

Of Big Birds and Bayonets: Hybrid Twitter Interactivity in the 2012 Presidential Debates

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Abstract

The 2012 US Presidential debates were hybrid media events. Millions of viewers “dual-screened” them, simultaneously watching their televisions and commenting on their social media feeds. In doing so, they helped transform verbal gaffes and zingers into debate-defining moments that may have influenced public opinion and media coverage. To examine this phenomenon, we apply network and qualitative textual analyses to a unique dataset of over 1.9 million tweets from the first and third presidential debates. We address two questions of networked information flow within the debate-relevant Twittersphere: who was most responsible for spreading the “Big Bird” and “horses and bayonets” memes, and how did they use humor to discuss it? Our results reveal that nontraditional political actors were prominent network hubs in both debates and that humor was widespread in the first debate and among anti-Romney users.

Keywords: political humor, qualitative, Twitter, elections, debates

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Hours before the first presidential debate on October 3rd, 2012, journalist Walter Shapiro posted an article to the *Columbia Journalism Review* website, titled: “Debate Advice: Turn Off Twitter.” His point, mirrored by political scientist and fellow CJR columnist Brendan Nyhan, was that media spectacles like presidential debates tend to encourage “pack journalism” (Nyhan, 2012). Debate reporters have long participated in an echo chamber comprised of themselves, post-debate campaign spin professionals, and professional pundits. This is not a new phenomenon – Shapiro’s article draws upon his own first pack journalism experience, in the 1984 Presidential debate – but it has elicited additional concern in the age of Twitter:

There is a moral here for all of us who will be journalistically multi-tasking during Wednesday night’s debate: As much as humanly possible, look up from your computers and actually watch what is happening ... Remember that your reactions will not be typical of anyone other than similarly hyperactive reporters and short-attention-span political junkies. (Shapiro, 2012).

Likewise, Brendan Nyhan suggested in the *Columbia Journalism Review* that news outlets should experiment with “blind debate coverage” – putting a reporter in a room with no internet access so they can avoid the “media hive mind” on Twitter.

Blind debate coverage and “look(ing) up from your computers” may provide reporters with a more unvarnished perspective on presidential debates, but it underestimates some important trends in how the modern-day “pack” has changed. Reporters are not alone on social media. Kohut, Doherty, Dimock and Keeter (2012) found that 11% of the debate audience ‘dual-screened’ the 2012 Presidential debates. Like non-political media spectacles – the Super Bowl or American Idol finale – presidential debates have become venues for intense hybrid media

interactivity (Chadwick, 2013). The pack of commentators who weigh in through their social media second screens—or *viewertariat* as Anstead and O’Loughlin (2011) call them—is not limited to fellow reporters and “short-attention-span political junkies.” The *viewertariat* includes sports stars, average citizens, comedians, musicians, and parody artists. Turning off Twitter may indeed give reporters a more focused view of the debate itself, but it also narrows their view of the broader political spectacle and how non-journalists make sense of it.

Indeed, the most noteworthy feature of the conversation about the 2012 Presidential debates was the metamorphosis of the traditionally homogeneous “pack” into a diverse *viewertariat*. Throughout most of the 20th century, the pack was comprised of credentialed journalists at major television and print outlets, along with professional media operatives from the two campaigns. In today’s hybrid media landscape, the *viewertariat* has fuzzy boundaries, incorporating everyday citizens and non-political celebrities. New media technologies promote different elements of the debate performance, empowering different publics and constructing different media narratives. Hybrid media participation itself has become an important field of inquiry. It changes how stories are selected and produced (Chadwick, 2011), furthers the blending of media genres (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), and broadens the tonal range of political commentary to include humor, as we will demonstrate. But to date, we know remarkably little about the form or content of the *viewertariat*’s diverse constituents. Rather than turning Twitter off during the debates, it is high time for researchers to pay attention to the second screen’s role in political spectacles.

Candidate gaffes and zingers routinely spark such spectacles, which in 2012 were greatly expanded through the *viewertariat*’s participation. In the first debate, Mitt Romney commented that he would stop subsidizing PBS, even though he “love[s] Big Bird.” In the third debate,

Barack Obama quipped that “You mentioned the Navy, for example, and that we have fewer ships than we did in 1916. Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military’s changed.” Both comments became discursive grist for a diverse array of social media actors, including celebrities, parody accounts, and nonelite users. Rather than reacting in the straight-laced style of traditional journalists and pundits, many Twitter commentators responded with jokes. While political humor has been on the communication research agenda for decades, the study of humor as real-time political commentary is still in its infancy.

This paper contributes to the emerging literatures on hybrid media events and political humor by offering an empirical assessment of online discussions of high-profile candidate comments in the 2012 Presidential debates. The dynamics of political commentary examined here reveal important and largely unexplored characteristics of hybrid media. Our study brings methods from computational social science and qualitative analysis to bear on a dataset of over 1.9 million debate-related tweets from the first and third debates, analyzing their network structure, authors, and content. Our two main research questions explore related but distinct aspects of these hybrid media spaces:

RQ1: Which kinds of commentators attracted the most attention?

RQ2: How prevalent was humor and to what extent did it convey political messages?

In other words, we are primarily concerned with the *identities* of the most popular debate commentators and the *substance* of their commentary. Two major answers emerge that we expect will generalize to a broader set of cases: first, non-traditional political participants were particularly prominent; and second, humor was most prevalent in the first debate and among

anti-Romney users, who expressed themselves both textually and visually. We begin by briefly reviewing relevant research, followed by an overview of the first and third 2012 presidential debates. We then proceed to empirically explore each of our research questions in turn. We conclude by summarizing our major findings and discussing how they may apply to other cases.

