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Analysis of 2016 Presidential Candidate Social Media Activity

Overview

The 2016 presidential election is dominating media, and social media is no exception. While social media played a vital role in the 2012 election (and even in 2008), it has become an essential element of campaigning as candidates attempt to engage voters using outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. Hillary Clinton has received some criticism for her sometimes awkward attempts to reach younger voters, and Donald Trump regularly receives criticism for his controversial posts, but despite any missteps, it is obvious that their activity on social media is generating conversation about these candidates. A comparison of their social media activity provides insight into the type of voters they are attempting to reach, and examining the reactions of voters to their posts provides an indication of how much success they are having in their attempts to engage voters online.

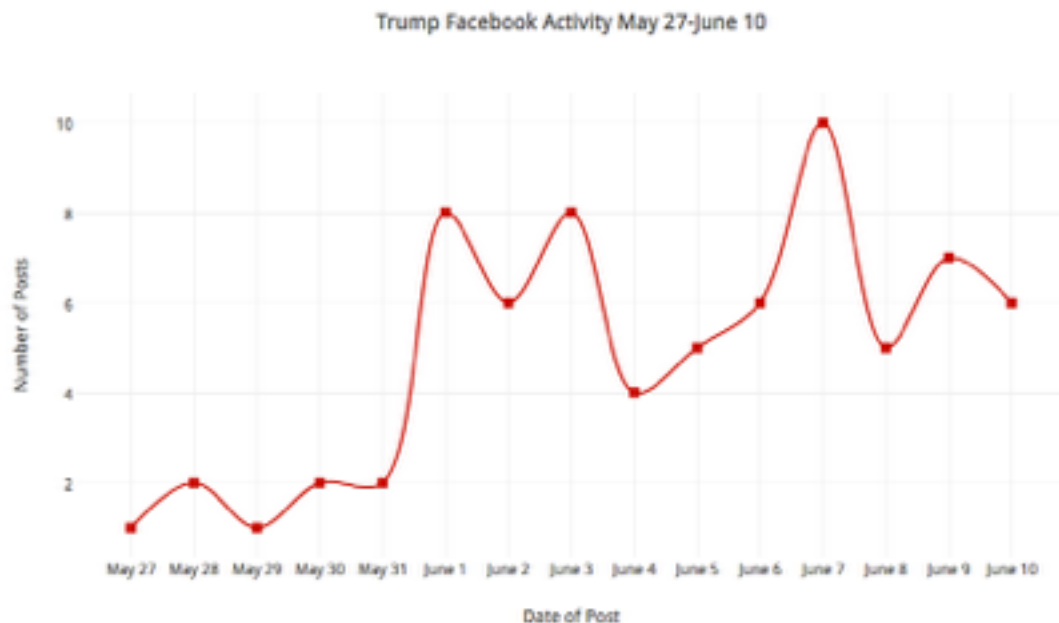
Brand 1: Donald Trump

Donald Trump is the presumptive Republican nominee in the 2016 presidential election. His campaign organization, Donald J. Trump for President, Inc., was founded on June 16, 2015. The campaign has at least 40 full-time national staff members as well as individual state directors in all 50 states. Their mission to win the 2016 presidential election includes a concerted effort to recruit and maintain a following on social media, in particular on Facebook and Twitter. While campaigners may run the accounts, they are not marked as campaign profiles, but as personal accounts for Donald Trump. This adds to the air of authenticity that Trump attempts to project as an everyman candidate who is not part of the Washington establishment.

Based on his posts, it is apparent that Trump's target audience is voters who are dissatisfied with politics as usual and desire a candidate who will not play by the rules. A large number of his posts negatively mention his opponent Hillary Clinton (usually referring to her as "Crooked Hillary"), so another target audience would be voters who do not support her or the Democratic party. Trump often employs strong, derogatory language to make his points, contributing to the brash, unapologetic persona many of his supporters appreciate. Many of his posts are negative, including information that is likely to make his followers angry (the most common "reaction" emoji from his followers on Facebook after the "like" and "love" icons was the "angry face"). While Trump's social media presence is not as polished as Hillary Clinton's, who has a purposeful graphic design theme and professional videos, this may be intentional, since Trump wants to distance himself from the professional political class as much as possible in his quest to "Make America Great Again."

