Political Dialogue in the “Liking” Era: Engaging Controversy on Facebook

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Abstract:

Facebook has evolved into a unique interactive platform for political expression both during the campaign stage and for elected officials. Elected officials have taken to the social media site to present policy, explain and justify legislative votes, and maintain expressive space that allows contact with constituents and voters. While image maintenance is a large component of the rhetorical strategy employed by elected officials online, the substance of the dialogue on a politician’s Facebook page challenges message consistency and message discipline. Through the examination of the “official” Facebook page of Congressman Beto O’Rourke (D-Texas) this exploratory paper presents a typology of political rhetoric deployed in social media, with a focus on the engagement strategies. Our typology allows for analysis of the language strategies used and offers guidance for practitioners to evolve their communication strategies for elected officials using social media.

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Introduction

Facebook has evolved as an interactive platform for political expression between politicians and a broad public audience. While research has started to analyze and quantify interaction between politicians and their audiences online, two patterns emerge in the existing literature; research is largely focused on examples outside of the United States (Carlson & Standberg, 2012; Gasser & Gerlach, 2012; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Gilmore, 2011; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010; Ifukor, 2010) and existing research relies on quantitative data and analysis (Baum, 2012; Lawless, 2012; Williams & Gulati, 2012). Our essay challenges these patterns, because we believe that studying social media in the political context of the United States is overdue and we strongly believe the discursive data in politician’s rhetorical strategies offers rich insight into engagement of audiences and potential voters in contemporary politics. While there are limits to discourse and possibly even the cultivation of shallow, political activism in the digital expressive space this initial exploratory analysis is more than justified.

Social media, Facebook in particular, offers elected officials an expressive space that is cost efficient, easy to maintain and has distinctive media features embedded into one pane in addition to offering space for the audience to engage the official (or their proxies) and to engage with others in the broad “friend” stream. We believe that Facebook as used by elected officials is the perfect political communication tool for image maintenance, especially as an elected official transitions from the campaign stage to the governing stage. However given the openness of Facebook and the scope of a politicians audience, the potential for disruption and destabilization of message is high. Our essay endeavors to do two things; first, present a typology of messaging strategy on Facebook. The typology details the structure of messages used on Facebook. The second goal is to track discursive controversy on Facebook through audience comments on politician’s pages.

Our essay draws qualitative data from the Facebook page of United States Congressman Beto O’Rourke (D-Texas), a relatively recently elected official whose Facebook presence has been consistent and well curated since his election in 2013. Indeed the O’Rourke communication team seems to follow what Williams and Gulati (2012) observed in their work, that active page engagement and curation add positive image qualities to a candidate such as accessibility and authenticity. The essay starts by discussing the role of social media in politics, particularly Facebook, over the last several years. We then present our typology of discursive engagement strategies using examples from O’Rourke’s page with an eye toward how practitioners might evolve their own curation of Facebook pages. The typology allows for a discussion on audience engagement by considering how comments on official posts unfold and by evaluating the nature of these comments. Finally, our essay considers implications of the research and how the typology might be a useful starting space for more theoretical discussions as well as to consider a model for best practices.

As with most aspects of global life, the Internet has had a substantial impact of politics and political communication. Bimber and Davis (2003) point to the year 2000 as a pivotal year for the Internet in United States politics with candidates from the presidential level to local races actively using web sites to campaign and fundraise, while simultaneously more Americans were using bandwidth to connect with candidates and advocacy groups online. Understanding of this new online political space has evolved quickly, but technology remains quicker and more elusive. Looking at work from Davis (2005) on blogs and chatrooms to Foot and Schneider’s (2006) examination of web-based campaigning to Feld and Wilcox’s (2008) work on digital grassroots (netroots) movements and their role in politics, the Internet occupies an important space in political research. As technology and politics intermingle there is no question about their combined impact, however there is an interesting dilemma afoot as well; more users of technology and their participation in politics has not necessarily increased political participation. And as each of these researchers concede, to an extent, the future of digital politics in the United States is harder to predict both because of the rapidity of technological change and the way civic participation in America is shifting.

