

Free Media and Twitter in the 2016 Presidential Election: The Unconventional Campaign of Donald Trump

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Abstract

This article examines the surprising outcome of the 2016 presidential election, which saw Donald Trump defy nearly all of the conventional wisdom to become the 45th president of the United States. Political commentators and experts offered several immediate postelection explanations for Trump's victory, one of which focused on how Trump was able to generate considerable unpaid or free media for himself, often directly through Twitter. This article explains the theory and rationale underlying the *free media thesis* (FMT) and then examines whether there is any preliminary empirical support for it. Using media tracking data and public opinion surveys, the results reveal that Trump indeed dominated the unpaid media market. Although the findings in this article cannot make causal claims about whether Trump's advantages in free media are the primary reason for his upset victory, the results, nonetheless, suggest that some of the basic conditions necessary for the FMT were present in the 2016 election and that the FMT offers a plausible avenue for further analysis and future research.

Keywords

social media, Twitter, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, presidential election

On June 16, 2015, speaking in New York City from his own Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue, Donald Trump announced his candidacy for President of the United States. Trump, a real estate mogul and billionaire celebrity with no previous elected political experience, entered the electoral arena as a curiosity to most political observers. Perhaps known best to Americans for his fiery and bombastic personality on the television programs, *The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice* (which Trump hosted from 2004 to 2015), and for his propensity to generate controversy with inflammatory comments, many pundits and journalists initially dismissed Trump's entry into the presidential race as a publicity stunt rather than a serious effort to win the presidency. In the words of one commentator shortly after his presidential announcement, "Donald Trump isn't really running for president;

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he's running to make more money and enhance a brand that's bigger than his real-estate holdings and golf courses" (Gasparino, 2015). Conservative commentator, Charles Krauthammer, went further, referring to Trump as a "rodeo clown," while op-ed writer, George Will, added that Trump sounded like "the guy nursing his sixth beer at the end of a bar in Duluth" (quoted in Weaver, 2015).

Yet, roughly 17 months later, Trump's presidential campaign had stunned his critics and doubters. Trump first defeated a crowded field of 16 Republicans to earn his party's nomination. As the political forecaster Nate Silver described the result in May of 2016, "If you'd told me a year ago that Trump would be the nominee, I'd have thought you were nuts" (Silver, 2016). As the general election approached, there were a few political scientists who accurately forecasted a Trump victory, pointing to factors such as presidential approval ratings, the growth in real gross domestic product, the length of time that the incumbent president's party held the White House (i.e., one term or more than one term), and primary results (Abramowitz, 2016; Norpoth, 2016). Predictions favoring Trump, however, did not reflect the general consensus of most experts (Ceaser, Busch, & Pitney, 2017). Indeed, betting markets had the Democratic Party's presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, a more than seven to one favorite on the eve of Election Day (RealClearPolitics, 2016).

Trump, however, defied the odds again, defeating Clinton to become the nation's 45th president, in what one newspaper headline referred to as a "cataclysmic, history-making upset" (Cillizza, 2016). In the immediate aftermath of the election, several postelection analyses attempted to make sense of how Trump had won. One explanation centered on Trump's ability to attract free media, especially through his use of social media. As one headline read, "Donald Trump rode \$5 billion in free media to the White House" (Stewart, 2016). Social media, especially Twitter (140-character social network), was often at the center of Trump's ability to generate free media. Brad Parscale, Trump's digital director, commented after the election that Twitter was one of the "reasons we won this thing" (quoted in Lapowsky, 2016). The purpose of this article is to examine these and similar claims, or what is herein referred to as the *free media thesis* (FMT).

This article proceeds with some background information about the 2016 presidential election. I begin by discussing the conventional wisdom surrounding successful presidential campaigns heading into the 2016 election. This provides the necessary context in which to assess the unconventional campaign of Donald Trump, in which generating free media exposure, rather than relying on paid media, such as television advertising, was the primary vehicle to reach and communicate with voters.

As the results in this study show, Hillary Clinton held enormous advantages in fund-raising and television advertising expenditures, but it was Trump who ultimately won more exposure in news coverage and social media, which, in turn, seems to have also helped Trump dominate the personal conversations that voters had with other people about the election. Although this article is unable to make any definitive causal claims about whether Trump's unorthodox campaign explains his victory, the results still suggest that some of the conditions necessary to support the FMT were present in the presidential election of 2016. I conclude that Trump's innovative use of social media and his ability to generate free media from it could have far-reaching consequences in transforming the way future candidates wage presidential campaigns.