Platform 1: Facebook

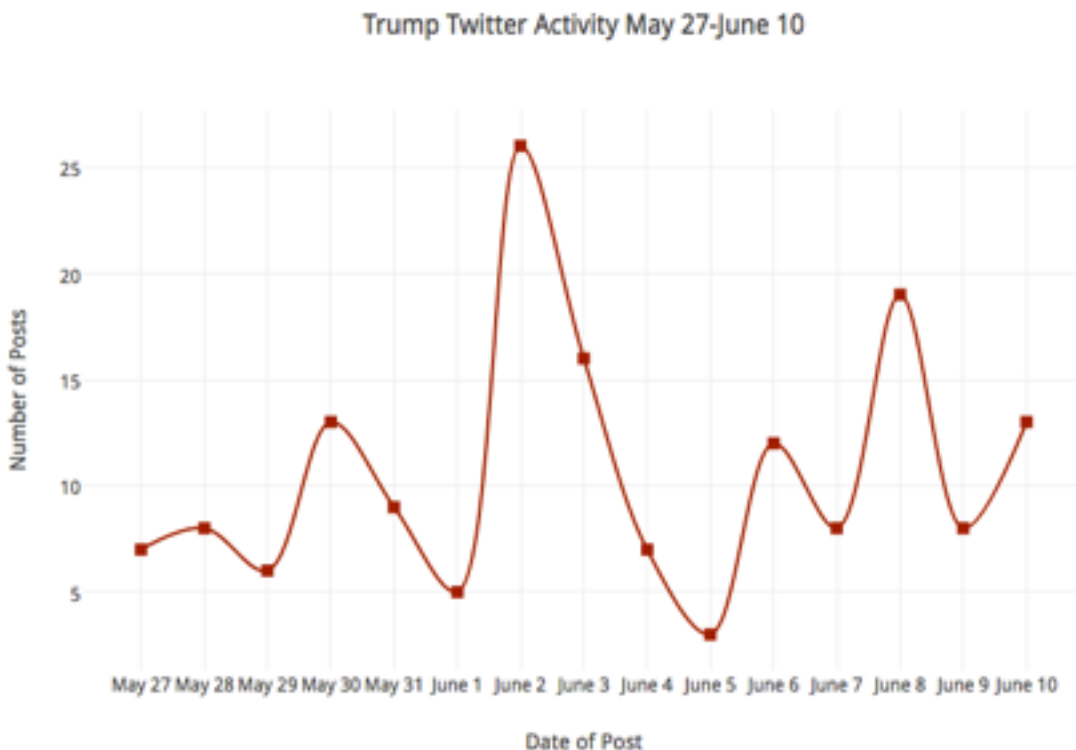
Donald J. Trump's Facebook page has 8,096,701 likes as of June 11, 2016. In the two-week span from Friday, May 27 to Friday, June 10, Trump's page was updated 73 times. There were 10 video posts, 11 text-only posts, 14 posts with photos, 17 "meme" posts, and 21 posts that included links to websites. His posting volume is not consistent from day to day, but it increased significantly from one or two posts a day on May 27-29 to several posts a day on June 1-10. On June 7, the date of the presidential primary in five states (California, Montana, New Mexico, New Jersey, and South Dakota) the number of posts spiked significantly to ten, mostly due to Trump posting five "thank you" photos for voters in those states.



Trump's followers are not hesitant to interact with his posts on Facebook. The fewest number of reactions to any post in the two-week period was about 13,000, and that was for a post with a broken link. The average number of reactions was about 71,000. An average of 11,000 followers shared each post, while there were an average of 4,682 comments per post. Of the five posts with the most reactions, three were memes, which indicates that Trump's followers like "shareable" content such as a photo with a short quote from Trump. The post with the most reactions (296,000) as well as the most comments (13,509) was simply a photo of Trump with the text "I don't have time for political correctness and neither does this country. Donald J. Trump." The most shared post (120,323) was also a meme, a photo of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama with the text "She'll say anything, and change nothing. -Barack Obama, 2008." Trump's commentary with the post was "THROWBACK THURSDAY," indicating that he is aware of the social media convention of posting a photo from the past on Thursdays and is using it to his advantage to demonstrate Barack Obama's changed opinion of Hillary Clinton since he was running against her in 2008. Trump also posts upcoming events on his Facebook page, providing advertisement for upcoming rallies and also giving organizers an idea of how many people will be in attendance.

