journalist (such as Dan Rather), a politician (e.g., Senator Cory Booker, or Mayor Bill deBlasio), a diplomat (such as an ambassador in Brazil), a government employee (someone who identifies as working at the EPA, for example), or a nonpolitical celebrity (e.g., Beyonce, or Stephen Colbert). These particular types of individual sources were identified in previous social media studies about the role of audience members as content creators. For example, Golan and Himelboim (2015) studied directional news flow and global network analysis on Twitter and singled out sources who were unaffiliated individuals as opposed

to media, governments or organizations. Hermida, Lewis & Zamith (2014) studied Twitter comments of journalists during the Arab Spring of 2011, identifying them through their profile pages. Lee, Kim and Kim (2015) performed content analysis of 52 Korean journalists' tweets to determine whether they covered public affairs or more personal topics. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) had discussed the importance of the characteristics of individual journalists who build an agenda. The current study aimed to narrow in on a variety of individual sources who set the Twitter agenda in the 2016 election, and coded separately for individual, journalist, politician, diplomat, government employee, and non-political celebrity.

### **Group Sources**

In addition to sources conceptualized as being an individual, as described above, there were separate variables to identify whether the Twitter source was a “group,” such as a news media organization, (e.g., *The New York Times* or CBS News) as opposed to a named individual journalist (which fell into the individuals category above). This type of “group” source also included the Twitter profile of a non-news business, such as Wells Fargo or McDonalds, of an institute or university such as Brookings or Harvard, an activist or nonprofit organization (e.g., The Sierra Club or Planned Parenthood), or an official government agency account such as the National Parks Service or the Department of Homeland Security. Other content analysis studies have singled out such Twitter sources that are groups. Golan and Himelboim's (2015) study on news flow focused on Twitter mediators that were news media outlets, governments and non-government organizations such as Wikileaks. Howard's study at the Oxford Internet Institute (2017) singled out sources that were professional news outlets, amateur news outlets,

government agencies, think tanks, universities, and political parties, among others. Kim, Xiang and Kiouisis (2011) and Kiouisis, Kim, Ragas, Wheat, Kochhar, Svensson and Miles (2015) performed agenda-building content analyses during election campaigns and also focused on sources such as news media, policymakers, businesses, interest groups, and political parties, among others. Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, Pearce and Boyd (2011) studied what types of actors on Twitter started and propagated information flow during Middle East uprisings, and classified “actors” into groups and individuals such as news organizations, journalists, individuals, non-media organizations, celebrities, politicians and activist groups. The categorizations in studies such as these informed the selection of source types for this study.

In addition, the coders counted the numbers of “likes” and “retweets” for each Twitter comment, as previously done in public diplomacy studies by Park and Lim (2014) and Lotan et al., (2011) study of information flow. This served to further characterize the reach and influence of the varied sources.

### **Dominant Topics**

Previous studies in agenda-building of political campaigns have analyzed media content for various topics. For example, Kiouisis, Kim, McDevitt and Ostowski (2009) studied election campaign topics in U.S. mainstream media that included education, terrorism, international problems, social issues, immigration and war. Sheafer and Wiemann (2005) studied agenda-building in Israel by examining whether media content focused on domestic policy or international security. Gruzczynski and Wagner (2016) selected topics for their “agenda uptake” study of 2008 election issues in the media by examining people’s Google search terms on Google Trends, which they cross-referenced



with the internet data-mining tool called Meme Tracker. They selected topics that appeared in Meme Tracker, including abortion, economy, Iraq, and--in order to measure uptake of issues that were considered scandalous--“lipstick on a pig,” an epithet used by Barack Obama to describe his opponent’s economic plan, one that was quickly adopted by the GOP and used against him. Lotan et al. (2011) used the Twitter application programming interface (API) to search select keywords. Golan and Viatchaninova (2014) examined Russia’s use of paid advertorials in India and the U.S., including variables of interest such as international politics, domestic issues, human rights, science, and human interest stories, among many others. Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012) performed content analysis on journalists’ tweets and coded for topics such as business, politics, and entertainment or celebrities.

Variables for this study came from studies such as these, and were selected here to include the campaign itself or the “horserace,” including polls or campaign rallies, social issues (such as religion and gender rights), international relations/immigration/war, American topics such as the economy, constitutional rights and income taxes; and personal attacks, meaning that the candidate was presented as incompetent, untrustworthy or criminal. As this study examined the perspectives of international social media, the topic list was extended to include the effect on the host nation of the Twitter source (e.g., “is this American candidate good for India?”). Given that Twitter is a limited space for posting messages with only 140 characters, the topics were relatively clear and simple to code.

## **Secondary Topics**

Additional topics emerged from pilot coding of a sample of 500 tweets, as well as from the data collection engine Sysomos Media Analysis, which was prompted for “Topic Insights” and identified popular keywords in these Twitter samples, such as “Wikileaks” and “Comey,” which were added to the coding sheet. Prior studies used similar results from analytical tools Google Trends and Meme Tracker (Gruzczynski & Wagner, 2016). Secondary topics for this study thus included “email server,” “FBI/Comey,” “computer hacking,” “sexual assault,” “Wikileaks/Assange,” and “tax return.” In most instances—more than 80% of the 6019 comments--there were no mentions of these secondary topics at all, and those tweets were coded as zero. As this subcategory seemed relatively negligible, the data were collected but not analyzed in this study.

## **Images**

Similar to the secondary topics, many tweets did not contain any image at all, and thus, this variable most often was coded as zero. However, when the tweet contained an image, the coders marked its existence by coding it as an image of Trump (1) or Clinton (2), both candidates (3) or another subject completely (4). This data might inform research on cultural aspects of Twitter. For example, Park and Lim (2014) studied public diplomacy on social media in Asia and found that Twitter users in Japan used more images than text. Some visual communications studies examined content of images on Twitter, such as Seo’s (2014) study propaganda in Twitter images during the 2012 Hamas conflict in Israel. Fahmy, Bock and Wanta (2014) briefly discussed the relatively new phenomenon of images on Twitter created by citizens in their overview of visual

communication theory. Other studies about Twitter that examined news flow or content did not consider images at all, such as Lotan et al. (2011), Golan and Himelboim (2016) and Gurman and Ellenberger (2015). While visuals are not the primary focus of the present study, the researcher wanted to measure their frequencies and explore their presence and variations between candidates and among various cultures. .

### **Comment Tone**

Agenda-building suggests that sources “may not just influence what topics are covered in media coverage, but also how those topics are portrayed and ultimately how they are defined in public opinion” (Kiousis et al., 2006, p. 270). This includes whether the message is positive in tone, or negative, or neutral. Message valence and overall tones of news stories and social media posts e have been studied in a variety of media and themes. Many of these studies focus on topics such as negative media frames of China in global media (Ono & Jiao, 2008; Lams, 2015). Those which focused on election campaigns include McCombs, Llamas, Escobar-Lopez and Rey (2000), who studied a Spanish general election and measured whether media included affective attributes that were positive, such as “a good leader,” and those that were neutral or negative. Golan and Wanta (2001) studied the 2000 Republican primary in New Hampshire and found that candidate John McCain was covered in media with more positive tones than was George W. Bush. Researchers Kiousis, Kim, Ragas, Wheat, Kochhar, Svensson and Miles (2015) examined negative, neutral and positive tones in media frames of candidates in the 2012 U.S. presidential election, and found that these tones were linked to those in the information subsidies provided to media. Yoon and Lee (2013) examined media tones about Clinton’s 2008 primary race against Obama, and found they were more negative

for Clinton. For the present study, coders considered the valence of each Twitter comment. For example, calling someone a “crook” or “incompetent” was coded as negative in tone, whereas someone who is the “best person for the job” was coded positive in tone. Calling someone merely a “Republican” or a “liberal” was considered neutral in tone. A rally with a celebrity was considered a positive comment for the “campaign/horserace” of either candidate. Positive or negative poll numbers and endorsements were also coded, accordingly, as positive or negative tones for a candidate.

Pilot coding revealed an initial intercoder reliability of 0.74 for Tones. Therefore, the coders convened to review and discuss these results, and learned that discrepancies in Tone largely were caused by interpreting Twitter messages about FBI investigations. The coders resolved the discrepancies by determining that a comment that simply reported the FBI investigation of Clinton emails was to be coded as neutral. But if the comment suggested that Clinton’s campaign was “in trouble” due to the investigation, or the word “criminal” appeared, that Twitter message was coded as negative for her. When the coders recoded the pilot sample in this way, the intercoder reliability for Tone improved to 0.79. Coders agreed not to seek out any hidden meanings in Twitter comments other than what was expressly stated.

In order to focus and analyze those who were setting the agenda and choosing the topics, this study examined only original tweets, not the comments or replies, nor those that were retweets (shared from elsewhere). Previous studies have examined the frequencies of retweets, such as Lasorsa et al. (2012), who found that 15% of journalists’ Twitter posts were retweets from other commenters. Gurman and Ellenberger (2015) studied 2,635 tweets during the 2010 Haiti earthquake relief effort and found that 13% of

them were retweets. The present study aimed to explore the origins of topics on the media agenda, and the researcher opted to exclude the comments that were not original. The comments in this study did include those that contained hyperlinks, links to other news stories or websites, but not the retweets that originated from another Twitter commenter.

Lewis et al. (2013) noted that the brevity of Twitter messages may require extra examination to discern meaning, as traditional media texts (i.e., print and broadcast transcripts) are lengthier and more explicit. They point out that coders must consider context and understand “the rhythms of Twitter or the culture around a particular hashtag” (p. 48) in order to code them most effectively. Hermida (2010) noted that Twitter streams are fragmented and multi-faceted and that the significance of a single message has less validity than the aggregate effect of many messages. Therefore, the context of messages and size of this study’s sample are limitations. In addition, the ability for a Twitter user to create his or her own profile means that the sources are self-defined, and these may not clearly be classified as journalist, politician, publicist, everyday citizen, and so forth. Many “influential Twitter users do not easily fit into traditional categorization schemes” (Lotan et al., 2011, p. 1397). In spite of these limitations, the data are voluminous and randomized, assuring informative results.

As previously described, the researcher and a second coder reviewed a pilot sample of 500 Twitter comments, and refined certain variables and definitions. After these modest revisions, a coding sheet was finalized, as shown in Appendix A.

### **Reliability**

After training and the pilot tests, the coders moved on to testing for intercoder reliability. They coded the topics, sources, retweets, images and tones of a random

subsample of 900 Twitter comments (15% of the total) The researcher measured intercoder reliability using Krippendorff's alpha, and the rates of agreement achieved by the two coders for key variables were: Nation, 1.0; Date, 1.0; Number of Retweets, 1.0; Number of "Likes," 0.99; Presence of embedded link, 0.92; Source Type, 0.92; Topic, 0.89; Secondary Topic, 0.90, Image Subject, 0.89, and Comment Tone, 0.79.

As discussed, the intercoder reliability for Tone of Twitter comment was marginally less than 0.80, which is not an optimal score for reliability. However, Krippendorff (1980) himself reported studies with alphas below .80, and other researchers (Wimmer & Dominick, 2003; Bannerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney & Sinha, 1999) proposed a standard minimum alpha of .75, which has been the intercoder reliability score for "tone" in other recent content analyses (e.g., Kioussis et al, 2015). As such, the score of .79 is acceptable here, particularly for this study which coded content from a variety of different cultures.

The researcher used SPSS for chi-square analysis as well as ANOVA tests for means distributions. The Results section below highlights select findings related specifically to the research questions.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### **Sources of Twitter Comments**

Research Question 1 examines the types of sources who commented on Twitter about candidates Trump and Clinton. In every nation, the preponderance of sources making comments were individuals, “everyday citizens” with no professional affiliation or public persona. Depending on the nation, between 56% and 80% of all Twitter comments came from individuals, as shown in Table 4.1. As such, no statistical analyses were run to determine whether there were significant differences between individuals and other source types. The second most frequent commenters were either journalists or news media companies. As indicated, the proportions of source types were largely equivalent across nations.

Table 4.1 shows the frequencies of source types for all Twitter comments in the sample, comprised from subtotals of roughly 500 comments for each candidate in each nation. The first three columns—individual, journalist, politician/celebrity—are sources who are individuals and not groups or associations. Coders found that there were very few individual diplomats or government employees in the entire sample—in fact, virtually none—so these were combined into the “other” category. There were also few

celebrities and politicians represented, but they are listed here for comparison purposes. The second three columns in Table 4.1 represent “group” Twitter accounts, such as official news media companies, other business that are not news-related, institutions and nonprofit organizations. There were very few in the latter groups, but are also included in the table for comparison purposes.