Facebook and Politics

Facebook has certainly been impactful on the political social media landscape, evolving political communication as technological mobility increased and as people use smart devices as their “onramp” to the information superhighway. By 2008, social media platforms reached the ubiquity that websites had several years before; with uses ranging from campaigning and fundraising to message and image maintenance. Carty (2011) notes that social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have been important evolutions in digital politics by creating an expressive space that is “real time” and which can pull together responses from various conduits without having to have movements that require structure or formal leadership.

Marichal (2012) argues that Facebook represents a paradigm shift in social networking largely by moving users from anonymous participation to a space where public and private spheres merge and people strive to connect across the breadth of those spheres. This paradigm shift has been important for digital politics as connectedness and political participation merge together as well. Becoming a follower of a politician is an active choice on Facebook as users are taking an affirmative step to “like” or “follow” a page. While this step is not as arduous as registering to vote, caucusing, or even making a campaign contribution, it represents a decision to participate in politics, whether that is as an observer or as a discussant. Williams and Gulati (2012) also argue that Facebook creates interpersonal connections between followers that allows for new networks and other connections to develop and grow.

Facebook posts that bridge the elected official and their constituents provide for an immediate expressive space to discuss legislation and the legislative process and also create space to respond to pressing events and crises. Acquiring traditional media airtime is more difficult unless comments from elected officials are specifically sought. Take for example the President’s State of Union where immediately after media seek out various political voices in Congress, however their filtering usually privileges more senior members of Congress. Facebook allows immediate, real time comments from Congressional members that can spotlight their own perspectives and can be tailored to their home districts and constituents (Householder & LaMarre, 2014).

Additionally, expense and the need for technical expertise required to use Facebook are minimal. The establishment of a Facebook presence for an elected official is free and Facebook has established specialized pages both for campaigning politicians and those elected politicians wishing to have an official page. While certain functions related to outreach have a fee structure associated with them, Facebook does not charge for posting or editing material that way a webpage provider would charge for webpage alteration. The role of the administrator for a Facebook page is decidedly less complicated than that of a webmaster and Facebook has developed tools and applications that allow one or many administrators to be able to control official postings, page structure, friend acceptance or rejection as well as all editing power over a page.

Bennett and Lawrence (2008) suggest that one additional rationale for elected officials to favor social media is that with direct contact between the official and constituents, any potential or perceived media bias encountered in traditional channels can be circumvented. Approval of content, particularly for advertising and fundraising, is not necessary as with traditional media. Furthermore circumventing traditional media, has the benefit of minimizing costs for airtime, plus the platform allow hyperlinking to video sites such as YouTube and Vimeo and reposting content such as commercials, videos of events or even video clips from traditional media networks such as C-Span or CNN. Householder and LaMarre (2014) and Lee and Ahn (2013) contend that credibility from the active participation on Facebook pages, especially by politicians (or their teams) and social cause organizers, respectively, promotes more engagement by users. This credibility capital is certainly powerful especially when discussed as a counterpoint to potential or perceived media bias.

Methodology

Our project focuses on the Facebook page of Beto O’Rourke the United States Representative for the 16th Congressional District of Texas. O’Rourke, elected to office in 2012 and sworn in January 2013, received much national attention after beating an eight-term incumbent in the Democratic primary. O’Rourke, a charismatic and likeable candidate, came from the technology sector where he ran a successful business dedicated to web management, design, and data storage. The Congressman’s background was one factor in our selection of his Facebook presence to study. A second factor was the scope of his campaign’s digital footprint, a commanding presence over that of the Democratic incumbent in the 2012 race. The digital difference between incumbent and candidate not only highlighted the age gap between candidates, but also delineated the gap between voters age as well and O’Rourke’s ability to pull a younger voter pool into the election. Finally O’Rourke was re-elected to office in 2014 running against a Republican and a Libertarian set of challengers; the victory in 2014 confirms to some extent his success in his congressional office, messaging, and campaign prowess. Given the scope of O’Rourke’s digital footprint while in office, which includes an active House.gov website, a Facebook page, a Twitter feed (@RepBetoORourke), a newsletter, and a Medium.com-based blog, we felt that O’Rourke was a good source to build our project around.