Platform 2: Twitter

On Twitter, @realDonaldTrump has an estimated 8.8 million followers as of June 11, 2016. In the two-week period from Friday, May 27-Friday, June 10, Trump tweeted 159 times. These consisted of 15 Tweets with links to outside content; 13 with photos; five with videos; 87 that were text-only, four Retweets, and 35 Quoted Tweets from people he follows, many of whom were supporters. The fact that Trump's Twitter feed is filled with Quoted Tweets from followers reinforces his image as an everyday guy who can relate to the masses, unlike his career politician rival. His Twitter activity is sporadic—some days he only tweets three or five times, and on other days, such as June 2, he tweets up to 26 times. On that day, he mentioned “Crooked Hillary” negatively six times and also made negative comments about CNN, USA Today, the judge in the civil lawsuit against Trump University, and ObamaCare.



Trump's Twitter followers are also actively engaged with his content. His posts received an average of 6,269 Retweets and 16,877 likes. Of the top five posts with the most likes, four

were text-only and one included a photo. Two of the top five posts referenced military veterans—one was from Memorial Day and one from D Day—indicating that military issues are important to Trump supporters. The Tweet with the most likes and Retweets was a message in reply to Hillary Clinton. After Clinton tweeted “Delete your account.” to Trump in response to his criticisms, Trump tweeted, “How long did it take your staff of 823 people to think that up-- and where are your 33,000 emails that you deleted?” This snarky reply obviously resonated with Trump supporters, who greatly dislike Hillary Clinton. Trump’s Twitter account, like his Facebook account, has a personal feel—even if staffers are helping him with posts, it does not appear that way, and the unpolished look and tone of the feed contributes to his authenticity with supporters.

Donald Trump Evaluation:

Trump and his campaign are definitely winning the social media game—while he has over eight million followers on Facebook and Twitter, his rival Hillary Clinton does not have even half that many. Trump’s followers respond to and share his content regularly, increasing the audience for his message while the campaign spends nothing for the advertising. Trump also does well in posting a variety of content, including photos, videos, memes, and links, so that his followers do not tire of seeing the same kinds of posts in their feed.

One way that Trump’s campaign could improve his social media presence is to post more consistently. Trump gets a lot of engagement from supporters on social media, so he and his organizers should be harnessing that engagement and posting on a regular basis on every outlet on which they have a presence. They should also consider posting more memes on Twitter—while Trump’s most widely shared posts on Facebook are meme-like photos of him with quoted text, he has posted no similar content on Twitter, where one could argue that meme-like content can be shared even more easily and widely.