Media spectacles and the viewertariat

Research on hybrid media is rooted in the study of changing news genres. Dayan and Katz (1992) classify media events like presidential debates, sports championships, and other major public spectacles as the “high holidays of mass communication.” Media events of this sort – “Conquests, Contests, and Coronations” – “transfix the nation” and “hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience” (p. 1). This places them in a separate category from day-to-day “hard” vs “soft” news. Though presidential debates do not determine the outcome of elections (Erikson & Wlezien, 2012), they do represent key moments when the mass public collectively tunes in and pays attention. This is a critical function in a culture that mostly pays sporadic attention to politics (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

The ability to engage with a second screen such as a laptop, tablet, or smartphone while watching television has substantially changed the real-time viewing experience for a minority of digitally-savvy users. Much existing research on second-screen engagement has focused on the Twitter-based fan communities of television shows and events such as Eurovision (Highfield, Harrington, & Bruns, 2013), *Glee* (Wood & Baughman, 2012), *The West Wing* (Bore & Hickman, 2013), and various sports (Bruns, Weller, & Harrington, 2013; Clavio, Burch, & Frederick, 2012). These studies typically examine devoted fans who tune in regularly to watch an ongoing program or to cheer on a favored team or contestant. Political spectacles such as presidential debates attract not only the candidates’ and parties’ “fans” but also casual viewers

who do not follow politics regularly. Recent American, British, and Canadian political debates have already yielded a few studies of second-screen activity, most of which have been heavily computational and quantitative in their methods. Some have applied sentiment analysis tools to debate-related tweets in an attempt to construct high-level impressions of which candidate users perceived as “winning” (Diakopoulos & Shamma, 2010; Wang, Can, Kazemzadeh, Bar, & Narayanan, 2012). Others sought to link social media-related variables such as tweet frequency to political engagement, campaign media use, and candidate evaluations (Hawthorne, Houston, & McKinney, 2013; McKinney, Houston, & Hawthorne, 2013). In contrast, our work is more similar in spirit to the mixed-method approaches adopted by Anstead and O’Loughlin (2011) and Elmer (2013), who present fine-grained findings based on Twitter users’ reactions to televised political spectacles. These include the nature of interactions between political elites and non-elites, the sharing of web content of relevance to the debate, and the capacity of digitally-connected audiences to react publicly to political spectacles in real time. This last notion, which Anstead and O’Loughlin label the *viewertariat* (2011), effectively describes our objects of study: we seek to probe the contours of the first and third 2012 presidential debates’ viewertariats, and in particular to isolate several of its key characteristics that may recur in future hybrid media backchannels.

What kinds of actors might comprise the viewertariat of Twitter presidential debate commentary? The study of political communication has for most of its history situated *political elites* (mainly politicians, government officials, and leading journalists) as information producers and ordinary *nonelite* citizens exclusively as consumers. In the past decade or so, the rise in popularity of participatory media has raised the possibility of a major shift in that status quo ante. Notwithstanding the arguments of Hindman (2010) and others who point out the heavily skewed

nature of attention online, social media at least in principle affords the exposure of nontraditional political voices to large audiences. This potential has been extolled by many prominent authors (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2013; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013; Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Zuckerman, 2013), and here it leads us to investigate the role of nonelite citizens in the production of widely rebroadcasted political content (Chadwick, 2013).

Research on social media also suggests another category of nontraditional political actor: celebrities. As a small contingent of political science research has demonstrated, celebrities have a history of involvement in political matters (Becker, 2013; Marsh, 't Hart, & Tindall, 2010; West & Orman, 2003). Celebrity endorsements of politicians, political ideas, and causes have been shown to influence nonelites' opinions (Austin, Vord, Pinkleton, & Epstein, 2008; Jackson & Darrow, 2005; Pease & Brewer, 2008). Many musicians, actors, sports stars, authors, and other entertainers who gained fame through offline channels maintain active Twitter feeds through which they interact directly with fans. Celebrity accounts are among the most followed on Twitter, and they regularly share news content with followers (Wu, Hofman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). Fans establish close connections and a sense of intimacy with celebrities through Twitter (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) and thus may take their political opinions more seriously than they would a traditional political elite's. Simply put, celebrities are unquestionably elites, albeit not *political* elites. Many of their followers prioritize sports, music, comedy, and other forms of entertainment over politics if they pay any attention to politics at all. Thus, when celebrities cross into the political news cycle, we reconceptualize them as *bridging elites*. We adapt the term "bridging" from Burt (1992) to denote the phenomenon in which non-political celebrities channel political information (such as debate content) to their followers. In this way, celebrities sometimes "bridge" the structural holes in media networks that separate apolitical citizens from

political spectacles. One of the guiding questions of this section concerns the extent to which such bridging elites appear among our most-rebroadcasted users.

In addition to examining *who* the viewertariat are, we also explore *what* they say. By definition, hybrid media might contain almost any type of content. Existing research leads us to expect humor to emerge as a particularly salient element in political spectacles, especially as compared to mainstream journalism. Political humor has been an object of study in the social sciences for decades (Gardner, 1994; Paletz, 1990; Schutz, 1977). Its recent increased prominence on the political communication agenda is due in large measure to the popularity of politically-flavored television comedy programs such as the Daily Show, the Colbert Report, Saturday Night Live's political sketches, and the American broadcast networks' late-night talk shows. Most research on these programs can be divided into two main branches: one focusing on the effects of political comedy on its consumers (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Cao, 2008, 2010; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2006; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young & Tisinger, 2006; Young, 2004), and the second focusing on program content (Baym, 2005; Bennett, 2007; Feldman, 2007; Warner, 2007). Scholars have concluded that political comedy programming can contribute to increases in viewer political knowledge, traditional news exposure, civic engagement, opinion change, and political participation (Cao, 2008; Feldman & Young, 2008; Xenos & Becker, 2009; Young & Tisinger, 2006; but see Baumgartner & Morris, 2008). All of these effects are highly contingent upon demographic characteristics and overall media consumption patterns.