This project has been funded by the College Office of Undergraduate Research Initiatives, which pairs a high achieving undergraduate researcher with a faculty mentor. Once the research relationship was formalized and a research plan emerged, we began constructing the methodology for the project. In addition to the large digital footprint that O’Rourke has online, all of the channels the Congressman uses are frequently updated and message consistency is high. We focused on the first year of O’Rourke’s presence, specifically starting in January of 2013. We isolated the first year because O’Rourke and his staff, ostensibly the other administrators for the various digital platforms, were new to governing and messaging through Facebook and the first year was likely to show the widest range of postings and messages as everyone got comfortable with the technology. One year of postings was examined and we then classified what we found into a typology or categorization of posts. As categories developed we tracked numbers of “likes”, shares and then comments. We are indebted to the work of Lawless (2012) who has presented the most complex categorization of Twitter and Facebook use among congressional leaders to date; she posits her categories as: credit claiming, positions taking, advertising, information sharing, personal issues, and procedural issues (p. 222). While her categories are significant, we believe that in order to study the discursive value of the posts and subsequent comments, our typology offers more insight. Plus our focus was on a larger data pool that considered the most active time blocks of the session where Lawless focused on a window during the summer. Additionally we are less concerned with quantitative significance as was Lawless, except where a high number of “likes” and/or shares highlighted volume of discourse.

Typology

The typology we present is composed of eight categories: action notice, community outreach, community recognition, legislative information, personal, reflection, staff recognition, and vote information. In this section we explain the categories, offer examples of what the categories encompass and explain the significance of the categories to a broader discussion about politics and discursive, rhetorical strategies on Facebook.

The category of *action notice* was composed of 93 posts between January and December of 2013. Action notice posts focused on activities related to the Congressman’s official duties including participating in legislative debates in the House chamber, committee meeting participation, meeting with constituents in regard to specific legislative issues, explanation of issues in Congress and action on votes. The category includes a number of photos and video posts as well, including the Congressman introducing legislation, speaking with constituents and video content related to how constituents should deal with changes in federal law. One such video posted on October 28th, 2013 dealt with the Faster Filing Act. In the action category one consistent vein of posting focused on the federal government shutdown in October 2013. The first posting on October 1st, focused on the personal impact of the shutdown on the Congressman and on his role as an advocate for citizens in the 16th District. O’Rourke used Facebook extensively to post information about the shutdown including a video posted on October 4th where the Congressman spoke on behalf of US Border Patrol agents impacted by the shutdown.

We believe the action notice category is significant because it is a space where the newly elected official can point to how they are trying to fulfill their mandate set by voters. Broadly the action notice category is potentially the most important for the elected official because it reflects the tempo of the position and allows prescriptive posts about plans and the congressional agenda as well as reactive posts as with those related to the October 2013 government shutdown. Video and photo posts give legitimacy to the elected official by positioning them in official settings and alongside political personae or constituents.

The second category in the typology is *community outreach*. Community outreach positions the elected official as a conduit of information and services to and for the community. The category includes posts related to how the elected official is outreaching to their home district and the posts often position the politician physically in their community. In the case of O’Rourke this category is the most significant in terms of the total number of posts with 215 over the study period and a high concentration of “likes” as well. In September 2013 the Facebook page featured posts about an engagement effort pioneered by O’Rourke; a mobile town hall called “Bussing with Beto.” The Congressman got on a longer route of the community’s mass transit system and met with constituents as they bussed toward downtown. The community outreach effort was posted about and photos and eventually video was shared on the Facebook page. Interestingly in the community outreach category, O’Rourke and his staff rally Facebook participation by commenting on how many followers joined the page. As benchmarks in follower statistics are celebrated, the posts encourage sharing of material and encouragement to bring more followers to the fold; the very dynamic at the heart of social networking.