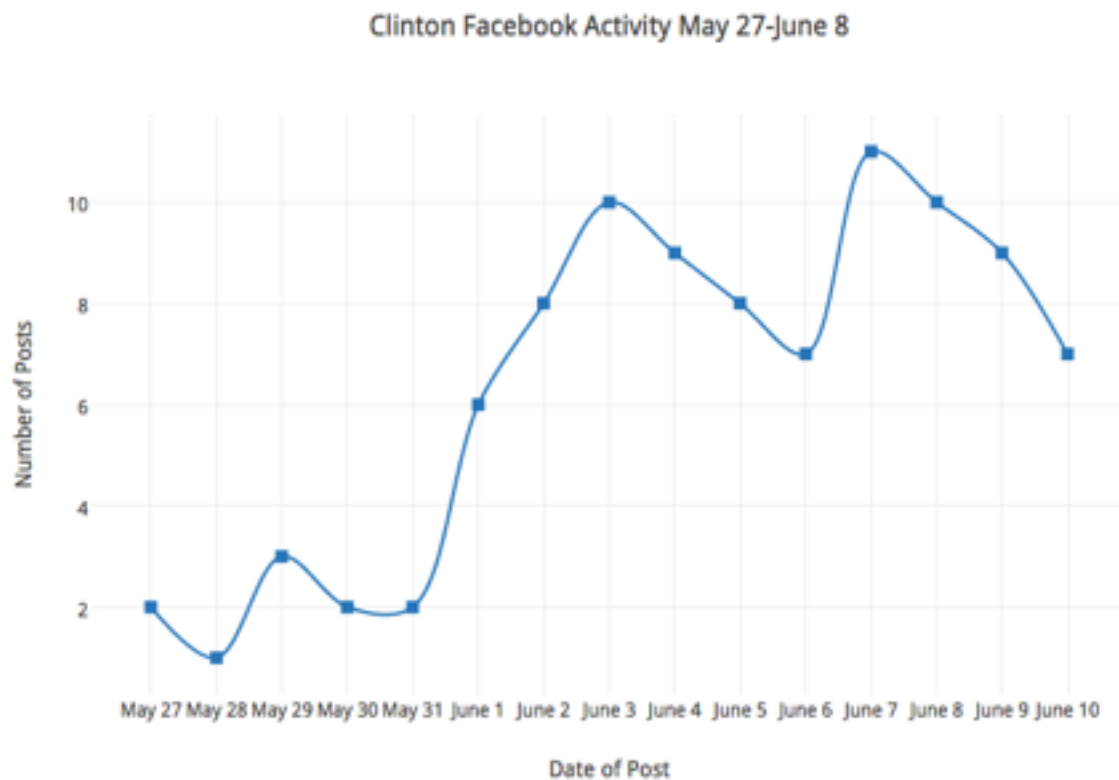
Brand 2: Hillary Clinton

Hillary Rodham Clinton is the presumptive Democratic nominee for the 2016 presidential election. Her campaign organization has existed since before the 2008 election, when she was a serious contender for the Democratic nomination, but remained dormant until she announced her candidacy for 2016 on April 12, 2015. Clinton has almost 1000 full-time staffers (823, according to Trump's recent Tweet) and is currently hiring more now that she has secured the nomination. Clinton has had a social media presence for quite some time (her Twitter feed goes back to June of 2013), but her feeds have been devoted to her presidential campaign since April of 2015.

Clinton's social media content caters to people who have progressive social ideas, are supporters of President Obama and are opposed to Donald Trump. She portrays herself as a confident, competent candidate who is a more rational, reasonable alternative to Trump. Her campaign, unlike Trump's, has a distinct graphic design theme, with consistent typeface (called Unity, custom designed for her campaign) and red, light blue and dark blue colors, evoking the colors on the American flag. Unlike Donald Trump's posts, many of which seem to incite his supporters to anger, most of Clinton's posts have a more positive tone and focus on exhibiting the qualities that will cause voters to trust her as their choice for president in November. However, she does not shy away from posting frequent criticisms of Trump.

Platform 1: Facebook

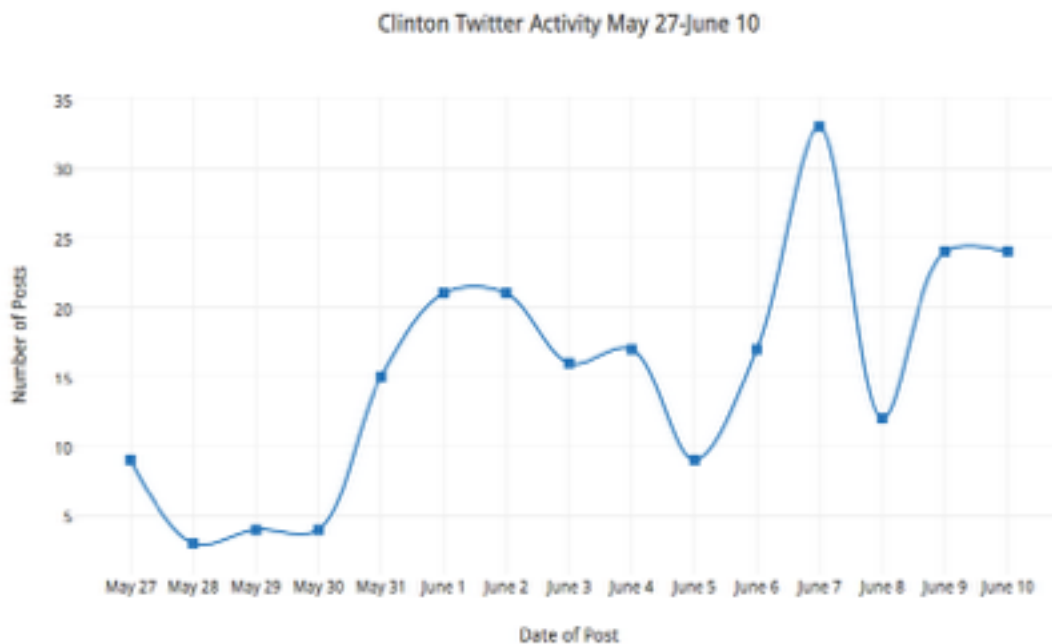
Hillary Clinton's Facebook page has 3,931,742 likes as of June 11, 2016. From Friday, May 27-Friday, June 10, the page was updated 95 times. These updates included 34 posts with video, seven posts with text only, five posts shared from other pages, 16 with photos, 11 meme-like posts, and 22 posts with links to outside content, 13 of which were links to her campaign website, hillaryclinton.com. Clinton's Facebook activity, like Trump's, peaked on June 7, the day of presidential primaries in five states. This indicates that Clinton is also aware that it is important to maintain an active social media presence when there are important events occurring in the campaign.