To provide additional information about the sources in each nation, and to measure the potential impact of these sources in the Twitter universe, this study compiled lists of the sources in this study who have the largest numbers of “followers.” Results indicated that the most frequent Twitter commenters in each country are everyday citizens, many of whom have only a few hundred followers. This list of impactful sources includes individual sources such as celebrities and journalists, and mostly large news corporations and with global identities. Also included here are actual tweets from the data under study, to provide examples of typical posts and the expanse of followers that were exposed to them. Table 3 shows the most-followed Twitter sources from the 6019 tweets in this study sample, organized by nation. Table 4.2 is followed by six figures that show actual Twitter comments from the study sample, as well as observations about the Twitter comments in each nation. Additional samples of the actual Twitter comments are included in Appendix B.

As with most countries, the American sample of 1,000 contained Twitter posts from major news outlets, and these were the Twitter accounts with the greatest numbers of followers. In all of the nations’ samples, there was no other journalist who had nearly as many followers as Vox.com editor-in-chief Ezra Klein. While popular celebrities such as Ellen DeGeneres and Katy Perry may have many more Twitter followers (73 million



and 104 million, respectively) among many others Americans, they were not among the random sample in this study. Contrary to the findings of Benkler et al. (2017) and Faris et al. (2017), this sample of 1,000 tweets from the U.S. did not contain any that originated with Breitbart or InfoWars. Samples are shown in Figure 4.1.

### **United Kingdom**

Two or three of the predominantly pro-Trump British tweets were from residual “bots” whose accounts had not been deleted, such as a user named “Juliette Bot” showing a photo of an attractive woman, who had more than 11,000 followers. The U.K. sample also showed more than 60 comments from a group called “Israel Bombs Babies,” one of many pseudonymous commenters who propagated negative comments claiming Clinton was a pedophile and a Satanist. However, the Twitter users with the greatest numbers of followers were all news media companies. See samples in Figure 4.2.

### **Brazil**

The sample of Twitter comments from Brazil contained a number of anomalies. First, there was a total of 320,000 comments using the keyword “Trump” within the dates of this study, but only about 11,000 for Clinton, as mentioned in the Methods section. This difference in proportion was not so extreme in other nations. Also, the data sample from Brazil contained almost no media companies or journalists at all, unlike most other countries. Those that are included above, “Reuters” and “TypGyn” news, have relatively modest numbers of followers, compared to news outlets in any other nation, which may be due to their use of English language. Another unusual Twitter phenomenon in Brazil were individuals casting pro-Clinton “votes” in an online poll that linked to the Twitter page of a NBC TV affiliate in Connecticut. This same poll was posted more than 50

times in Brazil on November 8 by different individuals (see sample in Figure 5), and was not observed in any other nation. It appeared to be an automated post, the only one that appeared to be in favor of Clinton, and these comprised roughly 10% of her entire (and modest) Brazil sample. See two examples in Figure 4.3

### **Russia**

Many Russia comments—more than 10% of them—had been deleted or the account was “closed” after November 8. It was observed that many comments in Russia contained links to Breitbart and InfoWars.com, more than in other countries, and more frequently than links to other American media. It was also noted that the top sources here in English language included an American journalism school in St. Petersburg, an American columnist for the conservative newspaper *Washington Times*, a British journalist, and an American PR executive (Benador) who was clearly working to promote Trump. Benador’s comments always included hashtags such as #MAGA (“Make American Great Again,” Trump’s campaign tagline) or #ONLY TRUMP. There were very few media companies or Russian journalists in the sample, which may be due to the limitation of English language, but may also reflect the efforts of agenda-building in the language that easily transmits to the United States. See Figure 4.4.

Table 4.1

*Frequency of Twitter comments, by Source Type.*

	<u>Individual</u>	<u>Journalist</u>	<u>Pol/Celeb</u>	<u>News co</u>	<u>Oth bus.</u>	<u>Inst/Non</u>	<u>Othr</u>
US							
-Trump	414 (82.8%)	20 (4%)	3 (0.6%)	36 (7.2%)	10 (2%)	15 (3%)	2 (0.4%)
-Clinton	372 (74.4%)	26 (5.2%)	0 (0%)	56 (11.2%)	16 (3.2%)	25 (5%)	5 (1%)
UK							
-Trump	367 (73.4%)	23 (4.6%)	9 (1.8%)	62 (12.4%)	24 (4.8%)	9 (1.8%)	6 (1.2%)
-Clinton	346 (68.7%)	17 (3.4%)	5 (1%)	75 (14.9%)	43 (8.5%)	17 (3.4%)	1 (0.2%)
Brazil							
-Trump	437 (86.7%)	14 (2.8%)	4 (0.8%)	13 (2.6%)	7 (1.4%)	6 (1.2%)	23 (4.6%)
-Clinton	433 (85.6%)	22 (4.3%)	7 (1.4%)	30 (5.9%)	2 (0.4%)	11 (2.2%)	1 (0.2%)
Russia							
-Trump	366 (73.1%)	53 (10.6%)	0 (0%)	35 (7%)	34 (6.8%)	11 (2.2%)	2 (0.4%)
-Clinton	283 (56.5%)	89 (17.8%)	1 (0.2%)	84 (16.8%)	22 (4.4%)	22 (4.4%)	0 (0%)
India							
-Trump	326 (65.1%)	26 (5.2%)	84 (16.8%)	101 (20.2%)	30 (6%)	5 (1%)	4 (1%)
-Clinton	313 (62.5%)	31 (6.2%)	3 (0.6%)	106 (21.2%)	25 (5%)	13 (2.6%)	10 (2%)
China							
-Trump	367 (73.3%)	56 (11.2%)	3 (0.6%)	44 (8.8%)	19 (3.8%)	3 (0.6%)	9 (1.8%)
-Clinton	352 (70.4%)	56 (11.2%)	2 (0.4%)	46 (9.2%)	28 (5.6%)	3 (0.6%)	13 (2.6%)
Totals							
-Trump	2277 (75.7%)	192 (6.4%)	27 (0.9%)	291 (9.7%)	124 (4.1%)	49 (1.6%)	47 (1.5%)
-Clinton	2099 (69.7%)	241 (8%)	17 (0.6%)	397 (13.2%)	136 (4.5%)	91 (3%)	30 (1%)

## United States

Table 4.2

*Twitter Sources in this Study Sample that Have the Most Followers*

Nation	Twitter Source	No. of Twitter Followers
U.S.	<i>The Washington Post</i>	10,509,000
	<i>Entertainment Weekly</i>	6,483,825
	NBC News	4,807,000
	Bloomberg Media	4,050,600
	<i>USA Today</i>	3,358,600
	The Hill	2,540,000
	<i>Fortune</i> magazine	2,227,200
	Ezra Klein, Vox Media journalist	1,796,007
U.K.	BBC Breaking News	32,357,000
	<i>The Economist</i>	20,706,000
	BBC World News	19,720,000
	<i>The Guardian</i>	6,582,000
	Sky News TV	4,100,000
	<i>Financial Times</i>	2,870,000
	<i>The Independent</i>	2,262,000
<i>The Telegraph</i>	2,150,000	
Brazil	Tony Rocha, unverified “radio and TV director”	2,103,000
	Ricardo Nester, self-described actor and journalist	966,000
	Reuters Brasil	298,000
	Yasmin Mitri, unverified actress	136,000
	Ed Perez, individual	127,000
	TopGyn News	109,000
	Carlos Bolsonaro, conservative politician	116,000
Russia	<i>RT</i> , formerly Russia Today	2,601,870
	Sputnik News	188,000
	Poynter Journalism School, St. Petersburg	180,000
	Alexander Nekrassov, unaffiliated journalist	85,000
	L. Todd Wood, <i>Washington Times</i> correspondent	71,000
	Shaun Walker, <i>Guardian</i> correspondent	67,000
	Eliana Benador, Individual, PR consultant	63,000
India	NDTV	9,940,000
	Times Now TV	7,820,000
	ABP News TV	6,980,000
	<i>The Hindustan Times</i>	5,700,000
	India Today TV	4,380,000
	<i>The Hindu</i>	4,350,000
	CNN News 18	3,670,000
	Zee TV News	3,520,000
	ANI (Asian News Intl)	2,080,000
China	<i>China Xinhua News</i>	10,100,000
	<i>People’s Daily</i> , China	3,780,000
	CGTN China Global Television Network	3,330,000
	China.org	469,000
	Ryan Edward Chou, CGTV journalist,	384,000
	<i>Global Times</i>	314,000



Figure 4.1

*Samples of Twitter Comments from Top U.S. Sources*

 **The Guardian** @guardian Follow

Clinton campaign dismisses polls putting Donald Trump in the lead



**the guardian**

**Clinton campaign dismisses polls putting Donald Trump in the lead**  
A senior Clinton campaign official says a new ABC News/Washington Post tracking poll which put Trump one point ahead is 'not what we see at all'  
[theguardian.com](http://theguardian.com)

12:22 AM · 2 Nov 2016

21 Retweets 16 Likes

 **The Independent** @Independent Follow

Trump avoided potentially hundreds of millions in taxes in a way even his own lawyers considered questionable



**Trump used a massive tax avoidance scheme even his own lawyers consider...**  
Donald Trump used a now-illegal tax loophole to avoid paying potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in tax in a way which, even at the time, his own lawyers said was ...  
[independent.co.uk](http://independent.co.uk)

4:49 PM · 1 Nov 2016

106 Retweets 52 Likes

Figure 4.2

*Samples of Twitter Comments from Top UK.. Sources*



Figure 4.3

*Samples of Twitter Comments from Top Brazil Sources*



Figure 4.4

*Samples of Twitter Comments from Top Russia Sources*





Figure 4.5

*Samples of Twitter Comments from Top India Sources*

## **India**

India was notable because although the sources were mostly individuals, there were many more news media companies on Twitter than there were in other nations. More than 20% of Twitter comments about both candidates came from major television or print news companies in India, whereas in most other countries these comprised 10% or less. This may indicate that media companies in India are much more active on social media than those in other countries, or, perhaps, individuals simply use Twitter less in India. English is an official language in India, of course, and English language news is already popular here, in print and television, so Twitter may be more of a natural platform for India media than other international cultures. See Figure 4.5.

## **China**

In China, government control means that average citizens do not have internet access to Twitter or Facebook. Chinese consumers use Weibo and WeChat instead. Therefore, as expected, the Twitter sources in this study were largely media companies and journalists; the individuals posting on Twitter here were primarily ex-patriate Americans and British living in China. But the numbers of followers for these English language state-controlled media companies are impressive, e.g., *Xinhua News* with 10 million Twitter followers around the world is equal in reach as *The Washington Post* is. China sample tweets are shown in Figure 4.6.

## **Topics of Twitter Comments**

Research Question 2 addressed the general topics featured in Twitter comments about the two presidential candidates. As shown in Table 4.3, the most frequent topics of

Twitter comments were somewhat divergent about Trump and Clinton. This is further examined below.

As shown in Table 4.4, the most frequent topic in Twitter comments, in every nation, was the campaign or “horserace.” This is particularly true for comments about Trump, where nearly 70% focused on the race, somewhat consistently across nations, whereas for Clinton the frequency of comments about the campaign was lower, about 49%, of the time, but it was still the most frequent topic. The second most frequent topic was a personal attack on the candidate—but there were more than twice as many personal attack comments on Clinton (1182) than there were about Trump (454). This is probably due to the fact that so many comments talked about the renewed FBI investigation into Clinton emails and how she remained under a cloud of suspected criminal activity. There is a significant difference between Clinton and Trump in these Twitter topic categories, in every country in this study, as shown in Table 4.4.