The outreach posts also feature a number of photos where the Congressman is featured interacting with people in the community including school children, office visitors, and other figures such as veterans. These photos are categorized as community outreach because they do not necessarily position O’Rourke in a legislative capacity, but rather as someone engaging the community writ large. Town hall meetings feature prominently in this category as well as photos of the Congressman speaking at these events and photos of the town hall audiences, all which emphasize engagement and community outreach. Some photos in this category position outreach through the office; a photo on July 23, 2013 shows interns from the Congressman’s office handing out material related to the border economy. This distinction is important, because in this capacity the congressional staff are presented as a link to the community and the language in the Facebook posts frame that as well.

The next category in the typology is *community recognition*; the category consists of posts that acknowledge a member or organization from the community, including remembrances and digital memorials to fallen soldiers. This latter recognition is significant not only because the O’Rourke’s district includes a large US Army post, Ft. Bliss, but also because discursively the topic of military support and veterans affairs became an issue in the first election. Only second to community outreach in terms of prevalence, the category of community recognition posts are frequent and range in terms of individuals and organizations recognized.

One of the most trafficked community recognition posts was on August 27, 2013, when Congressman O’Rourke witnessing a civil union at the Paso Del Norte Bridge, one of the major conduits between El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. On a visit to the bridge, ostensibly part of O’Rourke’s efforts to streamline wait times for crossers, the Congressman had the opportunity to witness a couple’s wedding at the top of the bridge. O’Rourke used the discursive opportunity to express his support of the couple and their action as symbolic of immigration reform struggles.

Had the honor of witnessing the wedding of Edgar and Maricruz on the U.S-Mexico line of the Paso del Norte Bridge this morning. Edgar lives in the U.S. and Maricruz lives in Mexico. Despite the international boundary that prevents them from being together, they decided to make a lifelong commitment to each other. Their union is symbolic of the struggles that many couples living on the border face. Congratulations to the happy couple. (O’Rourke, 2013).

The focal point of the post is a picture of the couple with Congressman O’Rourke by their side.

This category of community recognition post supports Pérez-Latre, et. al. (2011), and Selnow’s (1998) respective arguments that at the center of communication, especially mass communication, there is an inherent need to revert back to one-on-one, interpersonal communication. Furthermore, Williams and Gulati (2012) contend this type of Facebook engagement is crucial to building a politician’s authenticity with the audience. O’Rourke not only engages constituents personally, but also via social media. Status updates like the discursive example presented attract comments from followers, which are examples of a new interpersonal form of engagement communication O’Rourke facilitates and benefits from.

The category we classify as *legislative information* consists of posts that explain issues being tackled by the US Congress its members and details legislative action being undertaken. This particular category is extremely important as a component of the O’Rourke’s responsibility to keep the 16th Congressional district of Texas informed about new legislation introduced or passed and the implications for the district. While surprisingly legislative information posts are not the bulk of the posts on the O’Rourke’s Facebook page, we believe they are significant to users for the informative nature and ability to impact accountability, similar to what happens with action notice and vote information posts.

On August 27, 2013, Congressman O’Rourke addressed events in Syria that were fomenting debate domestically, about whether United States involvement should escalate to the point of military engagement. The Congressman’s response was as follows:

Today I joined a bipartisan group of lawmakers in writing to President Obama to consult with and receive authorization form Congress before ordering the use of U.S. military force in Syria. Our letter makes it clear that we stand ready to come back to Washington, consider the facts, and share the burden of making the decision. (O’Rourke, 2013).

The post is a strong exemplar of the informative strength of using Facebook to discuss legislation and responsibility underlying potential Congressional action. It allows the rhetorical framing of crisis to emphasize the need for action as well as creating a linkage between the Congress and its responsibility to act, with O’Rourke placing himself in that party of responsible actors, and the legislative action underway. Even if the action is minimal, a letter to the President of the United States, the post suggests a sense of immediacy and ownership of the action; an important discursive factor to address an audience of voters.