Online political humor has received far less attention than televised political comedy, and existing research on the former is far less unified. Existing research suggests that humor may be a regular feature of online political contexts, as it is in online non-political contexts (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Shifman & Blondheim, 2010; Shifman, 2007). Long before the social media

era, Foot and Schneider (2002) noted the prominence of jokes and parody in both official and unofficial political campaign websites. More recently, humor has been observed as common among journalists and politically-interested users on Twitter (Holton & Lewis, 2011; Mejova, Srinivasan, & Boynton, 2013), and Jenkins et al. (2013) argue that humor is one of several key qualities that make media “spreadable” online.

The 2012 US presidential debates on Twitter

The 2012 US presidential debates collectively constituted one of the highest-profile political spectacles of the year. The share of attention the public pays to politics regularly increases during election years, and it crests as Election Day draws near, due in part to the greater intensity of media coverage. In the past, candidate gaffes and zingers have been objects of substantial media attention (Clayman, 1995), but the rapid adoption of real-time public commentary platforms such as Twitter has allowed a much broader viewership to judge the debate’s defining moments. This study focuses on two such defining moments from 2012: Mitt Romney’s “Big Bird” comment from the first debate and Barack Obama’s “horses and bayonets” comment from the third debate.¹ At approximately 9:34pm during the first debate, Romney said:

I'm sorry, Jim, I'm going to stop the subsidy to PBS... I like PBS. I love Big Bird.²

Actually, I like you, too. But I'm not going to keep on spending money on things to borrow money from China to pay for. That's number one.

In the third debate, Romney claimed at one point that the navy did not have enough ships to do its job. To this Obama replied:

Well, governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets. ... We have these things called aircraft carriers, where planes land on them. We have these ships that go underwater,

nuclear submarines. And so the question is not a game of Battleship, where we're counting ships.

Each of these comments was a defining moment in its respective debate, at least judging by Twitter users' reactions (Li, 2012; Sharp, 2012). Because a wide range of people and institutions referenced these comments upon a number of online platforms, they illustrate well the dynamics of hybridized media.

Our general methodological approach can best be described as “hybrid methods for hybrid media”; that is, we use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the nature of media hybridity within Twitter. Data collection began by harvesting a subset of the millions of tweets posted during the first and third presidential debates on October 3 and 22, 2012. We used an open-source Linux data collection server called 140dev to capture tweets from Twitter's streaming API that matched at least one of the following keywords: “obama,” “romney,” “mitt,” “barack,” “debate,” “president.” These keywords were case-insensitive and matched longer text strings that included them, such as “presidential” and “debates.” Tweet collection for each debate began at 9pm EST (debate start time) and ended at 3am the following morning, to capture some of the post-debate reactions. In all, we captured 1,896,885 tweets, which constituted only a small fraction of the 16.8 million debate-related tweets posted during both debates (Li, 2012; Sharp, 2012). While the streaming API does not generate completely random samples, collecting *ns* of tweets in the hundreds of thousands has been shown to yield keyword and hashtag results similar to the full Twitter firehose (Morstatter, Pfeffer, Liu, & Carley, 2013). Each row in our dataset contains a full complement of metadata for the tweet it describes, including post date and time, the author's screen name and Twitter bio, geolocation information if provided, and the application used to post the tweet.

Our analyses focus on the most-propagated tweets about these two candidate comments. To identify the top tweets, we created two subsets of the data: the first consisting of all tweets containing the phrase “big bird” during and after the first debate, and the second consisting of all tweets containing either the keyword “horse” or “bayonet” (which also included longer terms like “horses” and “bayonette”) during and after the third debate. All keywords were case-insensitive. The resulting subset for the first debate contained 16,600 tweets, while the third debate’s contained 32,574 tweets. Next, we identified all duplicate tweets within each subset and ranked them in descending order of prevalence. The most popular way to duplicate a tweet by far is to click the “retweet” button, which reposts the original tweet on the retweeting user’s timeline verbatim. As a result, the most-duplicated tweets were also the most-retweeted tweets. We selected the top 100 such tweets within each subset for in-depth analysis guided by our research questions. The most-duplicated Big Bird-related tweet appeared 923 times, while its counterpart in the third debate appeared 751 times.

Network overview

To provide a brief descriptive overview of our data, we rely on network analysis, for which Twitter data are particularly well-suited (see e.g. Conover et al., 2011; Highfield et al., 2013). Figures 1 and 2 present visualizations of the Big Bird (BB) and Horses & Bayonets (HB) retweet networks. In these figures, which were created with the open-source network visualization platform Gephi, each node represents a Twitter user and each link represents one user retweeting another. Node size indicates network in-degree: in other words, the larger the node, the more times that user was retweeted. The largest nodes are labeled by screen name to give a sense of whose messages spread the farthest. Network clusters are arbitrarily assigned a distinctive color based on the Louvain community detection algorithm (Blondel, Guillaume,

Lambiotte, & Lefebvre, 2008), which grouped together users who retweeted the same sources. As these figures were generated by a force-directed layout algorithm, the clusters' absolute positions are also arbitrary.

[Figure 1 about here]

[Figure 2 about here]

Both figures depict networks that are sparse, extremely fragmented, and held together by a small number of heavily-retweeted users. Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman, and Himelboim (2014) refer to this distinctive hub-and-spoke configuration as a *broadcast network*—similar in effect and attention distribution to the analog broadcast networks of the 20th century. Overwhelming majorities of users in both networks--75.3% in BB and 73.7% in HB--only retweeted one other user. Similarly, most users were not retweeted by anyone (78.3% in BB, 82.1% in HB). As a result, tiny minorities of users in each network (21.7% in BB and 17.9% in HB) produced all the tweets in this dataset that were retweeted at least once.