**Ryan Edward Chua** 蔡曼中  
@ryan\_chua [Follow](#)

Clinton leads Trump by 6 points, same as before FBI announcement: Reuters/Ipsos [reut.rs/2ef1gdJ](http://reut.rs/2ef1gdJ) via @Reuters



Clinton leads Trump by 6 points, same as before FBI announcement: Reuters...  
Hillary Clinton led Republican Donald Trump by 6 percentage points among likely voters, according to a Reuters/Ipsos daily tracking poll released on Wednesday, the...  
[reuters.com](http://reuters.com)

1:40 AM - 3 Nov 2016

8 Likes

**China Xinhua News**  
@XinhNews [Follow](#)

#Trump2016, #Clinton finish presidential race with historically poor images: #Poll [xhne.ws/ieWD2](http://xhne.ws/ieWD2)



11:01 AM - 8 Nov 2016

33 Retweets 108 Likes

Figure 4.6

*Samples of Twitter Comments from Top China Sources*

Table 4.3

*Main Topic in Twitter Comments*

	<u>Campaign</u>	<u>Own nation</u>	<u>Social issue</u>	<u>Internat'l/ immigration</u>	<u>US issue</u>	<u>Personal Attack</u>	<u>Other</u>
US							
-Trump	372 (74.4%)	0 (0%)	10 (2%)	12 (2.4%)	12 (2.4%)	81 (16.2%)	13 (2.6%)
-Clinton	190 (38%)	0 (0%)	2 (0.4%)	5 (1%)	7 (1.4%)	285 (57%)	11 (2.2%)
UK							
-Trump	346 (69.2%)	10 (2%)	7 (1.4%)	17 (3.4%)	8 (1.6%)	100 (20%)	12 (2.4%)
-Clinton	256 (50.7%)	6 (1.1%)	6 (1.1%)	22 (4.3%)	2 (0.4%)	189 (37.5%)	23 (4.5%)
Brazil							
-Trump	375 (74.4%)	14 (2.8%)	1 (0.2%)	23 (4.6%)	4 (0.8%)	66 (13.1%)	21 (4.1%)
-Clinton	257 (50.7%)	2 (0.4%)	5 (1%)	11 (2.1%)	5 (1%)	198 (39.1%)	28 (5.5%)
Russia							
-Trump	351 (70%)	37 (7.4%)	1 (0.2%)	15 (3%)	8 (1.6%)	67 (13.3%)	22 (4.4%)
-Clinton	217 (43.3%)	29 (5.8%)	1 (0.2%)	15 (3%)	3 (0.6%)	217 (43.3%)	19 (3.8%)
India							
-Trump	324 (64.6%)	33 (6.6%)	6 (1.2%)	36 (7.2%)	15 (3%)	74 (14.8%)	13 (2.6%)
-Clinton	280 (55.8%)	43 (8.5%)	3 (0.6%)	6 (1.2%)	12 (2.4%)	133 (26.5%)	24 (4.8%)
China							
-Trump	333 (66.4%)	28 (5.6%)	6 (1.2%)	18 (3.6%)	6 (1.2%)	66 (13.2%)	44 (8.8%)
-Clinton	270 (54%)	22 (4.4%)	1 (0.2%)	19 (3.8%)	3 (0.6%)	160 (32%)	25 (5%)
Totals							
-Trump	2101 (69.9%)	122 (4%)	31 (1.1%)	121 (4%)	53 (1.8%)	454 (15.1%)	125 (4.2%)
-Clinton	1470 (48.8%)	102 (3.4%)	18 (0.6%)	78 (2.6%)	32 (1.1%)	1182 (39.2%)	130 (4.3%)

Table 4.4

*Most Frequent Twitter Topics about Each Candidate*

	Clinton	Trump	$\chi^2$	df	Sig.
<b>US</b>					
-Campaign	190 (38%)	372 (74.4%)	134.565	1	.000
-Pers. attack	285 (57.5%)	81 (16.2%)	150.840	1	.000
<b>UK</b>					
-Campaign	256 (50.7%)	346 (69.2%)	36.158	1	.000
-Pers. attack	189 (37.5%)	100 (20%)	36.966	1	.000
<b>Brazil</b>					
-Campaign	257 (50.7%)	375 (74.4%)	63.648	1	.000
-Pers. attack	198 (39.1%)	66 (13.1%)	100.218	1	.000
<b>Russia</b>					
-Campaign	217 (43.3%)	351 (70%)	64.830	1	.000
-Pers. attack	217 (43.3%)	67 (13.3%)	113.051	1	.000
<b>India</b>					
-Campaign	280 (55.8%)	324 (64.6%)	8.805	1	.003
-Pers. attack	133 (26.5%)	74 (14.8%)	26.583	1	.000
<b>China</b>					
-Campaign	270 (54%)	333 (66.4%)	16.750	1	.000
-Pers. attack	160 (32%)	66 (13.2%)	50.742	1	.000
<b>Totals</b>					
-Campaign	1470 (48.8%)	2101 (69.9%)	25.112	5	.000
-Pers. attack	1182 (39.2%)	454 (15.1%)	22.820	5	.000

**Images in Twitter Comments**

Research Question 2 addressed the content in the Twitter comments, and this includes the frequency of images and their subjects. Results shown in Table 4.5 show that most tweets (more than 68% of the total) did not contain any image at all. Of those that did contain images, commenters were more likely to include an image when the comment was about Clinton (32%) than if it was about Trump (24.8%). Comments about Trump featured his image a total of 291 times, compared to Clinton comments showing her image in 473 tweets.

Table 4.5

*Frequency of Image Subject in Twitter Comments*

	<u>No image</u>	<u>Trump</u>	<u>Clinton</u>	<u>Both</u>	<u>Other</u>
<b>US</b>					
-Trump	415 (83%)	35 (7%)	6 (1.1%)	5 (1%)	39 (7.8%)
-Clinton	377 (75.4%)	5 (1%)	82 (16.4%)	9 (1.8%)	27 (5.4%)
<b>UK</b>					
-Trump	338 (67.6%)	57 (11.4%)	5 (1%)	16 (3.2%)	54 (10.8%)
-Clinton	337 (66.8%)	11 (2.1%)	75 (14.9%)	31 (2%)	50 (10%)
<b>Brazil</b>					
-Trump	365 (72.4%)	44 (8.7%)	10 (2%)	23 (4.5%)	62 (12.3%)
-Clinton	302 (59.6%)	10 (2%)	70 (13.8%)	67 (13.2%)	57 (11.2%)
<b>Russia</b>					
-Trump	348 (69.4%)	58 (11.6%)	17 (3.3%)	19 (3.7%)	59 (11.7%)
-Clinton	350 (69.8%)	14 (2.8%)	91 (18.8%)	8 (1.5%)	38 (7.5%)
<b>India</b>					
-Trump	338 (67.5%)	67 (13.3%)	13 (2.6%)	37 (7.4%)	46 (9.2%)
-Clinton	322 (64.2%)	14 (2.8%)	78 (15.5%)	39 (7.7%)	48 (9.6%)
<b>China</b>					
-Trump	428 (85.4%)	30 (6%)	6 (1.2%)	10 (2%)	27 (5.4%)
-Clinton	428 (85.4%)	7 (1.4%)	77 (15.4%)	31 (6.2%)	25 (5%)
<b>Totals</b>					
-Trump	2262 (75.2%)	291 (9.7%)	57 (1.9%)	110 (3.6%)	287 (9.5%)
-Clinton	2048 (68%)	61 (2%)	473 (15.7%)	185 (6.1%)	245 (8.1%)

Images were used most frequently in Brazil, the U.K. and in India, but only marginally more so than in other countries. The researcher considered various factors in the use of images, and transformed the data to see whether use of images corresponded to whether a country was considered a high-context or low-context culture (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1993), and found there was no correlation. Next, the researcher examined whether use of images corresponded to whether the nation was a democracy or a state-controlled regime, which also proved not significant. While the results of Tone analysis is reported in detail later in this section, the researcher did find a relationship between Tone of content and the use of images. If the comment had an image and was negative in tone, it was most likely to contain an image of Clinton. Trump's face appeared mostly frequently in positive comments (146); Clinton's image appeared mostly in negative comments (262), all of which were most frequently posted by Russian Twitter users. These numbers are not large, but provide an important foundation to additional studies about images in political communication and social media. Overall comment tones are discussed in greater detail in their own section on page 75.

Table 4.6

*Tone and Presence of Image in Twitter Comment*

	<u>Trump Image</u>							$\chi^2$	df	Sig.
	US	UK	Brazil	Russia	India	China				
Negative	21	26	28	12	35	7	41.452	10	.000	
Neutral	1	17	14	24	14	7				
Positive	25	12	36	32	23					
Total	40	68	54	72	81	37				

	<u>Clinton Image</u>							$\chi^2$	df	Sig.
	US	UK	Brazil	Russia	India	China				
Negative	49	44	36	68	32	33	27.907	10	.002	
Neutral	14	13	20	9	21	13				
Positive	23	24	31	38	37					
Total	88	80	80	108	91	83				



Means testing was performed to confirm these findings, entering the code 1 for positive tone, 2 for neutral or balanced, and 3 for positive tones. Table 4.7 shows that there were significant differences between the means for Trump (2.08) and Clinton (1.83) regarding tone of Twitter comments that contained images.

Table 4.7

*Means and ANOVA tests for Tones and Images*

Image:	N	Mean Tone	Std Dev.	F	Sig.
None	4310	1.94	.858		
Trump	352	2.05	.884		
Clinton	530	1.84	.898		
Both	295	2.26	.752		
Other	532	1.93	.860		
Total	6019	1.95	.862	12.846	.000

Following are specific Twitter comments that were the most retweeted in this sample. As indicated below, the comment retweeted most widely was in India, where a news article about Clinton linking to Wikileaks was retweeted more than 4,100 times. The second most widely-circulated tweet in this entire study was from the U.K., where a conservative commentator who is associated with Alex Jones' InfoWars remarked about the FBI probe of Clinton and generated almost 3,000 retweets.

Table 4.8

*Comments and Sources with the Most Retweets*

Nation	# of Retweets	Source	# of Followers
US	2,598 on 11-5-16	Fox News host DA Jeanine Pirro	675,000
	1,557 on 11-7-16	McKay Coppins, <i>The Atlantic</i> journalist	107,000
	879 on 10-30-16	Joe Scarborough MSNBC	1,630,000
	559 on 10-31-16	Fox & Friends	931,331
	521 on 11-5-16	Daniel Dale, <i>Toronto Star</i> journalist	180,000
UK	2,982 on 10-30-16	Paul Joseph Watson, conservative UK radio host and Infowars editor-at-large	665,000
	1,307 on 11-8-16	BBC Breaking News	32,357,000
	865 on 10-31-16	Paul Joseph Watson, journalist	665,000
	627 on 10-31-16	BBC Breaking News	32,357,000
Brazil	26 on 11-8-16	Pedro Rafael, Individual	17,900
	12 on 10-31-16	Carlos Bolsonaro, conservative politician	116,000
Russia	2,009 on 11-4-16	RT	2,601,870
	1,597 on 11-4-16	RT	2,601,870
	1,013 on 11-4-16	RT	2,601,870
	742 on 11-4-16	RT	2,601,870
	712 on 11-4-16	RT	2,601,870
	408 on 11-4-16	RT	2,601,870
India	4,143 on 11-4-16	<i>The Hindustan Times</i>	5,700,000
	154 on 11-7-16	Minhaz Merchant, journalist	135,000
	135 on 11-8-16	Zero Hedge, financial news blog	427,000
	61 on 11-8-16	Sahil Kapur, journalist	70,000
	47 on 11-8-16	RJ Alok, journalist	417,000
China	228 on 11-5-16	CGTN	3,300,000
	179 on 11-7-16	CGTN	3,300,000
	136 on 11-3-16	Kaiser Kuo, journalist	46,500
	99 on 11-5-16	Xinhua News	10,100,000
	98 on 11-6-16	Xinhua News	10,100,000
	81 on 11-4-16	Clay Shirky, American researcher	365,000



Figure 4.7

*Most Retweeted Twitter Comments in U.S.*



Figure 4.8

*Most Retweeted Twitter Comments in U.K.*

**pedro rafael**  
@falarafha

Follow

Hillary is in the lead  
Trump is in the lead  
Hillary is in the lead agias  
Trump's back in the lead  
#ElectionNight  
Me:




5:26 PM - 8 Nov 2016

26 Retweets 27 Likes

**Carlos Bolsonaro** ✓  
@CarlosBolsonaro

Follow

FBI agents pushed for Clinton Foundation investigation, but Justice Dept shut...  
[In.is/18roN](https://www.in.is/18roN) by #focasonline via @c0nvey



**FBI agents argued for Clinton Foundation investigation: rep...**  
The DOJ's public integrity unit decided there was not enough evidence to proceed.  
thehill.com

6:07 PM - 31 Oct 2016

12 Retweets 50 Likes

Figure 4.9

*Most Retweeted Twitter Comments in Brazil*

 RT  
 @RT\_com Follow

**#Pilger: #ISIL or #ISIS is created largely with money from people who are giving money to the #Clinton Foundation?"**  
**#Assange: "Yes."**



8:30 AM · 4 Nov 2016  
2,091 Retweets · 1,491 Likes

 RT  
 @RT\_com Follow

**BREAKING: 'Both Clinton & ISIS funded by Saudi, Qatari money' – #Assange in exclusive interview with John Pilger**



Assange: Clinton & ISIS funded by same money. Trump won't be allowed to ...  
In the second excerpt from the John Pilger Special, to be exclusively broadcast by RT on Saturday, courtesy of Dartmouth Films, Julian Assange accuses Hilary Clinton...  
rt.com

10:01 PM · 3 Nov 2016  
1,597 Retweets · 1,060 Likes

Figure 4.10

*Most Retweeted Twitter Comments in Russia*



Figure 4.11

*Most Retweeted Twitter Comments in India*

 **CGTN**   
@CGTNOfficial Follow 

Video: US presidential nominee Donald Trump hustled off stage during campaign in Reno over security threat



9:22 PM - 5 Nov 2016

228 Retweets 339 Likes 

 24  228  339

 **CGTN**   
@CGTNOfficial Follow 

Reuters/Ipsos final poll says Hillary Clinton has a 90% chance of winning the presidential election with hours to go before the vote



6:04 PM - 7 Nov 2016

179 Retweets 291 Likes 

Figure 4.12

*Most Retweeted Twitter Comments in China*



## Tones of Twitter Comments

Research Question 2 includes the examination of tones of Twitter comments—what are the frequencies of those that are either negative, positive or neutral about candidates Trump and Clinton, in the six nations. Table 4.9 shows the results, including chi-squares and significance levels of the differences in tones between Trump and Clinton.