While Clinton does not have as many followers on Facebook as Trump, her followers are also quite engaged. Her posts receive an average of 37,902 reactions, 8,076 shares and 3,454 comments, which, in percentages, is similar to the number of responses Trump gets from his followers. Of the five posts with the most reactions, three are photos, one is a video, and one is a meme. Three of the posts are about Clinton clinching the nomination on June 7, indicating that this was an important moment for Clinton and her supporters. The other two posts with the most reactions are from June 9, when President Obama endorsed Clinton for President. Unlike Trump, Clinton does not use the “Events” feature on her page to advertise upcoming rallies—her page is more focused on posting videos and content that build her brand and draw supporters.

Platform 2: Twitter

On Twitter, @HillaryClinton has about 6.8 million followers as of June 11, 2016, significantly more than her four million on Facebook. From Friday, May 27-Friday, June 10, Clinton tweeted 220 times. Of those Tweets, 51 contained videos, 31 contained photos, 52 were text only, 16 were Retweets, 16 contained memes, and 53 contained links to outside content. In one Tweet, Clinton used the poll feature on Twitter to ask followers, “Which story [about Donald Trump] appalled you the most?” which was a savvy way to make use of Twitter’s poll functionality while getting in a stab at her opponent. She retweets not only supporters, but also members of the Republican party, such as Marco Rubio and Mitt Romney, who make negative statements about Trump that will resonate with her audience (and perhaps convince Republican voters to side with her rather than Trump). Her Twitter activity generally increased over the two-week observation period, with a dip on June 5 and a spike on June 7, the day she clinched the Democratic nomination.



Clinton’s Twitter followers are highly engaged, with an average of 4,735 Retweets per Tweet and 7,918 favorites per Tweet. Of the five most retweeted Tweets, two were text-only, two included photos and one was a Retweet from Mitt Romney, former Republican presidential

nominee. The most retweeted and most favorited Tweet by far is Clinton's direct reply to an insult from Donald Trump which simply reads, "Delete your account." It had 429,288 Retweets and 529,808 favorites as of June 11 (the next most popular Tweet had 37,063 Retweets and 67,141 favorites). The statement has gone viral and has been used by other political figures such as Elizabeth Warren to object to Trump's statements on social media. While Clinton tweets often in Spanish, these posts receive the least amount of response—however, since Hispanic voters are an important demographic for Clinton, she will likely continue to post Tweets in Spanish to engage them.

Hillary Clinton Evaluation:

While Clinton does not have nearly as many followers on social media as Trump, she still has several million likes on Facebook and several million followers on Twitter. Some mock Clinton's attempts to connect to young voters, but her social media accounts generally use emojis effectively and use clever parody videos and Tweets to generate buzz about the campaign (particularly her snarky "Delete your account" Tweet to Donald Trump, which has exploded in popularity). She also does a good job of posting a variety of content—videos, photos, memes and links—to keep her feeds from being too homogenous.

While Clinton often retweets other politicians, news outlets, her daughter and her husband, she rarely retweets her own followers. Since Trump is viewed by many voters as the "people's candidate" and Clinton is sometimes viewed as out-of-touch with the average American, she could take a page from his book and make a habit of Quote Tweeting her followers and supporters to add some genuine connection and authenticity.

Conclusion:

The social media presences of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton are accurate reflections of the candidates themselves. Donald Trump's feeds seem a bit rough around the edges—while Clinton's posts include sleek, professional graphic design themes and

professionally-made videos, most of the video clips in Trump's posts are either directly from rallies or are clips from news shows. Trump's posts also appear more personal. He calls out people he does not like regularly, hurling insults left and right, while Clinton is more nuanced in her criticisms and has one target (Trump) instead of many. Both candidates utilize videos, photos, memes and links effectively, but Clinton tends to use links to drive traffic to her own website (where a pop-up invites readers to join the campaign with a donation), while most of Trump's links are to conservative news sites or articles about himself from major publications.

A lesson from these candidates for marketers using social media is to make the social media presence a reflection of the brand. From the content of these candidates' posts, it is easy to gather what they are like and what ideas they have about the world. Neither of them are attempting to be something they are not—whether through photos, videos, or 140 characters, they are projecting their brands to voters on social media, some of whom may only get to know these candidates through these outlets. Another lesson is that marketers should not be afraid to get personal. The most popular Tweets from both of these candidates were direct, heated replies to each other. Americans love rivalry, and marketers should consider calling out their rivals on social media for a bit of back-and-forth to generate buzz about their brands.