Conventional Wisdom: The Invisible Primary and the Republican Nomination

Winning the presidency first requires that a candidate win his or her party's nomination. Before voters cast any ballots in primary elections or participate in caucus elections, the so-called "invisible primary" begins the nomination process, which involves fund-raising, building support in the polls, and winning endorsements from prominent politicians. To raise money successfully, presidential candidates must win over the large individual donors in their party (Malbin, 2009). During the early

stages of the 2016 presidential election, for example, several Republican candidates made a concerted effort to win the support of Charles and David Koch—a process that some members of the press dubbed the “Koch primary” (see, e.g., Parker, 2015). In addition to these wealthy donors, presidential candidates can also raise significant sums of money from Internet donors who individually may only typically contribute modest amounts, but collectively total significant sums (Wilcox, 2008).

Early fund-raising success, in particular, is critical because it can generate favorable media coverage, as the press reports on who is “winning” one of the first key tests of the invisible primary. The result of such positive news coverage is that candidates often experience improved standing in the polls. This is significant because major campaign donors typically want to back winners (Brown, Powell, & Wilcox, 1995), and strong polling numbers in the early stages of the campaign help candidates make the case that they are electable (Adkins & Dowdle, 2002; Goff, 2004). Taken together, this process leads to what some political observers describe as a “virtuous cycle” in which “fund-raising leads to good press coverage, which leads to better poll numbers, both of which are shown to would-be contributors, leading to more money, to even better coverage and poll numbers, and so on” (Halperin, Wilner, & Ambinder, 2006).

The invisible primary also involves another critical component—winning high-profile endorsements. Since 1980, the single best predictor of winning a major party’s presidential nomination has been the number of endorsements from party elites (Cohen, Karol, Noel, & Zaller, 2008; Vavrek, 2015). These high-level party endorsements send positive cues and signals to those who will later vote in the primary and caucus elections (Cohen et al., 2008). As one account summarized, “Over the past few decades, when these elites have reached a consensus on the best candidate, rank-and-file voters have usually followed” (Bycoffe, 2016).

Endorsements also assist aspiring presidential candidates with their “ground game.” Interest groups, in particular, can be especially helpful in registering new voters and in turning out voters to the polls (see, e.g., Magleby, Monson, & Patterson, 2007). For Democrats, winning the support of groups associated with civil rights, the environment, or organized labor can be critical to turning out the vote needed for victory. For Republicans, winning endorsements from organizations that support socially conservative causes, gun rights, or smaller government can be especially helpful to a successful ground game. In the critical Iowa caucus, nearly all political professionals agree that turning out the vote is essential to victory there. As one headline from 2016 declared, “Turnout is Name of the Game in Iowa Caucuses” (Associated Press, 2016).

In short, money, support from high-ranking politicians and party leaders, endorsements from interest groups representing key constituencies in a party, and a strong organization, especially on the ground, are all mutually reinforcing. With this in mind, the conventional wisdom heading into the 2016 election was that a successful presidential candidate could not survive the nomination phase of the presidential election without the support of these established players (Cohen et al., 2008). This presented what appeared to be a serious problem for Donald Trump’s campaign.

During the period of the invisible primary, tabulations from *The New York Times* showed that Donald Trump had received not a single endorsement from a Republican governor or member of Congress. By comparison, former Florida governor, Jeb Bush, had received 30 endorsements from members of Congress followed by Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, who had won 27. Even long-shot candidate and former governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, who, at the time, stood at seventh in the polls in Iowa (the state that holds the first presidential caucus), and tenth in the polls in New Hampshire (the state that holds the first presidential primary), had earned an endorsement.

Trump also trailed behind his Republican rivals in early fund-raising totals. Including funds raised by the candidate’s campaign and allied Super-Political Action Committees (PACs), Jeb Bush again topped the Republican field, followed by Senators Ted Cruz of Texas and Rubio. Overall,

Table 1. The Invisible Primary and the Initial Long Odds of the Trump Campaign.

Candidate	Rank: National Endorsements	Rank: Money Raised
Jeb Bush	1	1
Marco Rubio	2	3
Ted Cruz	3	2
Rand Paul	4	6
Chris Christie	5	8
Carly Fiorina	8	5
John Kasich	7	7
Ben Carson	10	4
Mike Huckabee	5	10
Donald Trump	10	9

Note. Rankings above reflect where candidates stood before the first votes were cast in the 2016 primary season.