In the U.S. and in Russia, the tones were significantly more positive for Trump (46% and 56%) and significantly more negative for Clinton (60% and 60%). These posts were not from “bots” but real individuals and organizations. The tones in these two nations stand apart from the other four nations in the study. Only the United Kingdom was most frequently negative about Trump on Twitter, about as equally as it was negative about Clinton (41% and 42%).

In the U.K. and in Brazil, the tones on Twitter were largely negative about both candidates. In India and China, tones were marginally more positive about each candidate.

Means testing was performed to confirm these findings, using the code 1 for positive tone, 2 for neutral or balanced, and 3 for positive tones. Tables 4.10 and 4.11 show that there were significant differences between the means for Trump (2.08) and Clinton (1.83) regarding tone of Twitter comments.

Table 4.

*Tones of All Twitter Comments and significance of differences between Candidates*

<u>Nation</u>	<u>Trump</u>			<u>Clinton</u>			$\chi^2$	df	p-value
	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Positive</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Positive</u>			
U.S.	**206 (41%)	** 65 (13%)	**229 (46%)	**301 (60%)	** 86 (17%)	**113 (23%)	60.066	2	.000
	expected count 253.5	25.5	171	253.5	75.5	171			
U.K.	**207 (41%)	**123 (25%)	**170 (34%)	**210 (42%)	**181 (36%)	**113 (22%)	22.552	2	.000
	expected count 207.7	151.4	170	209.3	152.6	142.1			
Brazil	202 (40%)	114 (23%)	188 (37%)	198 (39%)	132 (26%)	176 (35%)	1.749	2	.417
	expected count 199.6	122.8	181.6	200.4	123.2	182.4			
Russia	** 95 (19%)	** 125 (25%)	**281 (56%)	**300 (60%)	**115 (23%)	** 86 (17%)	210.419	2	.000
	expected count 197.5	120	183.5	197.5	120	183.5			
India	* 156 (31%)	* 132 (26%)	* 213 (43%)	* 160 (32%)	* 170 (34%)	* 171 (34%)	9.426	2	.009
	expected count 158	151	192	158	151	192			
China	167 (33%)	151 (30%)	183 (37%)	177 (35%)	143 (29%)	180 (36%)	.532	2	.766
	expected count 172.2	147.1	181.7	171.8	146.9	181.3			

\*\* $p \leq .000$

\* $p \leq .01$

Table 4.10

*Means and ANOVA tests for Tones, in Total*

	N	Mean	Std Dev.	Std Err.	Interval Bounds	F	Sig.
Trump	3007	2.08	.871	.016	2.05-2.11	124.260	.000
Clinton	3012	1.83	.835	.015	1.80-1.86		
Total	6019	1.95	.862	.011	1.93-1.98		

Table 4.11

*Means Tests for Tone in each Nation*

	N	Mean	Std Dev.	Std Err.	Interval Bounds	F	Sig.
US							
Trump	500	2.05	.933	.042	1.96-2.13	57.165	.000
Clinton	500	1.62	.829	.037	1.55-1.70		
Total	1000	1.84	.907	.029	1.78-1.89		
UK							
Trump	500	1.93	.866	.016	1.85-2.00	5.201	.023
Clinton	504	1.81	.778	.015	1.74-1.88		
Total	1004	1.87	.825	.011	1.82-1.92		
Brazil							
Trump	504	1.97	.880	.039	1.90-2.05	.082	.774
Clinton	506	1.96	.869	.038	1.88-2.03		
Total	1010	1.96	.784	.027	1.91-2.02		
Russia							
Trump	501	2.37	.784	.035	2.30-2.44	265.454	.000
Clinton	501	1.57	.768	.034	1.51-1.64		
Total	1002	1.97	.872	.028	1.92-2.03		
India							
Trump	501	2.11	.851	.038	2.04-2.19	3.046	.081
Clinton	501	2.02	.813	.036	1.95-2.09		
Total	1002	2.07	.833	.026	2.02-2.12		
China							
Trump	501	2.03	.836	.037	1.96-2.11	.238	.626
Clinton	500	2.01	.846	.038	1.93-2.08		
Total	1001	2.02	.841	.027	1.97-2.07		

## Sources and Tone in the U.S. and Russia

Agenda-building studies traditionally involve the roles of journalists and news outlets. Although individuals were the source for the largest numbers of Twitter comments and tones about these candidates in every country, this study aimed to explore the tones propagated by professional news sources in the U.S. and Russia, where 60% of the comments were negative about Clinton and 56% were positive about Trump, as shown in Table 4.12. These proportions were significantly more diverse than they were in other nations. There have been revelations about the influence of Russian hackers on Twitter, but this study examined whether the partisan phenomenon also occurred in Twitter comments of official media professionals.

Table 4.12

### *Tones of Journalists' and News Outlets' Twitter Comments*

Nation	Trump			Clinton		
	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive
U.S.						
-journalist	4 (20%)	7 (35%)	9 (45%)	12 (46%)	4 (15%)	26 (39%)
-news comp	15 (42%)	10 (28%)	11 (30%)	23 (41%)	16 (29%)	17 (30%)
Russia						
-journalist	9 (17%)	3 (6%)	41 (77%)	56 (66%)	17 (19%)	16 (18%)
-news comp	9 (26%)	12 (34%)	14 (40%)	45 (53%)	28 (34%)	11 (13%)

Table 4.12 shows that the journalists and media in the U.S. were more balanced in tones on Twitter than the American public at large, but still most frequently negative

about Clinton. This is surprising as almost every American mainstream news outlet consistently reported Clinton as handily leading in the polls up until election day (e.g., “One last look at the polls: Hillary Clinton's lead is holding steady,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9; “Clinton leads by five points nationally as Trump personality concerns persist,” *Washington Post*, November 6). The American journalist and media tones on Twitter reveal that they were largely negative in tone, but not as significantly negative as the public-at-large on Twitter. The one notable exception in Table 4.12 is that U.S. news outlets (but not journalists) on Twitter were largely negative about Trump (as negative as they were about Hillary). This is the only type of source in the U.S. that reflected negative tones about Trump on Twitter comments.

In contrast, journalists and news media companies in Russia were more positive about Trump (77%) and more frequently negative about Clinton (66%) than were all individual citizens in Russia. These were not bots or trolls but professional news producers, some of whom work for conservative American media outlets and some of whom (e.g., RT) are official media outlets for the Russian government. In other words, the pro-Trump and anti-Clinton tweets in Russia were not all hackers, but also news media professionals.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

Twitter and other social media have revived the need for agenda-building research, as they have totally altered the landscape for traditional mainstream media as well as for public diplomacy, information subsidies, policymakers and consumers. Denham (2010) said that agenda-building is a constant negotiation between more and more sources, and merits further study. Others have indicated that digital tools such as Twitter need further study to advance knowledge of information subsidies (Waters, Tindall & Morton, 2010) and as an agenda-building tool in elections (Kiouisis et al., 2015; Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010). This research study was also motivated by the desire to add to knowledge about the role of social media on the mainstream agenda, including those messages generated across international borders, and the potential effects of social media not only on elections but on democracy itself, in cultures around the world. In addition, Guo and Vargo (2017) suggested “the investigation of intermedia agenda setting between news media in different countries can greatly enrich our understanding of international news flow and, ultimately, international relations” (p. 503). In this study of 6,019 Twitter comments about Trump and Clinton from six nations in the days prior to

the 2016 U.S. presidential election, a number of findings expand our knowledge about the evolution of agenda-building.

### **Individuals Build the Agenda on Twitter**

First, even aside from Russian infiltrators and Wikileaks tweets, and aside from the candidates' own tweets which received unprecedented attention from mainstream media, Twitter was a source and a conduit that allowed regular citizens from around the world to build the media agenda throughout the election campaign. Comments from nonprofessional, everyday Twitter users vastly outnumbered those from journalists, political parties, traditional public relations professionals and even the candidates themselves. Previous studies (e.g. Lotan et al., 2011) had found that most Twitter users in certain nations--roughly 70% of Twitter comments--came from individuals, and this study found similar proportions for Twitter users not only in the U.S. and U.K. but in nations that had not yet been examined: in Brazil, Russia, India and China.

The Shorenstein study (Patterson, 2016) found that Trump's media coverage was 77% negative, and that Clinton's coverage was 63% negative. The present study found that individuals on Twitter created a social media agenda that was at most 40% negative for Trump, and 60% negative for Clinton. The results of the election suggest that Twitter was a more accurate reflection of public opinion than other media, even excluding posts from those who were not legitimate users. This study revealed specific details about the phenomenon that has dominated mainstream news headlines (Calabresi, 2017; Dwoskin et al., 2017), those that declared Russia had influenced the 2016 American presidential election, and that they used Twitter to do it. The data in this study confirmed a pattern of influence from Russia on Twitter, and also identified sources that were not merely "bots"

but actual people. Legitimate citizen sources on Twitter in the U.S. and other nations—not just Kremlin-backed hackers and news professionals—propagated certain tones and story topics, and they drove the social media agenda during the pre-election period.

The MIT post-election study (Chou, 2016) identified the most common topics among Clinton and Trump Twitter followers were gun rights, racial issues and immigration. These topics were virtually nonexistent in the Twitter sample for the present study. The agenda set by individuals in the present study focused on the campaign status and personal attacks, in all six nations. The conversations were never about policies or issues, not even about topics of international interest. This suggests that the current sample did not include many who were Twitter followers of Clinton or Trump, such as were studied at MIT, and that most Twitter commenters do not directly follow tweets from the two candidates.

Fisher and Brockhoff (2008) and Golan and Himelboim (2016) found that global social networking platforms such as Twitter provide countless opportunities for direct interactions between governments and the foreign public. Results of this study showed that governments per se were not a part of the conversations about the American presidential election at all—except those from Russia that covertly infiltrated Twitter not only as bots but as legitimate Russian individuals and government-sponsored media. It was clearly an example of government interaction with the foreign public, in ways never observed before, and it seems to have been easily implemented.

### **Russians Drove the American Media Agenda**

Russian comments in this study came mostly from established accounts of real individual people, although U.S. federal authorities are “examining the role companies



like Facebook and Twitter had in swaying the 2016 election, and how they may have been weaponized” with fake accounts and bots (Kosoff, 2017). Recent investigations reveal that Twitter (and Facebook) were heavily populated by Russian-supported trolls who championed Trump and denigrated Clinton, hundreds and thousands of times a day (Shane, 2017). While this study lays out specific evidence that confirms this occurred, it also provides specific examples of the equally negative tones of legitimate sources, including media outlets. In other words, even excluding the Russian bots and trolls, the tones were overwhelmingly in favor of Trump and against Clinton, in proportions unlike any other nation.

The comment tones in the U.S. as well as in Russia were equally negative about Clinton (60% negative in both the U.S. and Russia), much more than in other countries. And only the Twitter users in the U.S. and Russia were predominantly positive about Trump. American comments were eerily similar to those in Russia, and further evidence that Russians used American pseudonyms and internet addresses, and incited or amplified American Twitter users to be wholeheartedly pro-Trump. One social media profile from a Russian troll showed an American name with a background that could not be verified later by investigative reporters, and whose photo showed him in a Brazilian restaurant, and another photo revealing a “Brazilian-style electrical outlet” (Shane, 2017, p. A1). Clearly, the Russian propaganda machine used internet protocol addresses in the Russia, the U.S. and, as this study reflects, they probably used Brazilian internet protocol addresses as well.