The fifth category of the typology we identify as *personal* and consist of any posts that pertain to the Congressman’s personal sphere such as posts about his own life, family or posts related to the maintenance of the page. The personal category has very few posts throughout the period analyzed but contains some of the most trafficked posts based on likes and comments by other users. We believe that even if there are not a lot of these types of posts, their significance is notable for how they fold the audience into the Congressman’s life adding authenticity to him as a person, and also creating interpersonal bonds between him and the audience. To an extent this is one of the more powerful benefits of Facebook and O’Rourke’s efforts mirror those of most Facebook users. The cultivation of individual networks on Facebook is driven largely by the social element or connectedness people see between themselves and others; whether that is experiential or the sharing of private sphere information.

A very popular personal post was a picture of a poster for Congressman O’Rourke’s birthday on September 26, 2013. Although the status update was written in the third person, the post received much attention (O’Rourke, 2013). The post and the recognition are reflective of the digital transition in politics and again point to the power of discursive revelation(s) on social media and on Facebook in particular. In previous generations, it was unlikely that a legislator’s birthday would be the source of attention or even connection between themselves and their voters. In the “liking” era however, it is exactly these kinds of posts that fuel traffic to an individual’s page and with someone like O’Rourke or any elected official, the pool of followers is just as likely to acknowledge or even comment on a personal post such as a birthday announcement.

Despite the paucity of personal posts, Congressman O’Rourke’s use of this type of posts is similar to the use of community outreach and recognition posts and all are consistent with Gatson’s (2011) notion that personal information sharing serves an important part of identity maintenance as well as Williams and Gulati’s (2012) position that such posts fuel a personal connection between politicians and their constituents. Add to this the viral nature of expression on Facebook and even though there are few personal posts, it is easy to see why they receive tremendous support.

The category of *reflection* consists of posts that only discuss or explain an issue without providing resolution or with minimal commitment or direction from Congressman O’Rourke. Reflection posts are mostly shared links to articles that may or may not have a comment from O’Rourke, leaving the interpretation up to the user. Again the uniqueness of Facebook means that when O’Rourke or any politician shares information and links to media, they are capitalizing on the viral nature of social media. While we did not track reposting in the content surveyed, it is clear that there is an important effect taking place when information is shared. And to an extent, even when there is not an explicit endorsement of the information or ideas in other media, there is an implicit connection and likely subtle support between the source and the reposter.

A post that reached many users was Congressman O’Rourke’s thoughts on the US Supreme Court decision regarding The Defense of Marriage Act on June 26, 2013. The following accompanied a link shared by the Congressman:

This is the most direct and the most eloquent response to the Supreme Court's DOMA decision that I've seen. Very honored to be serving with someone like Sean Patrick Maloney in the House of Representatives. (O’Rourke, 2013).

The Congressman shared with his followers the events that had taken place and the Court’s position on the legality of DOMA and then added some commentary. In the typology we believe this type of post is representative of Bor’s (2014) argument, which states that contrary to previous research, social media allows for politicians to control the message dispersed to followers. In this case, the presentation of information also communicates an ideological position, but does so without delineating an official position or even revealing an agenda as far as the issue is framed legislatively. As a rhetorical strategy, engaging the issue is important, but rather than taking the explicit route, sharing of information accomplishes just as much and avoids antagonizing a conflict with voters who may not agree to the politician’s perspective. While reflection posts are few, they have substantial weight in the Congressman’s overall purpose and message as they help illustrate and embody intent.