The most-retweeted users in these networks define the subcommunities of which they are members. The fact that most users only retweeted one other person means that most of the larger communities, which are clustered near the center of each figure, consist of one highly retweeted user and his/her distinct coterie of retweeters. For example, the largest community in the BB network is anchored by British actor Simon Pegg, who posted the network's most-retweeted tweet. But most of his retweeters are connected only to him and are unreachable from other communities, and this is also the case for many other similar communities. (Thus, although we classify Pegg as a bridging elite, his bridging work is invisible in this network.) The periphery of each network is defined by a loose ring of microcommunities, most of which consist of two or

three users connected by one or two retweets. These are among the most isolated islands in the networks: they are included in the broader network by only the thinnest of threads.

Overall, this network analysis depicts a highly individualized communication environment—the tightly-packed ideological clusters seen in previous Twitter politics research (e.g. Conover et al., 2011) are nowhere to be seen. Collectively, the highest-ranking nodes by in-degree attest to the great diversity of the first and third debates’ respective viewertariats. The two figures make it clear that the highest echelons of the viewertariat are no longer the sole provinces of yesteryear’s narrow pundit class. In the sections that follow, we explore who these top nodes were and how they used humor to talk politics.

Who attracted the most attention?

Consistent with the foregoing theoretical discussion, we categorized each member of the viewertariat in our dataset into one of six exclusive categories; three representing traditional political elites, one representing bridging (nontraditional) elites, and two representing nonelites.³ Beginning with the traditional political elites, *media and political organizations* include the formal organizational accounts of CNN, ABC, MSNBC, and other media sites. It also includes a small handful of formal organizational accounts from advocacy groups. *Journalists* include mainstream journalists and advocacy/opinion journalists – the traditional members of the debate-night “pack.” Whether they write for CNN.com or Slate.com, these are the individuals whose job it is to watch and comment upon the debates. *Political elites* include elected officials, pundits, high-profile consultants, and campaign surrogates. We judged nonpolitical accounts whose owners had Wikipedia pages as famous enough to count as *bridging elites*. Most of these were musicians, actors, sports figures, and other celebrities. *Parody accounts* that reference or pretend to be famous individuals (e.g. @FiredBigBird) have become commonplace on Twitter, serving

as an inside joke of sorts among second-screen viewers. (We assume that most parody accounts are operated by nonelites.)⁴ We classified all users who did not fit any of the preceding criteria as generic *nonelites*.

Due to the novelty of the bridging elite category, we submit Olivia Wilde as an illustrative example. Her million-plus followers on Twitter know her as a television and film actress, not a political guru. Her following is not primarily composed of “short-attention-span political junkies,” nor does her Twitter feed usually contain political observations. But during the first debate, she tuned in and shared an observation, thus extending the reach of the debate beyond its direct viewership. On that night, she tweeted: “Mitt is smirky, sweaty, indignant and smug with an unsettling hint of hysteria. And he wants to kill BIG BIRD.” This was retweeted at least 173 times, echoing within the Twittersphere and helping to shape second-screen viewers’ impressions. Wilde may have supplied some of her followers with the only political content they received that evening.

Overall, bridging elite and parody accounts accounted for more of the top 100 retweeted users in BB (19% and 29%) than in HB (11% and 9%). Media organizations and journalists were much less active around BB (14% and 12%) than HB (31% and 24%). As we will see in the next section, this appears to largely be due to the *type* of content that was judged most retweet-worthy in each case. Obama’s punchline was very popular when transcribed verbatim, whereas Romney’s quote was often transformed and referenced in jokes and other commentary. In BB, nonelite tweets were much more popular than those of political elites (17% vs. 3%), but in HB they were equally low in popularity (12% vs. 10%). James Carville and Karl Rove may dominate on television, but not on Twitter, further supporting Chadwick’s (2013) contention that hybrid media spaces admit a wider range of entrants than traditional media.

[Figure 3 here]

Like many other attention structures on the web, these retweet networks display a heavily skewed distribution, with short heads and long tails. In both debates, the most-retweeted messages received several hundred retweets, while everything outside of the top 20 received 100 or fewer. It thus is worth looking specifically at each network's short head to analyze the identities of the most-retweeted authors in each debate:

[Table 1 about here]

The individuals at the heads of these two networks are quite diverse. @SimonPegg and @OliviaWilde are Hollywood actors—bridging elites—each boasting over 100,000 followers at the time. @SilentKPants is a nonelite user named Katje from Portland Oregon who describes herself as a “militant hysterical overreacting feminist” and had approximately 500 followers. @FollowMeObama appears to have been a parody account but was deleted prior to this analysis. A few of the usual elite suspects appear here as well: @BobMcDonnell was governor of Virginia, @DavidShuster is a television anchor, and @Stefcutter was deputy campaign manager for the Obama campaign.

Why were bridging elites and parody accounts so much more active around BB, while media organizations and journalists surged around HB? A few contextual factors present themselves as potential explanations. BB happened in the first presidential debate, while HB occurred in the third, so there may be an element of debate fatigue. The lower ratings for the third debate as opposed to the first offer some evidence for this conclusion—political junkies were still tuned in as expected, but mass interest had evidently waned somewhat (Moraes, 2012). Also, the first statement was made by Governor Romney and was broadly portrayed as a gaffe, while Obama's statement was simultaneously interpreted on the right as a gaffe and on the left as a strong point. These possibilities add nuance to the general point that hybrid media bring

together diverse actors (Chadwick, 2013): the specific actors who capture attention in different hybrid spaces may depend upon the subject matter as well as the characteristic goals and incentives of different actor types. For example, journalists like juicy stories, political elites want their side to win, and many bridging- and nonelites simply want attention (Jenkins et al., 2013). The ability to compellingly harness high-profile moments in political spectacles toward those ends may help determine who attracts more and less attention. Turning to the content of these tweets helps us elaborate on this idea.

How prevalent was humor and to what extent was it “political?”