The Twitter sources in Brazil were unique compared to others countries—almost entirely comprised of individuals (roughly 85%), more than any other nation. Brazilian

media and journalists were virtually absent from Twitter, which was very unusual. Those with the most followers were unverified “actresses” and “television producers.” Brazil also had the greatest disparity of total comments about Trump during this period (324,600) compared to those about Clinton (11,400). Although all the individuals in the sample appeared to be legitimate people, such a discrepancy reflects an unnatural or artificial presence in the Twitter parameter of Brazil. These legitimate accounts were very likely trolls for Trump and may, in fact, reflect Russian operatives at work, as suggested by Shane (2017). While some Trump trolls appeared in other nations as well, they were far more numerous in Brazil, creating an unusual forum for international Twitter discourse about the American candidates. Most news accounts about the Russian influence on the campaign do not mention Brazil, but this study suggests there was some sort of manipulation of Twitter accounts using internet addresses from several nations around the world.

The changing and evasive nature of verifiable sources on social media—pseudonyms and trolls--means that their role as “information subsidies” is insidiously influential, and may lead to a general distrust of all media. And platforms such as Twitter provide a direct and global platform that bypasses the usual scrutiny of news editors and reporters. This platform clearly bypasses the usual scrutiny of international diplomats and state departments as well. It is now known to be easily infiltrated and manipulated by unknown and untraceable groups and individuals, as shown in this study.

Of course, the skepticism about verifiable news stories is also generated by those in power who trade in falsehoods, with or without social media. Politicians and their spokespeople were given wide berth by all the media to stretch the truth throughout the

2016 election. For example, *The New York Times* has been widely rebuked by other media companies for “very badly” erring in its over-coverage of the Clinton email issue (Fallows, 2017, n.p.), which legitimized the topic for all other media. It inspired a post-election meme: “but her emails!” While the *Times* has yet to account for this biased coverage of Clinton, this study opens up the possibility that the *New York Times*’ reporters—and other journalists--were scrolling through Twitter feeds and reading the scores of *RT* posts, every time Wikileaks released another batch of old emails leaked from the Clinton campaign. Vargo and Guo (2016) recently performed a large-scale intermedia agenda-setting analysis for one year, and found that *The New York Times* and other American mainstream media were likely to follow the agenda of online partisan media agenda, rather than set the agenda themselves. Vargo and Guo (2016) found that “partisan media were successful in predicting which issues were covered by other media” (p. 18). While the New York newspaper was not one of the mainstream outlets in this particular study, this intermedia phenomenon does not explain why U.S. mainstream media in this study were more critical about Trump than media in other nations. As a group, the American media outlets on Twitter were equally negative about Trump and Clinton, which is not in parallel with partisan media, nor with Russian media. American media might have tipped the Twitter tones more in favor of Clinton, had Twitter not been overwhelmed by Russian trolls. But the presence of American media tones on Twitter were not reflective of the Twitter population as a whole, as they were in Russia.

In Russia, an exceptional 35 percent of Twitter comments about Clinton came from journalists or media companies—a much higher proportion than did such Russian comments about Trump, and greater than the other nations’ proportions of media and

journalist comments. This provides residual evidence that thousands of individual accounts and tweets were deleted, leaving behind an unusually high proportion of tweets from news media and journalists. The most retweets in Russia were from *RT*, formerly called *Russia Today*, the official government-run TV news media outlet. No other nation had a single source representing all of the most popular retweets; in this case, the *RT* tweets all centered on the same topic (the *RT* Julian Assange interview about Clinton emails released through Wikileaks) and all on the same day (November 4). *RT* essentially repeatedly tweeted a story that, taken together, was retweeted 6,481 times in a single day, far more than any retweet in any nation during this period. Further examination might reveal exactly who retweeted the *RT* Assange story 6,481 times; they were not all in Russia, as that number far exceeds the total number of tweets in Russia that day (roughly 3,000). It is possible that more than one such retweeter was working at the *The New York Times*, which covered the Assange email story so thoroughly.

In the U.S., the Twitter sources with the most followers were media companies, such as *The Washington Post* and *NBC News* (the *New York Times* did not appear in this study's random sample). However, those that were retweeted most frequently were often specific journalists—such as Fox News' Jeanine Pirro and MSNBC's Joe Scarborough. The American sample under study had no tweets directly from Breitbart or InfoWars, although eight U.S. individuals tweeted links to those sites. Benkler et al. had found that Breitbart was the “center of a distinct right-wing media ecosystem” (2017, n.p.) in their automated study of Twitter during the six months prior to the election. Their study indicated that Breitbart was most frequently retweeted by others, particularly by individuals, but the present study found that Breitbart was not a frequent originator of

tweets. It was observed that scores of individuals in the U.S. had screen names such as “Sophia4Trump,” “TrumpGo2016,” “ExposeLiberals,” and variations using the word “Deplorable.” This indicates that many U.S. Twitter comments about both Trump and Clinton came from ardent Trump supporters, if not from Breitbart or Kremlin-backed trolls. There were no such pseudonyms that seemed to specifically identify pro-Clinton supporters.

Sources in the U.K. were comprised in similar proportions as the U.S.: news media companies had the most followers, such as *BBC Breaking News* with more than 32 million followers (the most followers for a single source in this study). But the greatest number of retweets were given to comments from specific journalists, particularly for the InfoWars contributor and British conservative radio host, Paul Joseph Watson, which contained inflammatory negative comments about Clinton.

A similar pattern emerged for Twitter sources in India: individuals made the most frequent comments but media companies dominated in numbers of followers, such as NDTV and *Times Now*. *The Hindustan Times* ran the single most retweeted comment in this entire study (4,143 retweets): the story about Wikileaks that seemed to originate at *RT* in Russia, one which was retweeted by other major media around the world. In China, there were mostly individuals represented as well, almost all of whom appeared to be resident non-Asians who had access to Twitter. One of these individuals, to the researcher’s surprise, was the communications scholar Clay Shirky, who appears to live in Shanghai. A couple of other Chinese journalists, such as Kaiser Kuo, evidently work for western news agencies or access Twitter through a non-Chinese internet server. The most-followed and most-retweeted sources in China were media conglomerates, such as

*Xinhua News* and CGTN. These media companies have millions of Twitter followers, none of whom are Chinese citizens. The Twitter accounts of these English-language media companies appear to serve one purpose only, and that is to disseminate state-sanctioned news to users in other nations, not their own.

With the introduction of social media, Vargo and Guo (2016) found that even elite American newspapers like *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* were no longer in control of the news agenda, instead following the leads of online partisan media. Research such as this study confirms this and widens our knowledge further, not only about content created by journalists and news companies but by increasingly influential masses of individual Twitter users, even those in foreign countries.

### **Conservative Journalists Helped Build the Twitter Agenda**

It was surprising how minor a role journalists played overall in the Twitter discourse, as a source category, particularly in the U.S., where the role of journalism and potential media bias was an issue Trump raised often during the campaign. The most visible and voluble journalists were those that were very pro-Trump (e.g. Watson in the U.K., Wood in Russia) and not in the United States.

Very few comments in this study—almost none--were contributed by politicians, diplomats or other celebrities, and virtually none by organizations, associations, educators or institutes. A handful of sources were private companies, some of which included promotional comments. For example, betting companies were very popular in the U.K., soliciting wagers from Twitter consumers for Trump or Clinton to win the election. But for the most part, neither private nor public industry was a large part of the Twittersphere in any country during this pre-election period.

While many of the individuals had fewer than 5,000 followers, some of them, like Eliana Benador in Russia, had as many as 63,000 followers, and she posted as much as five or ten times a day, according to this random sample. Further investigation of Benador's website reveals she is a public relations professional consultant based in the U.S. and was once employed by the administration of George W. Bush to promote the 2003 war in Iraq. The "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq led the U.S. to war, also a story that was completely misrepresented and globally legitimized by the *New York Times* (Fallows, 2017). While that event was before the existence of Twitter, evidence of this same provider of information subsidies in more than one misleading *Times* story is indicative that Benador has influence with major media and conservative journalists, and she now uses it effectively on social media. In this study, she proved to be an influential and powerful presence shaping the social media agenda in Russia, and beyond, in favor of Trump. Benador continues to blog about conservative American causes. Her Twitter account however, is registered with a server in Russia, indicating either the location of her home or her primary client or business. In any event, her agenda was to promote Trump heavily, revealing a link between the Trump campaign and information subsidies from Russia that are not even secretive or pseudonymous. Benador is not a journalist per se, and does not appear in any mainstream news stories about the election, but she clearly affected the overall tones on Twitter in Russia, in partisan media, and consequently in mainstream media as well.

Identifying the types of sources for social media confirms that individuals are transforming into an enormous aggregate of information subsidies—and, sometimes, propaganda—whether they are professionals or not. And while journalists and media

companies occupy a smaller proportion of social media comments than individuals do, Twitter enables even them to reach far larger audiences than their primary platforms. For example, MSNBC-TV's *Morning Joe* had an average television viewership of 896,000 in 2016 (Ziv, 2017), but host Joe Scarborough's Twitter page had a following of more than 1.5 million. His Twitter comments (like President Trump's) are not vetted by professional editors and fact-checkers, and, thus, misleading or biased posts from such a mainstream television journalist may find traction as having the imprimatur of NBC News, even when they do not. Before Twitter, a media source or channel was rarely an individual—and rarely a journalist who was communicating outside of the official news entity. Walter Cronkite did not give regular opinions or interviews in outlets other than the evening news desk at CBS. But news companies now encourage their reporters to use Twitter and give them some latitude to express personal opinions there (Lawrence et al., 2013; Lasorsa et al., 2012).

Conservative journalists reported numerous widely-received and overtly negative stories about Hillary Clinton, such as L. Todd Wood in Russia for the *Washington Times*, and Jeanine Pirro at Fox News. These news celebrities have an ability to affect the overall media agenda that is more powerful with Twitter than it is with newspapers or television alone. This may eventually lead to an environment where a journalist (conservative or liberal) no longer needs the media conglomerate to have a national platform and, even an international platform, as exhibited by popular online partisan media such as Breitbart.com, InfoWars.com and Vox.com. Traditional American news media seemed to have given Clinton the leading edge throughout the campaign in poll reports (in spite of daily "emails!" stories), but the Twittersphere was championing Trump. Twitter's



intermedia agenda-building appeared frequently on conservative mainstream outlets such as Fox News, which also promoted Trump, but also as a direct-to-consumer platform.

The power of Twitter and various individuals seems to have outperformed the mainstream agenda-building influence of politicians, lobbyists, media companies, and even the candidates themselves. Trump made egregious errors in public appearances, but frequent and colorful Twitter posts distracted the public as well as the mainstream media, even when the sources were known to be discreditable and biased.

The sources on Twitter were varied in power but not without partisan motivations, blatant manipulation, and easy crossing of international borders. The fact that a cache of old Clinton emails stolen by an unknown Australian man (Julian Assange) and posted on an Icelandic website (Wikileaks.com) traveled through Russia with the goal of becoming plastered on the front pages of American mainstream news outlets proves that the builders of our media agenda are not the policymakers and politicians, as they were in the past, but foreign entities who have mastered social media to take advantage of its hold on American news consumers.

**Twitter Topics and Tones Depend Not Just on Russians,  
But Also on the Candidate**

Benkler, Faris, Roberts, and Zuckerman (2017) suggested that Trump's favorite issue—immigration—was a prominent topic in the media agenda during the 2016 campaign. The present study found that only 4% of Twitter comments about Trump mentioned this topic (see Table 4.3 on p. 65), and only 2.6% mentioned immigration in the Clinton sample. This is notable not only because it contradicts what Benkler and his colleagues discovered in mainstream media, but because the Twitter comments in this

study came largely from non-American nations, where immigration might be considered an important issue. Many residents of these nations have relatives in the U.S., but there were not many posts that focused on this topic. Comments from the Trump sample here as a whole were focused on the campaign itself (between 64% and 75% in every nation), and personal attacks (between 13% and 20%), even in international settings.