The penultimate category of *staff recognition* consists of posts that acknowledge both staff and interns in the district and Washington D.C. offices. These posts are more frequent than personal posts but are not a large portion of the content analyzed. While this category of posts is not as common nor as popular as community outreach or community recognition, they serve a very similar function to those two categories in the typology. The majority of the posts in this category recognize individual interns or staff members but the following post acknowledges a group of interns just prior to returning to their schools. On August 11, 2013, Congressman O’Rourke posted, “Our DC office is going to get a lot quieter as some of our interns return to school and to El Paso this week. Thank you for all of your hard work this Summer!” (O’Rourke, 2013). Consistent with the personalized nature of Facebook postings, these recognition posts create connections between the audience and the staff the Congressman has, personalizing the office and the actions undertaken by the Congressman. While the recognition posts are potentially important to the staff members themselves, they illustrate to the audience the scope of what gets accomplished with a relatively small group of people. The posts can also cultivate a sense of how complicated the day to day operation of a congressional office can be, which is important to buffer pressure from constituents.

The focus on interns is also a solid discursive strategy because it connects O’Rourke with the educational value of training interns, the social-political value of civic responsibility, and the personal connection between younger voters and potential voters. Nothing draws a connection to the peer groups of college students better than celebrating the accomplishments of those college students working as interns. The element of school pride, as expressed by the information presented about interns and their affiliated universities, certainly helps connect the district to other places and is likely to fuel connectivity between currents students at those universities and alumni with O’Rourke.

The final category of the typology we identity as *vote information* and it consists of posts that explain O’Rourke’s votes on individual pieces of legislation and the implications of the outcome. This particular category is critical to not only the Congressman but to voters and constituents for accountability purposes. Vote information posts are the epitome of Facebook’s value to political discourse, because they appear as responsive and immediate, but have been vetted and prepared well before being posted. They also appear as first person explanations, which adds to the legitimacy and credibility of the post and because of the ownership factors discussed earlier, lay the groundwork for accountability. If voting is consistent with the values, ideology, or agenda that the legislator has promoted or has been connected with vote information posts allow them to highlight or celebrate their actions in voting. If the voting on legislation is controversial or counter to what values, ideology, or agenda that the legislator has promoted or has been connected with vote information posts allow them to get ahead of potential disagreement and frame the debate on their terms. The mark of the digital revolution on politics has been immediacy and access and with Facebook, the impression of that immediacy has benefited politicians to maintain an image or agenda that suits their needs.

The category is not a very dense group of posts but consists of some of the more explicit political communication originating from O’Rourke. The status update posted on October 16, 2013 came a short time after Congressman O’Rourke updated his followers on the possibility of a vote. The Congressman introduces the post by first stating his vote and then goes on to explain the implications of the bill:

I just walked down the steps of the Capitol after casting my vote in favor of compromise legislation to reopen the government and ensure that we pay our bills on time. Having passed the Senate and now the House, the legislation will head to the President for his signature later tonight. (O’Rourke, 2013).

Himelboim, et. al. (2012) argue that interpersonal informational trust promotes further political engagement which is promoted by posts from Congressman O’Rourke where votes are openly discussed, especially since the internet and social media are often used for political engagement and informing. Additionally, through transparency the Congressman’s page has the potential to promote civic engagement, which Boulianne (2009) argues is a benefit of and opportunity created by the Internet.

The typology serves as structural guide to understanding engagement on Facebook as well as a framework for analyzing the discursive value of political engagement. In the subsequent discussion, results of the sorting of posts into the typology categories will be presented.

Discussion

This exploratory project has yielded a wealth of information in terms of discursive data and while the paper showcases individual exemplars, several important observations can be advanced. To start with the discursive voice present throughout the Facebook posts is ostensibly that of Congressman Beto O’Rourke, this is most evident in posts framed in the first person. As with every aspect of a congressional office, while the Congressperson is likely to broadly approve messages, it is unlikely that in this case O’Rourke writes or even approves individual messages. The impact however is positive in that the first person voice lends legitimacy and gravitas to postings, especially those on controversial matters. Additionally the rhetorical power of deploying the first person adds to authenticity of the messages. Language in the posts communicates emotional involvement and a sensibility of the Congressperson while fomenting a relationship with the audience. In the posts related to community recognition, especially when the subject matter involved memorializing soldiers lost in combat, the “I” voice is especially strong. In the Democratic primary, O’Rourke used military support and issues with the regional Veteran’s Administration hospital as a way to attack the sitting congressman. Despite the incumbent’s status as a veteran of the war in Vietnam and his membership on the House Intelligence Committee, the challenger O’Rourke made substantial inroads with voters on this issue. Using first person in community recognition posts, among others, communicates ownership of the respective issue. It is a powerful discursive strategy and also reveals the value of quickly sequenced and released posts.