We classified the 200 tweets in our subset along two dimensions: humorous or serious; and anti-Romney/pro-Obama, anti-Obama/pro-Romney, or neutral valence. In Figure 4, we break down these tweets across the two debates and according to these two main attributes (anti-Obama/anti-Romney/neutral and humorous/serious). Four main findings are apparent in the figure. First, humor was far more prevalent in BB than HB, with nearly 75% of the former’s tweets judged as humorous. In contrast, fewer than half of top HB tweets were coded as such. Second, the most popular tweets in BB were more likely to attack Romney than Obama, whereas the reverse was true for HB. Interestingly, the most-attacked candidate in each debate was the one most widely perceived to have won (Edwards-Levy, Swanson, & Blumenthal, 2012; Swanson & Edwards-Levy, 2012). Third, and relatedly, a substantial majority of the humor within BB was directed against Romney, while none was directed against Obama (the balance was neutral). Within HB, humor was more evenly distributed, with a few anti-Obama and neutral jokes balancing a majority of anti-Romney jokes. Finally, anti-Romney users employed humor much more often than anti-Obama users in both debates.

[Figure 4 here]

Direct inspection of the tweets themselves clarifies the role of humor in both cases. Anti-Romney humor in BB often focused on the ire the governor was supposedly inciting by threatening Big Bird:

RT @BugattiBeez: Mitt, I wouldn't cancel PBS if I were you. Sesame Street gon' ride for Big Bird!

RT @TeaPartyCat: That awkward moment when Mitt Romney runs into Big Bird at the Denver airport.

In HB, anti-Romney users stressed his outdated views on foreign policy and other topics:

RT @BIGBIRD: Retweet if you think Obama won the debate. Invest in horses and bayonets if you think Romney won. #lynndebate #horsesandbayonets

RT @SethMacFarlane: If Romney's military budget includes bayonets, it better also include tri-cornered hats.

Most of the anti-Obama sentiment we identified was both serious and concentrated in HB. Some on the right were indignant about Obama's ostensible ignorance of military paraphernalia, while others mocked him for it:

RT @foxnation: Mr. President, US Special Forces Rode Horses Into Afghanistan
<http://t.co/rOyEEIDm>

RT @BobMcDonnell: President Obama's comment about 'horses and bayonets' was an insult to every sailor who has put his or her life on the line.

RT @CajunConservatv: Hey Obama, I'm a Marine. We still use bayonets. You know what else we still use? Sextants. I'll wait while you look that up.

The most common neutral statements in both discussions were direct candidate quotes, often produced by mainstream news accounts.

RT @CBSNews: Romney: 'I love Big Bird,' but I'd cut PBS funding VIDEO:

<http://t.co/SrVfKIId> #debates”

RT @HuffingtonPost: Obama's 'horses and bayonets' comment goes viral (VIDEO)

#debates <http://t.co/8LscS9Dc>

Indeed, 41% of the top tweets about both debate statements were coded as non-jokes. This was particularly pronounced in the third debate, in which a substantial proportion of the most popular tweets consisted of news organizations and campaign operatives quoting Obama verbatim or posting video of same (Coddington, Molyneux, & Lawrence, 2014).

These content differences are likely related to their situational context. The BB comment emerged from a debate Romney was widely viewed as winning. It is likely that conservative tweeters focused their attention on other moments in the debate. Romney’s Big Bird statement was not much of a rallying point for conservatives – they either thought it was a gaffe or unimportant. In contrast, HB was more contentious, emerging from a debate which many viewers felt Obama was winning. Conservative nonelites using the #TCOT hashtag (Top Conservatives on Twitter) tried to seize the statement as proof that President Obama was out of touch with the realities of the military. Conservative news organizations pushed the same critique. Meanwhile, progressives and neutral arbiters from the traditional journalistic pack viewed the statement as a well-delivered punch line. As a contested moment appealing to both ideological poles of the viewertariat, the comment generated a wider variety of reactions.

On a broader, more theoretical level, these findings support specific expectations for how different hybrid actors may react to different types of content. Items or events that possess qualities associated with spreadability—most prominently humor, but also references to widely-known pop-culture characters like Big Bird (Jenkins et al., 2013; Shifman, 2013)—seem to lend

themselves more to memetic innovation. They provide intuitive hooks that allow clever users to attach compelling commentaries that make sense within the context of the original event. (HB, which lacked a pop-culture connection or other obvious humor hooks, seemed to provide much less fertile ground for memetic innovation.) Note also that while traditional political elites are limited by professional norms in the extent to which they can engage in such playful expression, nonelites and bridging elites are not. Comparatively, traditional political elites tended to react to both debate moments by simply restating what the candidates said (journalists) or using them to attack the opponent (political elites). In contrast, much of the bridging elite and nonelite commentary was not partisan at all, and most of the attacks included humor. Thus, we should expect to see a much broader range of expression in hybrid media spaces from bridging elites and nonelites than from traditional political elites.

We see further evidence for such memetic creativity in the visual content found among the most popular tweets. Though difficult to quantify, it is clear that our data's visuals—which include photographs, edited images, and animated GIFs—can and do serve as vehicles for political critique. For example, the following image-bearing tweet, which was posted by a reporter for BuzzFeed Politics, was retweeted 65 times:

RT @BuzzFeedAndrew: How Big Bird felt about this debate, in one GIF.