Previous studies showed that media organizations build agendas that gain readers through entertaining or engaging stories (Gitlin, 1980; Chang, 1998; Entman, 2008). Findings here indicated that criminal investigations of Hillary Clinton served this purpose for social media in the 2016 presidential campaign, fulfilling the “vulture mentality” described by Ramanathan (2016). Some of this is due to the fact that Clinton was under FBI scrutiny between October 28 and November 7 (for the second time since June) regarding emails found on her assistant’s computer during an unrelated investigation of the assistant’s husband, Anthony Weiner (Vitkovskaya, Granados & Muyskens, 2017). During this same period, Wikileaks founder Julian Assange gave an interview that was heavily tweeted about by *RT* and picked up in other nations, in which he implied other newly released emails showed that Clinton’s election campaign was heavily funded by Middle Easterners who support ISIS terrorist groups. All of these email stories were shortly disproved, but they lingered in the Twittersphere. Only three weeks earlier, a television program had released audiotape of Trump making sexist comments about assaulting women, but that story had long faded from the media agenda by this time, even on Twitter. The renewed FBI inquiry and this newest release from Wikileaks were a sputtering “October surprise” that nonetheless added fuel to Twitter comments and

subsequently to mainstream media that Clinton remained under criminal suspicion and that her campaign was in jeopardy.

Topics such as social issues or constitutional issues were largely absent from the entire sample of Twitter comments, in every nation, as were topics relating to the home nations of Twitter commenters (e.g., how might the U.S. election affect relations with India, or with China). This was surprising, given that the topic of one's own country might be easily on the people's minds and media agenda of each nation. While overall Twitter topics were similarly dispersed in each nation—mostly about the campaign, followed by personal attacks—the proportions of these comments varied greatly between candidates. For example, nearly 70% of all comments about Trump focused on the campaign, polls, and rally events, and fewer than 50% of comments about Clinton fit into this category. For Clinton, personal attacks accounted for 39% of the comments, compared to only 15% of these for Trump.

Almost no mention was made in this Twitter sample regarding Donald Trump's comments about assaulting women, or about Trump refusing to disclose his income tax returns. If these topics dominated the Twitter discourse earlier in October, they were long gone by October 30, the start date of this content analysis. The timing of newsworthy disclosures—and the ability of social media to spread the stories quickly and globally, getting picked up by mainstream media along the way--affects their impact during the last days of an election campaign. And there is great impact for the Twitter release of questionable stories that quickly gain attention on other media and supersede any other news of substance. The one who tweets last tweets hardest. And that last tweet is most likely to be from an everyday individual, not a journalist, or even a candidate.

The Twitter comments from individuals focused on campaign rallies and Clinton's emails—around the world--and subsequently so did the mainstream media agenda. Largely unaffiliated individuals and false identities determined the topics on social media, and journalists and news media outlets enthusiastically followed their lead. Cobb and Elder (1972) and Dearing and Rogers (1996) would suggest that individual Twitter users had command of the campaign agenda; in this case, social media virtually never touched on actual issues of policy or substance.

Golder (2012) found that female political candidates in India frequently receive much less media coverage than male candidates do, and that proved true for Twitter, not only in India but in every country under study. Clinton's sample was always much smaller than the Trump sample on Twitter. It was notable that there was a complete absence of posts about Clinton's physical appearance, and also no mentions of Trump's appearance. There were also no tweets that mentioned stereotypical female attributes (or lack thereof), feminism, or even the novelty of a woman candidate in the United States. Pereira and Biachi (2016) performed a critical study of the two women who ran for election as Brazil's president in 2010. They found that the two candidates were framed by news media with stereotypical attributes such as fragility and religiousness, with plenty of references to their physical appearances and no mention of their rather extensive political experiences. This was not the case in the Twitter comments about Clinton, where tweets focused on her being a criminal rather than her femininity or extensive political experiences.

Jamieson (1995) suggested that the mass media are fixated on aspects of the private life of a political candidate, and this can be useful for women who run for office

because they often are better than men at expressing themselves. Male candidates use more war rhetoric and toughness than women do, although Greenwood and Coker (2016) found that partisanship superseded gender in terms of choosing such campaign rhetoric. Yoon and Lee (2013) found that media treated female candidates equally; their study showed that media coverage for Clinton's 2008 primary race against Barack Obama did not reveal gendered stereotypes, although news frames did reflect more negative coverage for her. Wagner, Trimble, Sampert and Gerrits (2017) studied multiple elections in Canada that had female candidates, over a period of 35 years, and found that mainstream news media did not focus on their gender as much as they did the "novelty" of the candidates. The frames of 2016 candidate Clinton were not that she was a novelty, but that she was considered part of the old and corrupted "establishment." Anderson (2017) suggested that Clinton's loss in 2016 was due to the fact that, even today, "every woman is the wrong woman" for the office of president (p. 132). Anderson proposed that it was Trump's "newness" and "novelty" as an outsider that overpowered Clinton's strengths. In other words, being a credible presidential candidate was her downfall: "Her electability made her unelectable" (p. 133). Her qualifications for electability were framed as being a well-connected political insider with decades of experience—qualities necessary for a female candidate to have credibility—but that worked against Clinton in a "change" campaign. "The problem lies with the culture rather than with the candidates" (Anderson, p. 135).

While this study did not compare content with mainstream media or do time-lapse analysis, post-election critiques have accused mainstream media of focusing on topics that were not salient to voters, falsely equating particular ethical lapses, and ignoring the

views of large American populations, even though they were evident on Twitter. The Twitter agenda about Clinton and Trump focused heavily on the horserace and on personal attacks, moving into second-level or attribute agenda-building, as described by McCombs, Lopez-Escobar et al. (2000) and Kiouisis et al. (2006, 2009) about earlier political campaigns, before social media. This study expands such research on attribute salience to social media, as well as to Twitter's international audiences. And, more than that, it reveals how hundreds of thousands of unidentified sources in platforms such as Twitter can drive stories onto the mainstream media agenda and public opinion, around the world.

Oxford Internet Institute researcher Philip Howard suggested that, even without counting the bots, Trump was still more popular on social media than Clinton was (Kottasova, 2016). This proved true in the present study for social media in the U.S. and in Russia, in the ten days prior to the 2016 election, but not true in the U.K., Brazil, India and China. The most frequent Twitter comments in the U.K. and in Brazil were negative ones about *both* candidates. The comments in India and in China were marginally more *positive* for both candidates, but otherwise evenly balanced among positive, negative and neutral tones for each candidate.

The negative comments about Clinton in the U.S. and in Russia comprised 60% of the totals—the same proportions in each country. Negative comments about Trump did not even come close to that number. The proportions of positive tones about Trump were smaller but still definitive and significant: 46% of the U.S. comments and 56% of the Russian comments were positive for Trump. As mentioned, many of the pro-Trump and anti-Clinton comments in Russia were generated by an individual who was subsequently

identified as a prominent public relations executive named Eliana Benador. Kiouisis and Wu (2008) identified that the efforts of such public relations counsel was effective in decreasing negative news stories about a nation. In this case, such effort proved effective in crossing borders and decreasing negative tones about a political candidate, Donald Trump. There have been several studies devoted to the role of Russian influence and social media in the 2016 election; the present one provides evidence of the tones of comments from each nation, particularly from the most predominant sources: individuals, journalists and news media outlets.

In the Trump sample from both the U.S. and Russia, individuals more frequently posted positive comments about him than negative or neutral comments about him. In the U.S., the margin for negatives over positives from individuals was small—46% were positive and 44% were negative--whereas in Russia individuals posted 53% positive and only 20% negative for Trump. This is attributable to the acknowledged infiltration of Russian social media by trolls, agents of the Kremlin, but also by Eliana Benador, the public relations professional who tweeted 15 positive comments about Trump in the sample of 500, more than any other single source, even more than *RT*.

As for Clinton comments, individuals from both nations posted overwhelmingly negative comments (of which Benador contributed only two). Clinton comments from individuals in the U.S. were 64% negative, and 20% positive. The individuals in Russia posted similar proportions—56% of them were negative for Clinton and 20% were positive. In the U.S., many individuals who slammed Clinton were clearly trolls for Trump, such as “TrumpMyPOTUS” with 4,200 followers, “Trumpster” with 7,000 followers, “ExposeLiberals” with 98,000 followers, and “Crossbearer” with 91,000

followers. They posted comments accusing Clinton of being a pedophile, an ISIS terror accomplice, and a Satanist. While some of the stories about the FBI investigation were not indicative of actual criminal conduct, the comments posted and news story links were framed as “Clinton in trouble again” and “Clinton under suspicion.” The tones for Clinton reflect that there were virtually no individuals championing her victory, in any country. There were no pseudonyms or any individual accounts who trolled against Trump, or in favor of Clinton.

The disparaging tones about Clinton were not limited to individuals and bots. Journalists expressed similar tones, although their numbers were fewer. In the U.S., journalists made only 20 tweets about Trump in the sample of 500 (most frequently positive), and 26 comments about Clinton (mostly negative). Journalists in Russia had far more presence on Twitter than did American journalists—they tweeted roughly three times more frequently during this period. But then, only a few of them were actually Russian. Many were American or British correspondents stationed in Moscow, and with a pro-Trump agenda all their own. Of the 53 Russian journalists’ tweets about Trump, 77% were positive, even more than those in the U.S. There were 89 Russian journalists’ comments about Clinton—many more than there were for Trump—but only 18% were positive, and 63% were negative about Clinton. So, while the propagandist trolls and bots may receive attention as swaying opinion about the American presidential candidates, journalists with many followers provided similar influential tones, and with a wider reach.

Media companies were slightly more neutral in the U.S. than media companies in Russia, but not altogether neutral. In fact, as stated earlier, media companies were the



only American source type that emerged as negative in tone toward Trump. However, they were also equally negative in terms of Clinton. None of the source categories from the U.S. and Russia—not individuals, not journalists, not media companies—were most frequently positive about Clinton. Even though American mainstream media seemed to predict a wide victory for Clinton when they published daily polls on their front pages, social media comments were clearly leaning in the other direction. Anyone who actually paid attention to Twitter would have seen that all sources were astonishingly in favor of Trump, not only in Russia but in the U.S. The Twitterspheres about the American election were eerily similar in these two nations. In other countries, however, the tones on Twitter were more distinctive. There were notable disparities in the other nations in this Twitter study about agenda-building for Trump and Clinton.

### **Twitter is Totally Different from One Nation to the Next**

Shoemaker and Reese (1991) pointed out that the agenda-building process requires a crucial step: cultural considerations. This study aimed to assess the different considerations in cultures other than the U.S. While Russia was a major focus due to its role in efforts to influence the American election, this study examined Twitter in Brazil, China, the U.K. and India, nations which have been largely excluded from previous communications research about Twitter. Edward Hall (1976), as well as Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) described distinctions of high context cultures; Hofstede's (1993) dimensions of culture include collectivism and individualism, perceptions of power distance among populations, feminine and masculine identities, uncertainty avoidance and the orientation of time, short-term and long-term. These and other scholars identified collective societies such as Brazil, Russia, China and India as “high-context,” as these

cultures rely on implicitness and subtlety in effective communication messages. The use of Twitter, if used by legitimate members of these societies and not just by trolls or expatriate populations, introduces new patterns in communication for high-context cultures. Members of collective cultures may find a new power or identity in acting individually on social media, and experimenting in conversations well outside their usual collective. Members of high context cultures also may find that social media contains a context that is much more fluid and deceptive, as are the representations of power and authority, whether they are fraudulent or not. Exposure to Twitter may encourage such cultures to experiment with individuality and assertiveness. But this study shows that Twitter is in very different stages of development around the world, where it only partially reflects cultural contexts.

**Brazil Has a Huge Twitter Population,  
But Not an Identifiable Agenda**

High-context Brazil has more Twitter users than many other countries (18 million) but the sources are largely evasive and pseudonymous, and there was clear evidence that Russian hackers had infiltrated the population here, as mentioned previously. Media and journalists were almost completely absent in the sample from Brazil, and scores of individual accounts appeared suspicious, particularly the 49 tweets in the Clinton sample of 500 that linked to an NBC TV affiliate in Connecticut. In spite of this abnormal pro-Clinton contingent, comment tones were most frequently negative for her in Brazil. In addition, the Sysomos program presented thirty times more comments about Trump than about Clinton in Brazil, indicating an algorithmic imbalance that was not present in other nations. This anomaly probably reflects the interference of

Russian influencers, as some of their false “American” Twitter identities seemed to come through Brazil, as mentioned earlier (Shane, 2017). This does not account for those seemingly automated and exceptional posts in favor of Clinton in Brazil, but it does explain why tones about her remained predominantly negative—the huge number of Trump posts from unverified and unrecognizable Twitter accounts overwhelmed anything positive for Clinton, as well as any comments from legitimate Brazilian media or journalists. It appears from the results of this study that residents and media companies in Brazil are not using Twitter in any meaningful way at this time.