Action notice posts combined with vote information posts highlight the value of having almost immediate responses to ongoing legislation, other relevant congressional action or developing political situations. As with previous strategies to deal with crises, the congressional staff can have scenarios and language pre-written that address any number of issues, but Facebook allows them a space to express their response quickly and efficiently. As noted earlier, the action notice posts help connect the politician to their mandate as set by voters, by explaining prescriptive and reactive stances on issues. And these types of posts can happen rather quickly after an event or issue develops, so responsiveness is important. In the case of the year’s analyzed posts, O’Rourke’s office is fast at posting and cultivates multiple messages in a narrative stream as necessary. Otherwise the postings on the page do not necessarily follow a set pattern, other than consistent messaging on a daily basis, which communicates attentiveness to the constituent followers. In previous generations so much of the news that emanated from an elected official either had to reach voters via media or direct contact from the official’s office. Social media provides a channel directly to interested parties whether those are voters, potential voters, media or other political officials.

Posts that are categorized as reflection posts and those that are personal are unique, because they discursively contribute to image management of the individual political figure. Other posts allow the Congressperson to delve into legislative analysis, but these posts give the audience access to a cultivated image of the individual whether celebrating life milestones or family success as well as reflective comments. These posts are cultivated for management of the individual image and sometimes feature humor or a lighter approach to issues of the day, plus they have the benefit of being alterable as necessary. Rhetorically this flexibility allows for nuanced changes in language or visual image and allows the communication staff the ability to advance additional ideas or messages through the personal or reflection posts that are equally nuanced.

Finally, of note in the category we describe as community outreach, are posts that emphasize O’Rourke’s engagement with the community promoting a strong sense of visibility. For political engagement with voters, the idea the politicians are ever-present is important. More often than not as incumbents are challenged, there are often complaints about their lack of presence or visibility in the community. With social media, not only can events be posted about with immediacy, but also there can be a whole series of posts or visuals presented that confirm said presence and show the elected official in the midst of constituents. In the specific case of Representative O’Rourke, Facebook allowed for a large number of posts accompanied by photos and even video of his town hall meetings. Again in reference to the campaign conducted by O’Rourke, an often-used attack was that the incumbent was not present in the district and was disconnected with constituents, rarely gathering with constituents in meetings to discuss the legislative agenda or pending legislation. Almost immediately after beginning his term, O’Rourke and his team held a number of town hall meetings including the event we referenced earlier held on a city bus with morning commuters. Social media helps advertise these events before hand, but the discursive value in “sharing” the event as it happened or immediately after the event allows the politician to confirm his mandate of participation and presence. Additionally as O’Rourke has demonstrated, the postings related to these events draw large numbers of “likes” and few comments other than support for holding the event. In a previous generation these meetings would be hard to capitalize on from an image management standpoint; they are not necessarily newsworthy and the information at the meetings is not likely to be exclusive. However the fact that a politician such as O’Rourke has been so successful in using Facebook to broadcast these meetings points to the value of social media and underlines the immediacy and economic value of social media. Furthermore tracking followers of the page it is revealing that traditional media have conceded the value of Facebook and other social media platforms by actively following the Congressman’s page. In the case of the buss town hall, media got word of the event via Facebook, showed up as the ride started and reported the event for their respective news outlets. Subsequently those stories were featured in posts on O’Rourke’s Facebook page with links to the print and television stories about the event.