<http://twitpic.com/b0u44j>

The linked GIF displays Big Bird, seemingly dazed or inebriated, staggering across a TV stage containing a series of large colored blocks stacked on top of each other. As it staggers, it clumsily knocks down the stacks of blocks, and eventually exits the stage. Others in this general category of PBS-related commentary images include an edited image of Big Bird sitting on a stump and holding a cardboard sign reading “Will Work For Food” (<http://twitpic.com/b0syqt>);

another image of several famous Sesame Street characters holding guns and knives and captioned, “MITT SAID TURN OFF PBS? SHIT JUST GOT REAL” (<http://twitpic.com/b0tmbc>); and an unedited photo of Big Bird’s face supposedly reacting to the news of Romney’s proposed cuts to PBS (<http://twitpic.com/b0sxcr>). These images collectively convey a range of reactions to Romney’s proposal, from shock to sorrow to anger. Moreover, they effectively demonstrate just how porous the boundary between journalism and entertainment has become (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011; Zuckerman, in press): the joke embedded in each image carries with it a clearly partisan message. The humor in each case was surely intended to increase the message’s spreadability or “virality” (Jenkins et al., 2013), in much the same way as political comedy TV programs do. The images discussed above were contributed by a political reporter, a parody account, a social media consultant, and an employee of the Washington State University football team, respectively, showing that non-elites can engage in this new mode of political communication cheek by jowl with elites.

Discussion and Conclusion

The defining moments of the 2012 Presidential debates offer a window into how media events and political humor mix together within the hybrid media system. We see three key themes emerging from our analyses: (1) the increased roles of non-political elites and nonelites; (2) the role of humor in expressing political ideas—both textually and visually; and (3) the relevance of key moments in political spectacles as opportunities for political communication in hybrid media spaces. We expect to see these phenomena repeated in the context of other media events, both within the US and abroad.

First, we see evidence that during media spectacles, political elites are not the only commentators that matter. Political Twitter is not solely the reserve of “hyperactive reporters and

short-attention-span political junkies.” It is also where actors, comedians, athletes, hip-hop artists, and ordinary citizens come to opine on politics. The 46th most-retweeted BigBird tweet came from WWE Professional Wrestler Shane “The Hurricane” Helms, who wrote “if Obama shows up at the next debate with Big Bird in his corner, WIN!” Bridging elites like Helms, Olivia Wilde, and Simon Pegg are particularly noteworthy for research on political echo chambers (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2007) and political knowledge gaps (Prior, 2007). They build their social media following based on audience interest in their sports and entertainment star-status. During political spectacles like Presidential debates, they behave as opinion leaders in an updated version of Katz and Lazarsfeld’s classical two-step flow model (1970). Whether WWE fans watched the debates or not, if they were following Shane Helms on Twitter and logged in during the first debate, they were exposed to political information.

Second, it is clear that political humor is particularly relevant to the study of news and information sharing in the digital environment. Most of the political humor literature has taken as its object a set of television programs that use a particular type of humor to engage audiences around current events. In the case of Twitter reactions to the first and third 2012 Presidential debates, political humor was quite prevalent. 58% of the most-duplicated tweets across both debate contained humor (74% in BB and 42% in HB). These textual and visual jokes were created and propagated by a diverse range of actors—not just comedians. And they often made substantive political points, although these were difficult to discern in some. All this strikes us as additional evidence of the genre-blurring described by Williams and Delli Carpini (2011)—it appears the affordances of Twitter reward wit and humor in the service of political argument. In the context of media events, political humor scholars would be well-advised to continue this line of research.

Third, we see additional evidence that viewertariat-generated political memes function as media objects. As in Chadwick's "bullygate" study (2011, 2013), citizen participation via social media created objects for engagement by journalists and other media personalities, extending the life of certain issue frames and feeding into the news agenda. Memes produced through BB and HB on some level became news stories unto themselves, in large part due to the diversity of the viewertariat that propped them up.

We also believe this study provides evidence of the value of mixed-methods research designs in the digital media environment. Most of the findings contained in this paper could not have been obtained through either quantitative-only or qualitative-only approaches. Combining computational techniques with close textual analysis yields layers of insight and helps us to understand how activity on the second screen blends with research traditions derived from the first screen.

However, this study examines only two closely related cases within a single social media platform. As such, its findings raise even more questions. For example, how did these Twitter conversations compare to similar conversations in other social media platforms? How do hybrid media conversations about non-electoral media events differ in content and structure? Do bridging elites only talk about politics during media events, or are there other conditions under which they act as opinion leaders? Further research, built on even larger datasets, should explore the long tail of second-screen social media conversation. Likewise, researchers studying non-US media systems can use this study as a starting point to analyze different media systems in different political cultures with different electoral contexts. We expect that hybrid media will remain a fixture of digital communication for the foreseeable future, and we hope this study's theoretical and methodological lessons will inspire future explorations of it.

Notes

¹ Data from the second debate are omitted due to a technical failure in our data collection process.

² Big Bird is a well-known US children's television character whose program *Sesame Street* airs on the public television station PBS.

³ Due to the small number of data points and high degree of granularity in our conceptual categories, we decided to classify each user qualitatively rather than conducting a standard content analysis (see discussion in Schreier, 2012, p. 34-43).

⁴ While parody accounts typically depend upon background knowledge of the elites or fictional characters being parodied, we characterize them as nonelites because they give voice to their operators, most of whom we presume lack access to traditional media channels.

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Table 1. Most retweeted users in BB and HB

First debate				
Rank	Username	Given name	Category	Description
1	@simonpegg	Simon Pegg	Bridging elite	Actor
2	@silentkpants	Katje	Nonelite	Feminist
3	@FollowMeOBAMA	FollowMeObama	Parody account	Parody account
4	@oliviawilde	Olivia Wilde	Bridging elite	Actor
5	@previs	PrevIsTheBest	Nonelite	Aspiring rapper
Third debate				
Rank	Username	Given name	Category	Description
1	@B1GB1RD	Big Bird	Parody account	Parody account
2	@EcheMadubuike	Eche Madubuike	Nonelite	Aspiring actor
3	@BobMcDonnell	Bob McDonnell	Political elite	Former governor of Virginia
4	@DavidShuster	David Shuster	Journalist	Journalist
5	@stefcutter	Stephanie Cutter	Political elite	Deputy campaign mgr, Obama 2012