**China Twitter is Carefully Geared to Non-Asians,  
and Exceptionally Immune to Hackers**

China proved an exception to the overall atmosphere on Twitter, as may have been expected since this particular social media platform is not accessible by average citizens but mostly by Chinese news media and journalists and expatriate civilians. Other studies about popular and accessible Chinese platforms such as WeChat and Weibo have shown that social media are powerful tools for democratic discourse and activism there (e.g., Yu & Xu, 2016; Wen, Hao & Han, 2016; Wei & O’Boyle, 2016), but this was not evident at all on Twitter. The present study did reveal that the state-controlled media in China were careful not to endorse one U.S. presidential candidate over another; they maintained primarily neutral tones and minimized stories about inflammatory accusations. Twitter comments were divided into thirds for each candidate—almost evenly positive, neutral and negative for both Trump and Clinton. However, news media outlets in China were different: they were more in Trump’s favor (50% of news media posts were positive for him, more than the total China sample). As the media outlets are

controlled by the Chinese government, and as most individual users are westerners who live in China, this shows that the government sanctioned more favorable Twitter coverage for Trump than it did for Clinton, who received only 26% positive comments from the media here, compared to 36% positive tweets in China as a whole. Eleven percent of the comments in China came from specific journalists, a larger proportion of journalists than in other nations. Some of these were American reporters in China, but several, such as Sinica.com podcaster Kaiser Kuo in Beijing, are freelance journalists who operate outside the bounds of state-controlled media, and seem to have outside access to Twitter. Journalists who tweeted in China were 61% positive for Clinton and only 29% positive for Trump. This is a sizable disparity from journalists' Twitter tones in other countries, as well as the opposite proportion as those posted by official Chinese state media outlets, but it reflects that many journalists in China were reporting different tones than those in other nations.

Different from Chinese news media, journalists on Twitter in China were more negative about Trump and more positive about Clinton than their counterparts anywhere else in the world. While this may be the result of the unique distinction in control over media coverage in China and relatively independent journalists, this imbalance in tone may also reflect public opinion and media bias in the one nation that seemed to have had no infiltration or manipulation by outside influence. While few westerners would suggest that Communist control of Chinese media is a good thing, strict regulation does appear to keep out hackers and bots. Government rules for Weibo ban anonymous users, false stories, violence, pornography (and political dissent). The government is proud that such control has allowed China's internet companies to grow without foreign rivals, and also

without foreign infiltration (Myers and Wee, 2017). Other, more democratic nations will be contending with hackers and insidious propaganda for years to come. Freedom of the press comes with a price.

### **Twitter Users in the UK Are Engaged in U.S. Politics, and Nationalism**

The only other population in this study who regularly use the target language—English—is, of course, in the United Kingdom. In fact, the Twitter account for the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) was the most-followed single source in this study, with more than 32 million. This is impressive considering it is the smallest nation represented in this study, and its total Twitter parameter is only 14 million. The tones from the U.K. were 41% negative for Trump and 42% negative for Clinton, making it the only nation that tweeted equivalent negative tone proportions about both American candidates. But when examining the Twitter comment tones of news media outlets in the U.K., they were far less negative for Trump--only 28% negative about him, whereas 32% of news media tweets were positive for him. This imbalance for media source tones may be due to popular conservative journalists in the U.K. such as Paul Joseph Watson, who is not a media outlet but who frequently posted links to InfoWars and his caustic American media compatriot, Alex Jones.

Clinton tones remained predominantly negative for all U.K. sources, many of whom were from individual trolls such as “Israel Bombs Babies,” which posted 26 negative posts about her in the sample of 500. This is the only nation that posted many tweets about Trump’s potential collusion with Russian interests, as well as about Trump’s history of sexual assaults and secretive tax returns. These topics simply did not appear in other nations. However, like the U.S., the U.K. also posted many stories about Wikileaks

and its inflammatory accusations about Clinton, which overwhelmed any negative balance for Trump. The positive and negative proportions of tones were less extreme in the U.K. than in other countries, in total; this may be due to the fact that, as a nation, it was not a target of or avenue for Russian bots and Trump trolls. It may also reflect British attitudes on the heels of its recent vote to exit the European Union only a few weeks earlier. Some posts compared Trump's successful candidacy to the popular "Brexit" movement, and there were a few cautionary posts addressing the down side of conservative nationalism.

### **India Media are Masters of Twitter**

Guo and Vargo (2017) found that a nation's political and economic status predicted its salience in the world news, and also that, in the digital age, the U.S. was becoming less and less the center of media attention. They also found that India was rising in media exports, and this study certainly found that media in India had a larger share of tweets than they did in other nations—more than 20% of the Twitter comments about both candidates came from news media sources. India is the world's largest democracy, and also the world's largest media industry. Guo and Vargo (2017) and Tunstall (2008) asserted that media exports in nations such as India have risen to the top of the "world media pecking order" (Tunstall, p. 235), which was confirmed in this study by the strong presence of India's media outlets on the Twitter agenda. Until the 1990s, Indian television news had been controlled by the government, so it is a relatively young news medium there (Thomas & Kumar, 2004). Its emergence in the international arena is enhanced by social media, where the relatively youthful TV news media, as well as the well established Indian print news media, show great presence. These Indian media

sources propagated a relatively more even balance of tone on Twitter between the American presidential candidates, but the Indian news media accounts on Twitter were still largely positive comments for Trump (40% of the time) and most frequently negative for Clinton (in 53% of Indian news media tweets). Individuals in India were more positive about Trump and more negative about Clinton than were the news media tweets in India. The high-context culture of India was leaning towards the partisan, individualistic tones of low-context Americans. Some of this may be due to the wide use of English language in Indian media, a residual of the British Raj. But the slant towards Trump may also be reflective of emerging partisanship in India itself. India has a popular but controversial Prime Minister (Narendra Modi) from a conservative party who is perceived as anti-Muslim, and many draw similarities between this leader and Donald Trump (Crunden, 2017). Championing an American candidate who was against immigrants and trade imports was not necessarily in India's best interests, but the other qualities in Trump regarding nationalism may have served to confirm for Indians the benefits of those values in Modi.

Twitter is an evolving but increasingly important element of agenda-building in media around the world. Social media provides exponentially more exposure for mainstream media as well as for motivated groups and individuals who can easily disseminate misinformation and propaganda and feed it to mainstream journalists and news outlets. While Twitter may provide a vehicle for dangerous political influence by some nations, it also provides a new platform for influence by mainstream news media, average citizens, journalists and public relations professionals. This study provides foundational information about social media in international settings, for political

communication and for 21<sup>st</sup> century agenda-building, which will continue to grow and evolve as does the nature of Twitter. Social media has been hailed for the past decade as a pathway to a more democratic public sphere, but growing pains show that it is vulnerable and in danger of weakening news credibility. Mainstream media may provide Twitter with content and legitimacy, but these news outlets must also contend with the ramifications of trustworthiness among consumers and counter the reputation for “fake news” on social media.

The Shorenstein study suggested that journalists were fascinated with Trump because their decisions were driven by news values, not by political values (Patterson, 2016). Journalists and media companies want to feature topics and people that are unusual and sensational. Findings of the present study suggest that their agenda may also be driven by individuals posting on Twitter, because they and their posts in themselves are unusual and sensational. Armed with knowledge such as this study, journalists and media companies—as well as government agencies and internet companies--will have resources to address the challenges of providing influence to any Twitter user, and to create media agendas that have the capacity to threaten the free press and other democratic institutions.

### **Limitations and Implications**

There are a number of limitations to this study, including the fact that Twitter has shown to be manipulated by individuals and groups who misrepresent their identities, particularly about a powerful political topic. While the presence of bots and trolls were identified and somewhat accounted for, there may have been many remaining identities that were falsified. In addition, the keywords and topic selected for this study were



centered on an American event which may have held variable importance to Twitter users around the world. In addition, Twitter users are a self-selecting group and, in this case, English language users, and may not be representative of the nations or their media. The sample size was also a limitation, as it was a small percentage of Twitter comments, in some nations more than in others. The numbers of specific journalists and media outlets in the sample were even smaller, roughly 20% of the total, making some of the interpretations less than generalizable

Another challenge of examining Twitter is the “echo chamber,” where consumers see a feedback loop in a filtered bubble, with little or no exposure to followers who are not like-minded (Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Gabler (2016) called this phenomenon “segmentation,” which allows consumers to find niche media, and no longer are forced to find commonality in general media such as “stodgy” broadcast television (n.p.). Goldenberg (1984) once said: “With regularized interactions, sources and reporters enter a bargaining relationship in which each actor extends efforts to interact with the other” to create a news product that is a subjective construction, and defined by the various sources (p. 236). Academic studies in agenda-building were founded on the normatively appealing mainstream media and traditional policymakers, but agenda-building is evolving as new media evolves: the public not only chooses its preferred social media outlets but also, now, creates the stories, disseminates them, and sends them to reporters.

This study revealed that Twitter provided a massive platform for special interests to influence and affect the outcome of an American presidential election, from parties around the world. While news about Russian infiltration continues to emerge, this study provides greater detail and insight into the specific nature of the ethical breaches in

agenda-building on Twitter, as well as observations about other international and influential Twitter comments regarding Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the 2016 American presidential election. This study confirms that individuals—as well as international powers—can quite easily influence public opinion by simply typing very short messages on Twitter, the accessible, mobile and global soapbox.

### **Future Research**

Communications research about Twitter is still relatively new, yet before we even fully understand the platform and its effects, it is already evolving to reflect manipulation and questionable ethics, which must be studied and remedied. New applications and news media platforms will be continue to be created regularly, and these will further influence consumers and news professionals, as Twitter has done.

Future studies may employ time-lapse analysis to see the direction of agenda-building between social media and mainstream media during this campaign, and during other events of international scope. The agenda-building process involves many factors, particularly in various cultures where Twitter is not as commonly used as it is in the U.S. Further research may use other social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Weibo which are used more often by consumers in Asia than Twitter is.

Research is also recommended to examine behavioral responses to social media, such as voting behavior and donating money to a cause, as well as the effects of partisan media and “fake news” on social media. In addition, studies will need to ferret out the “secret” agendas propagated on social media by special interest groups, politicians, racist groups and terrorists: elections are not the only opportunity for Twitter to serve as a media agenda builder. In addition, it is notable that the sample sizes here for Clinton

comments were all much smaller than those for Trump, due either to the hackers in Russia or, as suggested earlier, due to the lack of equal media coverage for female politicians. Future studies may include Twitter in performing research on gender and political communication. This study also exposed disparities in Twitter characteristics in nations such as Brazil, indicating a need for more international studies involving social media. While mobile internet access is transforming remote and rural populations in nations such as China with Weibo and WhatsApp, there would be benefits to exploring the influence of social media on other developing nations, not only in South America but also in Africa, among many other places that are gaining new access to social media, and also thus to American politics. Studies such as this one help communications researchers and consumers to build greater awareness of the validity of news stories and sources, and to nurture new generations of citizens around the world who understand the importance and the power of social media.

Meanwhile, more studies may be needed about Facebook and Google, companies which, like Twitter, are being investigated more intensely after U.S. authorities learned that these entities sold advertisements to Russian entities during the campaign (Applebaum, 2017), some of which focused less on the American candidates than on causing racial unrest and propagating civic strife in the U.S. Russians realized sooner than others did that “social media campaigns are a cheap way for an impoverished ex-superpower to meddle in other countries’ politics (Applebaum, 2017, n.p.). Researchers, educators, as well as the companies who create social media platforms, must continue to address the challenges of global social media. Our foundational communications theories, such as agenda-building, prove their value in supporting research that helps people safely

navigate online news stories and trustworthy sources. The technology itself exposes people to the ability to communicate with a multitude of cultures they might never otherwise encounter. Continued research will enhance our understanding of other societies and their means of communicating, which may even provide elements to remediate the dynamic technological challenges and vulnerabilities of Twitter. More than ever before, lies and fake news travel around the world “while the truth is still pulling on its boots.” As social media expands its reach with 21<sup>st</sup> century innovations, it is the responsibility of researchers, technological experts, and professional news outlets to keep its contents credible and culturally aware.