Conclusion

The ubiquity of social media in politics suggests it is the most important conduit between political figures and the universe of voters and potential voters second only to physical contact. And while the scope of our understanding of how social media and politics intersect is still limited, projects that evaluate the interaction of political discourse and rhetorical strategy are useful to highlight symbolic linkages as well as serve as guideposts for digital practitioners. There is much ground still to cover in studying social media, particularly in understanding how audiences consume types of messages and how they react to those messages on different platforms. As platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat compete for digital attention span, issues related to scope and visual complexities emerge, as do issues related to privacy and anonymity.

Our project focus on Facebook minimizes some of the potential complications with other social media platforms, but there are several limitations to acknowledge. The first limitation is the pool of potential data versus what we selected and presented. We have isolated a relatively small cluster of data. Tracing the arc of O’Rourke’s Facebook presence from the campaign through the first full term would inevitably add to the richness of this project, as would a comparison of the Facebook footprint in the first congressional term versus the second term. For the purposes of this exploratory project our data pool served us well, but the seeds for a complimentary project have been sown. A rhetorical comparison project would be helpful to test the idea that strategically the Congressman’s communication team was reactive to patterns in discourse on the page. A second limitation is the focus on the messaging from O’Rourke versus textual analysis of the responses and postings on the page. Initially the project endeavored to examine these responses from page followers, particularly on controversial subjects. We narrowed this draft of the paper to just O’Rourke’s messages for brevity and time’s sake. A final limitation is the broad approach to the discourse, looking at all of the messaging on the Facebook page versus a narrow examination of one issue. In conceiving this project we expected to find a broader pool of data, which was helpful to developing our typology but patterns related to specific issue discourse emerged. Again, for a second corollary project we have tremendous potential data to analyze and compare.

Engagement of voters and potential voters is crucial for a healthy political process. Politicians, especially congressional representatives have a narrow window in which to maintain their support from the election period into the governing period. Timeliness and efficiency in message delivery and message impact are more important than ever with so many competing influences on attention span. Social media, which ironically can be part of the attention span drain, also has a positive impact on how messaging and image management can be carried out. The typology presented in this project is the beginning of classifying and detailing the messages that are presented on Facebook. The structure of the typology is useful to make sense of the multiplicity of messages and to start to piece together the rhetorical strategies in play, whether those focus on increasing connections, adding to credibility or legitimacy, or being present and responsive. Each quality is important for an elected official and as Facebook use increases during the governing phase of an elected official’s career, the impact of these posts is significant and worthy of additional study.

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Congressman Beto O’Rourke (2013, August 11). [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/BetoORourkeTX16>

Congressman Beto O’Rourke (2013, August 27). Today I joined a bipartisan group of

lawmakers in writing to President Obama to consult with and receive authorization form Congress before ordering the use of U.S. military force in Syria. Our letter makes it clear that we stand ready to come back to Washington, consider the facts, and share the burden of making the decision. [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/BetoORourkeTX16>

Congressman Beto O’Rourke (2013, June 26). This is the most direct and the most eloquent response to the Supreme Court's DOMA decision that I've seen. Very honored to be serving with someone like Sean Patrick Maloney in the House of Representatives. [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/BetoORourkeTX16>

Congressman Beto O’Rourke (2013, October 1). As long as the shut-down continues, I will not accept my pay. I will be donating my entire pay for the length of the government closure to veterans’ service organizations (VSOs) in El Paso. I have also cosponsored two pieces of legislation (H.R. 3215 and H.R. 3224) that would tie Congressional pay to the government being funded. [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/BetoORourkeTX16>

Congressman Beto O’Rourke (2013, October 16). [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/BetoORourkeTX16>

Congressman Beto O’Rourke (2013, October 27). [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/BetoORourkeTX16>

Congressman Beto O’Rourke (2013, September 24). If you are a public transportation user and live in East El Paso, look for me on the 50 and 59 Sun Metro routes tomorrow. I will be riding the bus and making myself available to constituents from 9- 11:30 AM. #‎BusingwithBeto‬ [Facebook status update]. <https://www.facebook.com/BetoORourkeTX16>‬‬‬

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