Figure 1. “Big Bird” retweet network

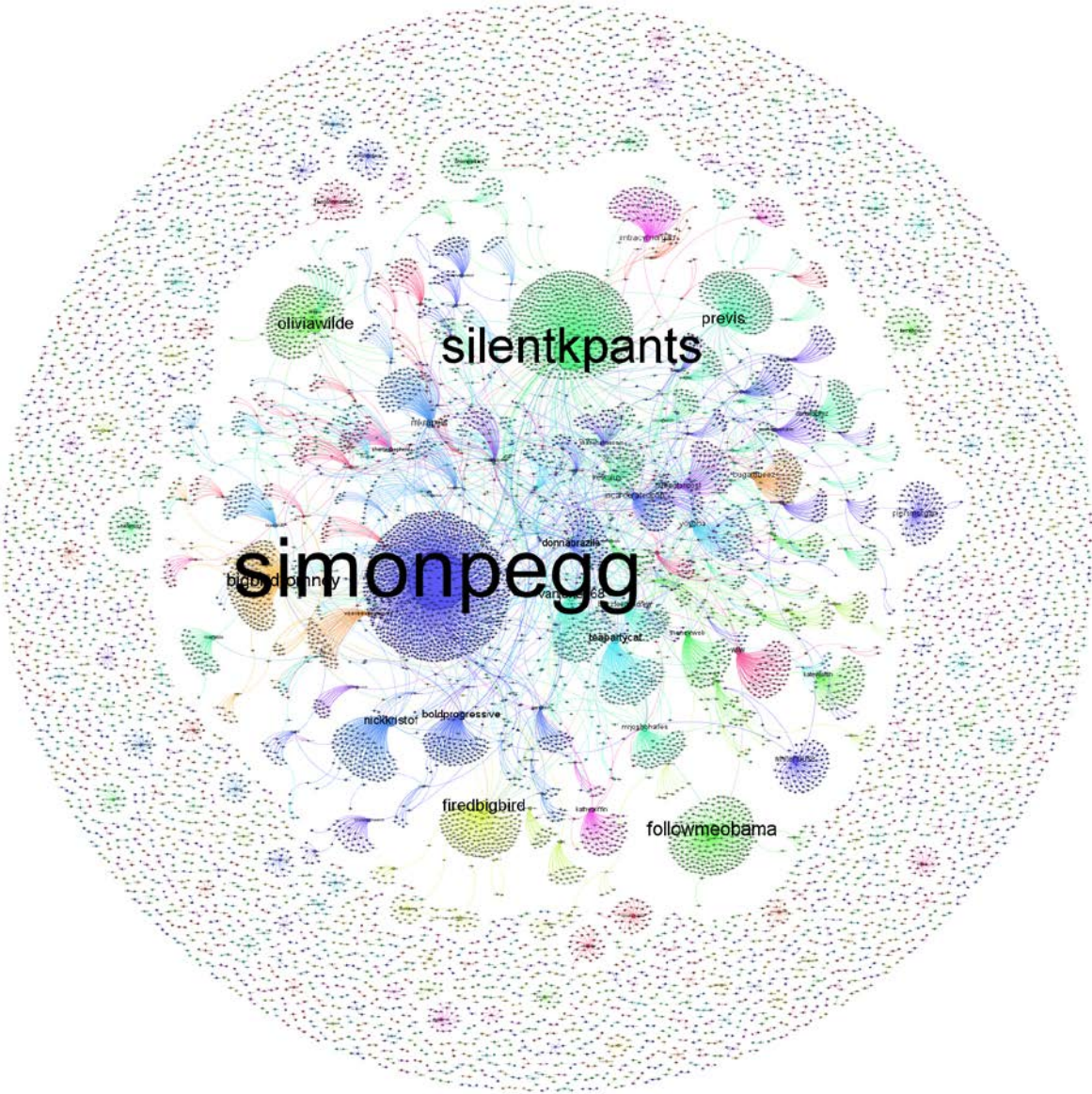


Figure 2. “Horses and bayonets” retweet network

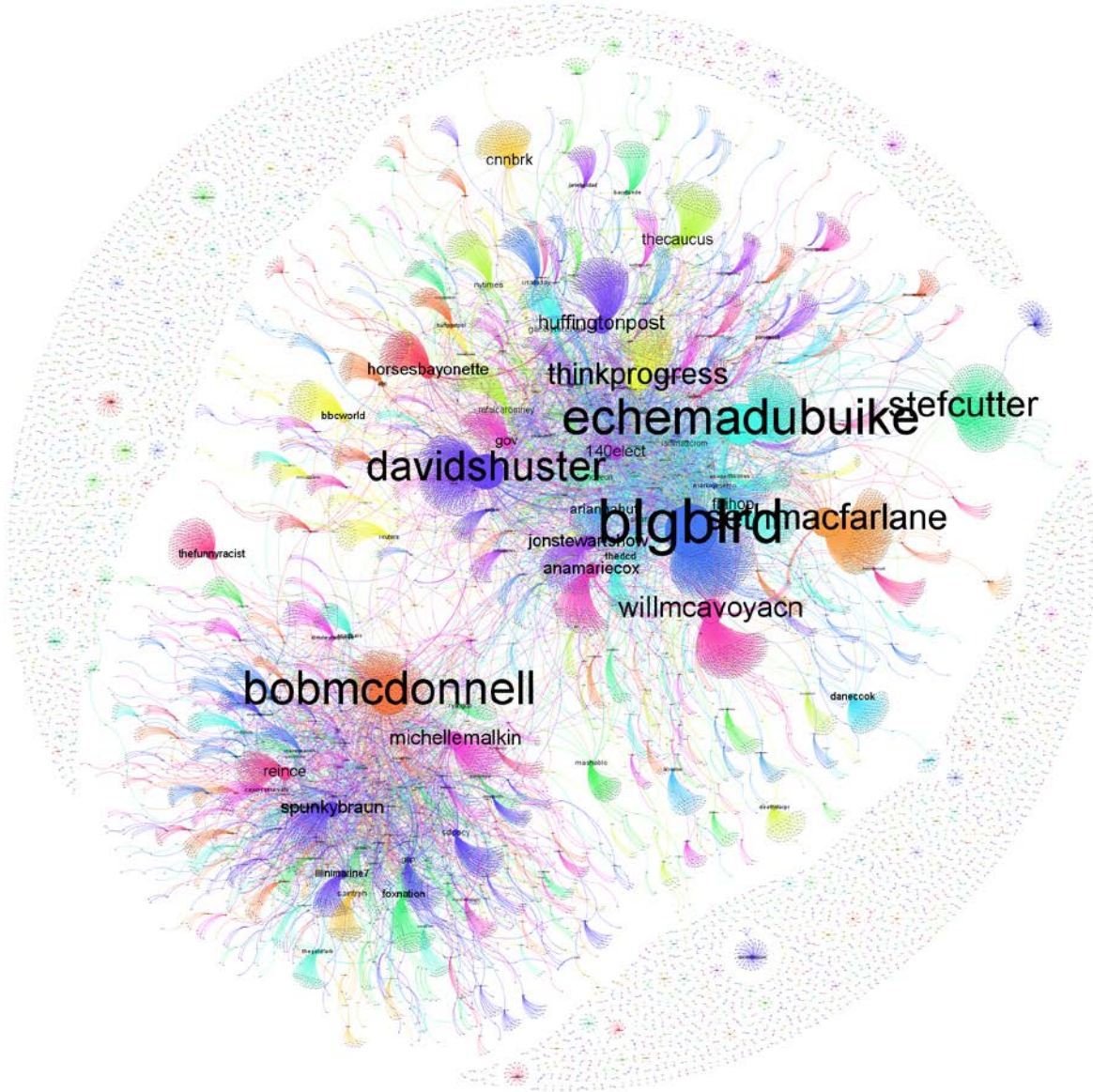