Source. *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/us/elections/presidential-candidates-dashboard.html>).

Trump ranked ninth in money raised,¹ placing him at or near the bottom in both the endorsement derby and the money primary—two essential tests of the larger invisible primary (see Table 1).

Political prediction markets in August of 2015 were in line with the conventional wisdom about the importance of the invisible primary, as Jeb Bush emerged as the clear favorite to win the Republican presidential nomination. PredictWise, which aggregates the probabilities from various political prediction markets, had Bush leading all Republicans with a 40% chance of winning the nomination. Oddsmakers, at the same time, gave Trump only a 14% probability of victory (Reuters, 2015). Over the next several months, as the race neared the Iowa caucus, Bush failed to gain any traction in the polls. As the Bush campaign floundered, Marco Rubio emerged as the overwhelming favorite, with PredictWise giving him a 56% chance of winning the Republican presidential nomination compared to 25% for Trump (*New York Times*, 2016). In sum, the most reliable predictors coming out of the invisible primary, as well as the odds from prediction markets during the invisible primary period, all suggested that Trump's chances of winning the Republican presidential nomination were unlikely.

Yet, despite his low probability of victory, Trump would go on to win the Republican presidential nomination. By the end of May 2016, Trump had surpassed the 1,237 delegate threshold required to win the nomination. The result became official on July 19 at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland. However, as the next section discusses, many political observers were again quick to dismiss Trump's chances as he entered the general election phase against Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton.

Conventional Wisdom: The General Election

In May, shortly after it became clear that Trump would be the Republican nominee, an article in *Salon* boldly predicted that Trump, in his matchup against Clinton, was “more likely to lose in a historic rout than he is to win the White House” (Gaughan, 2016). Likewise, a headline from *Slate* confidently predicted, “Donald Trump Isn't Going to be President” (Bouie, 2016). The chorus of Trump doubters only grew over the months that followed, perhaps most dramatically illustrated by a forecast from *The Huffington Post*'s polling team, which gave Clinton a 98% probability of defeating Trump (Jackson, 2016).

Several common explanations emerged to support the prediction that Clinton would defeat Trump with relative ease. Some commentators observed that Trump's surprising success in the nomination phase would mean little in the general election given there were strong differences

between Republican primary voters and the broader general electorate, most notably in the different demographic makeup of both. The conventional wisdom held that Trump's appeal—mainly to working class, white men—was simply too narrow when put up against Clinton's likely coalition of minorities, college-educated white professionals, suburban women, and young voters (see, e.g., Bump, 2016; Byler, 2016; Fenn, 2016). Other commentators built on that argument by noting that Trump's narrow appeal would make it exceedingly difficult for him to expand and broaden the Republican base, making it all but impossible for him to win in states where Mitt Romney, the 2012 Republican presidential nominee, had lost (Bouie, 2016). Moreover, Trump's path to the minimum 270 votes needed for victory in the Electoral College, contained almost no room for error. Most analysts agreed that Trump would need to come close to "running the table" in the competitive, "swing" states that ultimately determine the winner of the presidential election (see, e.g., Catanese, 2016; Seitz-Wald, 2016).

Others pointed to basic campaign-related factors that seemed to spell doom for the Trump campaign. Similar to arguments made during the nomination phase, experts pointed to the money race. Although Trump ultimately poured some \$66 million of his own cash to finance his campaign and raised a total of \$280 million from small donors (i.e., those who gave \$200 or less), his overall fund-raising total of \$647 million was still a far cry from the \$1.2 billion that Clinton and her allied Super-PACs raised (Allison, Rojanasakul, Harris, & Sam, 2016). This large financial advantage allowed Clinton to pour considerable sums of money into television advertising for her "air war" and into get-out-the-vote operations for her "ground war."

During the week beginning with Tuesday, October 18, for example, Clinton spent \$29.6 million on ads in battleground states compared to \$14.9 million for Trump—a nearly two to one advantage (Goldstein, McCormick, & Tartar, 2016). On the ground, Democrats had 5,138 staffers in 15 battleground states for Clinton compared to the Republicans' 1,409 staffers in 16 battleground states for Trump (Wilson & Disipio, 2016). Citing both Clinton's advantages on the airwaves and with her ground organization, one account surmised just 11 days before Election Day, "Hillary Clinton will be elected the 45th president of the United States" (Schlesinger, 2016).