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## APPENDIX A: CODING INSTRUMENT

I

1. Tweet ID \_\_\_\_\_ Coder \_\_\_\_\_

2. Keyword	1 Trump	2 Clinton
3. Date	Oct	Nov
	30 31	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
4. Nation	1 US	2 UK
	3 Brazil	4 Russia
	5 India	6 China
5. Number of retweets		
6. Number of likes		
7. Includes link? If yes, links to:		1 yes 0 no

Dominant topic in tweet (choose one)		0 no
TOP 1) Horsrace/election	1 yes	
TOP 2) Source's own country, elections	2 yes	
TOP 3) Social issue (eth/rel,LGBT, pvtv)	3 yes	
TOP 4) Int'l relations/immigration/terrorism/war	4 yes	
TOP 5) US issue: jobs/economy/tax/constitution/energy policy	5 yes	
TOP 6) Personal attack (candidate is criminal, incompetent, ugly, unstable)	6 yes	
TOP 7) Other	7 yes	

SOURCE	yes	0 no
<b>Individual</b>		
SIND 1) citizen/unaffiliated	1 yes	
SIND 2) journalist	2 yes	
SIND 3) elected politician	3 yes	
SIND 4) diplomat	4 yes	
SIND 5) agency/govt employee	5 yes	
SIND 6) non political celebrity	6 yes	
SIND 7) other individual	7 yes	
<b>Group</b>		
SGR 8) media/news company	8 yes	
SGR 9) other company	9 yes	
SGR 10) institution/university	10 yes	
SGR11) advocacy/nonprof grp	11 yes	
SGR 12) official govt agency	12 yes	
SGR 13) other group	13 yes	
NUMFOL) Number of followers		

Other topics mentioned	(one only)	0 no
OTOP 1) Email server	1 yes	
OTOP 2) FBI/Comey	2 yes	
OTOP 3) Computer Hacking	3 yes	
OTOP 4) Sexual assault	4 yes	
OTOP 5) Wikileaks/Assange	5 yes	
OTOP 6) Tax Return	6 yes	
OTOP 7) Other	7 yes	

Image in tweet?	Yes	0 = no
Trump	1	
Clinton	2	
Both Trump & Clinton	3	
Other	4	
<b>Overall TONE of tweet</b>		
Negative	1	
Neutral/balanced	2	
Positive	3	

## APPENDIX B. ADDITIONAL TWITTER SAMPLES

### *Samples of Twitter Comments from Top U.S. Sources*





Samples of Twitter Comments from Top UK.. Sources

**BBC Breaking News** @BBCBreaking

Donald Trump wins Ohio; Hillary Clinton wins Virginia

This is the current state of play on #ElectionNight

bbc.in/2eBYbEJ

US ELECTION 2016

Hillary Clinton 131

Donald Trump 168

270 TO WIN

After 31 of 50 states

7:40 PM · 8 Nov 2016

1,267 Retweets 812 Likes

**The Economist** @TheEconomist

Everything about James Comey's performance on the Clinton e-mail issue seems lamentable

The FBI accuses Hillary Clinton again

The Democratic nominee appears to have suffered serious, unreserved damage

2:00 PM · 7 Nov 2016

11 Retweets 111 Likes

**BBC News (World)** @BBCNewsWorld

Follow our #Snapchat from NYC where Trump and Clinton have set up their headquarters for #ElectionNight

bbc.in/2flyF8k

bbcnews

Snap or screenshot to add

6:16 PM · 8 Nov 2016

24 Retweets 42 Likes

**The Guardian** @guardian

Clinton campaign dismisses polls putting Donald Trump in the lead

the guardian

Clinton campaign dismisses polls putting Donald Trump in the lead

A senior Clinton campaign official says a new ABC News/Washington Post tracking poll which put Trump one point ahead is 'not what we see at all'

theguardian.com

12:22 AM · 2 Nov 2016

21 Retweets 16 Likes

**Sky News** @SkyNews

Your Sunday afternoon headlines: #USelections #Clinton #Trump #Raaga #Brexit #TheresaMay #superbugs

Katy Perry has endorsed his rival Hillary Clinton

Sunday afternoon headlines

#USelections #Clinton #Trump #Raaga #Brexit #TheresaMay #superbugs

6:35 AM · 8 Nov 2016

22 Retweets 30 Likes

**Financial Times** @FT

Breaking News: Donald Trump has won North Carolina, another key swing state

on.ft.com/2eKD9XX

FT

Electoral College

6:14 PM · 8 Nov 2016

55 Retweets 27 Likes

**The Independent** @theindependent

Trump avoided potentially hundreds of millions in taxes in a way even his own lawyers considered questionable

Trump used a massive tax avoidance scheme even his own lawyers consider...

Donald Trump used a now-disputed tax loophole to avoid paying potentially hundreds of millions of dollars in tax in a way which, even at the time, his own lawyers said was...

theindependent.co.uk

4:43 PM · 1 Nov 2016

106 Retweets 82 Likes

**The Telegraph** @Telegraph

FBI accused of double standards by sitting on evidence of Trump's Russia links and 'rushing' to state Clinton update

FBI accused of double standards by sitting on evidence of Donald Trump's R...

The embroiled director of the FBI has been accused of covering up evidence of Donald Trump's links to Russia while 'rushing' to state Clinton update...

the-telegraph.com

12:36 PM · 11 Nov 2016

41 Retweets 28 Likes

## Samples of Twitter Comments from Top Brazil Sources

**Stiffany Absoluta** @stiffanyabsoluta  
I just told #NBCCT I voted today for Hillary #Clinton. Follow @nbccconnecticut for the latest election news.



8:04 AM - 8 Nov 2016

**Yasmin Mitri** @yasmintmitri  
#TopStories Tech Titan Peter Thiel Explains Support for Donald Trump Amid Controversy - ABC News... [dvr.it/MYxZV](#) #YasminMitri



9:15 AM - 31 Oct 2016

**TopGyn Noticias** @topgynnoticias  
Trump, Clinton Go Neck-and-Neck in Presidential Race - Poll- [topgyn.com.br/capa/trump-cli](#)



10:45 AM - 30 Oct 2016

**Ricardo Neater** @ricardoneater  
Woman whose question was leaked wants Clinton disqualified [dvr.it/McNfNY](#)



7:35 AM - 7 Nov 2016

**Ed Povez** @edpovez  
Will Ferrell puts on 'Nasty Woman' shirt to campaign for Clinton




3:22 AM - 1 Nov 2016

**Reuters Brazil** @reutersbrasil  
Donald Trump's political journey gets comic book treatment [dvr.it/MZ2B4K](#)



3:32 PM - 31 Oct 2016

**Tony Rocha** @tonyrocha  
#StartUps Listen to cartoonist Ruben Bolling talk about Trump, art, and cartooning [dvr.it/Mc8Lp2](#) #NewsFeed



6:32 PM - 8 Nov 2016

**Carlos Bolsonaro** @carlobolsonaro  
FBI agents pushed for Clinton Foundation investigation, but Justice Dept shut... [In.is/18roN](#) by #focasonline via @c0nvey



6:07 PM - 31 Oct 2016

## Samples of Twitter Comments from Top Russia Sources

**RT @RT.com**  
'If somebody can't handle Twitter, they can't handle nuclear codes' - Obama blasts Trump  
[on.rt.com/7u3z](https://on.rt.com/7u3z)

**Alexander Nekrassov** @StringTrouble  
I call on people of Britain who have friends and relatives in America: get in touch with them and persuade them to vote for #Trump  
3:35 AM - 6 Nov 2016 from City of London, London  
13 Retweets 14 Likes

**L.Todd Wood** @LToddWood  
Coordinated media hit pieces across the board on #Trump and the Russians...funny  
8:55 PM - 31 Oct 2016  
3 Retweets 19 Likes

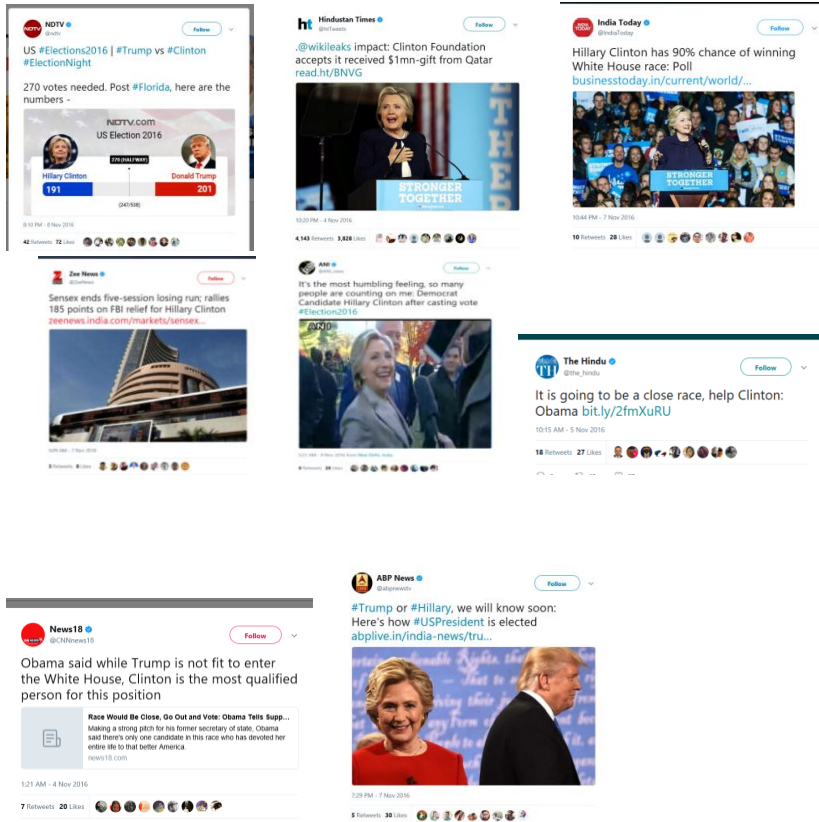
**ELIANA.BENADOR** @ElianaBenador  
VOTE #ONLY\_TRUMP  
"RIGGED" #RapingJustice #sowhat  
#DOJ's #PeterKadzik to investigate best pal @johnpodesta  
#WakeUpAmerica !! #PROTEST !!  
NEW DOJ EMAIL INVESTIGATION TO BE LED BY PODESTA'S CLOSE FRIEND  
PETER KADZIK

**Sputnik** @Sputnik  
#ClintonFoundation operates as giant slush fund for buying influence - #WallStreet analyst [sptknr.ws/cby1](https://sptknr.ws/cby1) #Clinton

**Poynter** @Poynter  
#ICYMI Newsweek's Clinton cover is not proof the election is rigged  
History and hyperbole. What young reporters witnessed covering Trump. A band of mostly young reporters traveled from town to town with Trump, some of them for over a year. Here is what they learned.  
[money.com](https://money.com)  
10:56 AM - 8 Nov 2016  
1 Retweet 1 Like

**Shaun Walker** @shauwalker7  
Russian Orthodox activist: We will pray for Donald Trump, because the demons are supporting Clinton  
[facebook.com/frolov.moskva/](https://facebook.com/frolov.moskva/) ...  
12:59 AM - 8 Nov 2016 from Moscow, Russia  
47 Retweets 38 Likes

## Samples of Twitter Comments from Top India Sources



*Samples of Twitter Comments from Top China Sources*

**CGTN** @CGTNOfficial

Republican nominee Donald #Trump's chance of victory in #Election2016 skyrockets according to New York Times forecasts

Popular vote margin

Clinton +1.1

11:11 PM - 8 Nov 2016

17 Retweets 71 Likes

**China Xinhua News** @XinhuaNews

As the dramatic game of power between Hillary Clinton & Donald Trump near the end, who will u vote for the next U.S. president?

#USElection

- 80% Hillary Clinton
- 21% Donald Trump
- 19% Neither of them

4,414 votes • Final results

11:21 PM - 8 Nov 2016

88 Retweets 168 Likes

**Ryan Edward Chua** @Ryan\_Edward

Clinton leads Trump by 6 points, same as before FBI announcement: Reuters/psos reut.rs/2ef1gdl via @Reuters

Clinton leads Trump by 6 points, same as before FBI announcement: Reuters... Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump tie for 6 percentage points among their voters, according to the RealClearPolitics poll tracking poll released on Wednesday, the Reuters.com

1:01 AM - 8 Nov 2016

4 Likes

**China Xinhua News** @XinhuaNews

#Trump2016, #Clinton finish presidential race with historically poor images: #Poll xhne.ws/eWd2

11:01 AM - 8 Nov 2016

33 Retweets 168 Likes

**China.org.cn** @chinaorgcn

OPINION: Clinton's emails, Trump's fetates #USPresidentialDebate on.china.cn/2eqtkob @jagmailk

chinaorg.cn

12:28 AM - 8 Nov 2016

4 Retweets 16 Likes

**Global Times** @GlobalTimes

Absentee ballots could decide #Election2016 : report bit.ly/2fG49ts #Trump #Clinton

8:24 PM - 7 Nov 2016

5 Likes

**People's Daily China** @PDCChina

#BREAKING: 45th US presidential election kicks off with #Clinton clinching her first win in New Hampshire town #ElectionDay

9:22 PM - 7 Nov 2016

88 Retweets 138 Likes