Figure 3. Major user types by prevalence in each debate

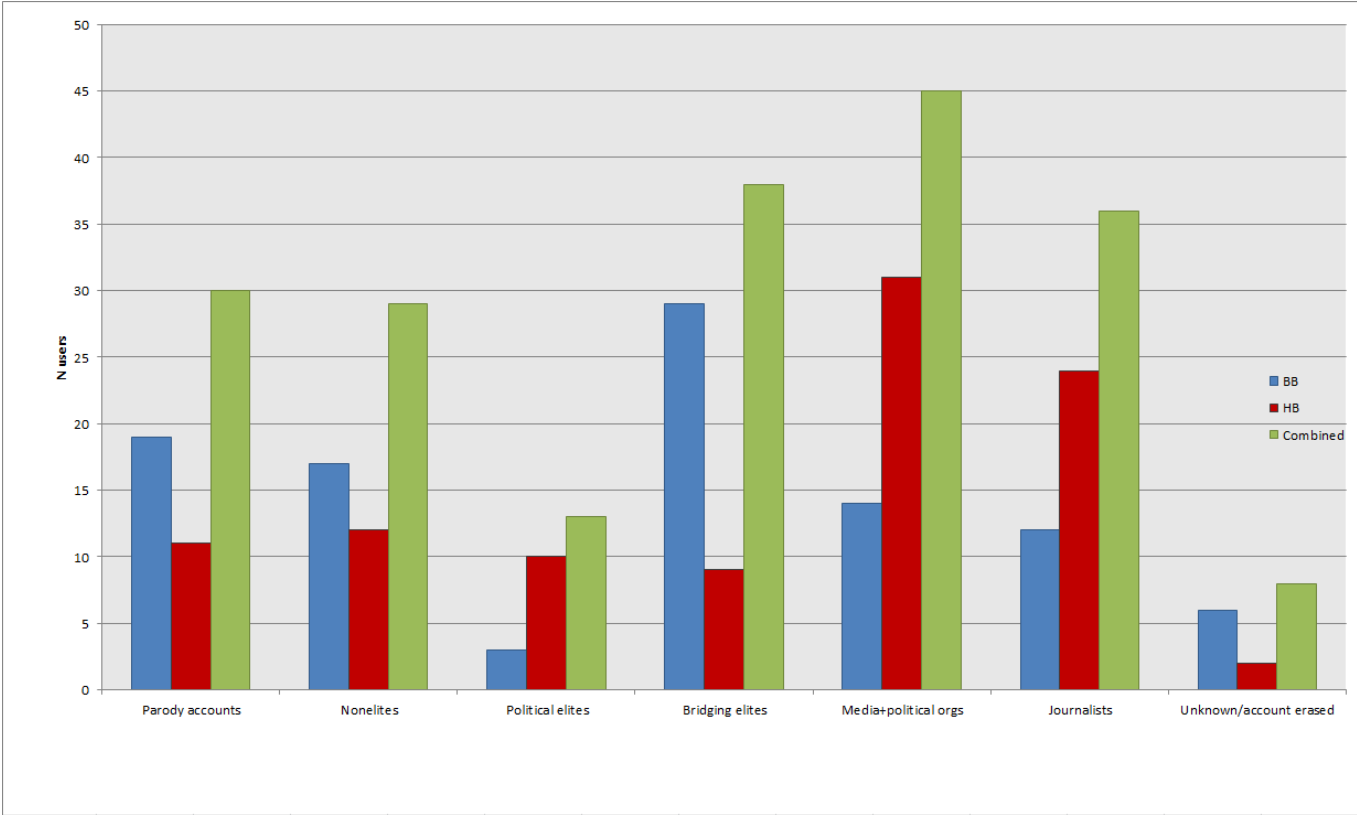


Figure 4. Humor and seriousness among the top debate tweets