Yet, on November 8, 2016, voters beat back the predictions of a certain Clinton victory. Although Clinton would go on to win the national popular vote by nearly 3 million, Trump carried the key battleground states of Ohio, North Carolina, and Florida. He also added three formerly Democratic states to his column that no Republican nominee had won since 1988: Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. When members of the Electoral College cast their votes a month later in December, Trump had 304 votes to Clinton's 227.

This stunning election result had many pundits confounded in the days and weeks afterward. How did Trump pull off such an incredible upset? Among many explanations, a popular one deals with Trump's novel use of social media to generate unpaid media air time. In sections that follow, I explain the rationale behind the FMT and then test several related hypotheses.

Trump's Unconventional Campaign and the FMT

While conventional explanations offer little help in understanding how Trump was able to defy most predictions, several postelection analyses have pointed to Trump's use of social media as a factor in his surprising victory (see, e.g., Khan, 2016; Le Miere, 2016; Yu, 2016). According to the argument, or FMT, Trump's use of social media, especially his frequent postings on Twitter, generated significant news coverage. This unpaid or free media exposure allowed Trump to remain in the public eye without requiring his campaign to spend millions of its own dollars on paid media such as advertising. Moreover, social media provided a vehicle for Trump to communicate directly with the public absent the usual filter of the mass media. Using social media in this fashion allowed Trump to mitigate many of the disadvantages that pundits had pointed to earlier during the election, which had

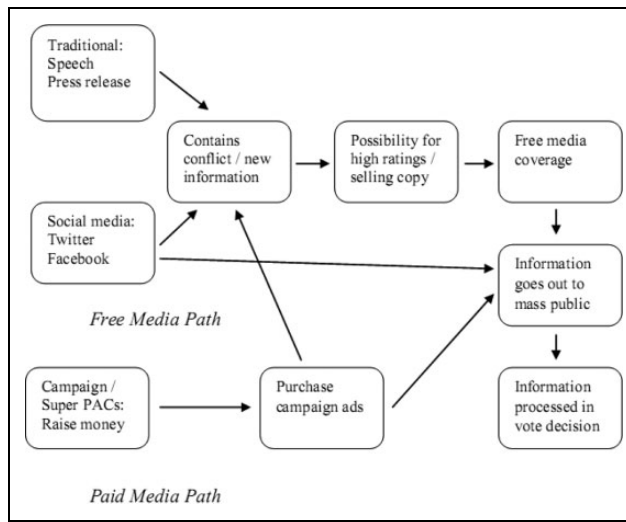


Figure 1. Path of influence for free media and paid media on vote choice.

suggested that Trump’s campaign was ill-equipped to take on his better-funded and better-organized opponents in the Republican primaries and caucuses, and later Hillary Clinton in the general election.

Of course, Trump did simply more than tweet. His Twitter posts were often deliberately designed to entice journalists with controversial statements intended to provoke conflict with an opponent—a strategy for generating free media that candidates have used in speeches and press releases well before the dawn of social media (Arterton, 1984; Haynes, Flowers, & Gurian, 2002; Leighley, 2004; Patterson, 1994). Indeed, journalists are often looking for colorful quotations to spice up their stories and news outlets face commercial pressures to sell copy or generate ratings (Bennett, 2009; Patterson, 1994; Shea, 1996).

As just one example, Trump posted a tweet in February 2016, mocking Jeb Bush: “Wow, Jeb Bush, whose campaign is a total disaster, had to bring in mommy to take a slap at me.” This comment came shortly after Bush’s mother, former First Lady Barbara Bush, told CNN in an interview that she was “sick of” of Trump. After Trump’s tweet, a *USA Today* headline read, “Trump: Jeb Bush ‘had to bring in mommy to take a slap at me’” (Allen, 2015).

Once a candidate generates free media coverage and the information goes out to the mass public, individual voters exposed to it must process the information. Of course, free media is not the only way to reach a mass audience. Social media postings on Twitter or Facebook allow information to go straight to the public. Candidates who can build a large social media following have the potential to communicate information directly to an audience of millions. The same is also true for traditional campaign advertising; however, social media has the advantage of eliminating the high costs that come with traditional 30-second television ads (West, 2014). Ultimately, individual voters process this campaign information (Lau & Redlawsk, 2006), which, in turn, can have a significant effect on a voter’s evaluation of the candidates (Lodge, Steenbergen, & Brau, 1995). Figure 1 is a visual diagram of how this process operates in theory.

Of course, to test the basic validity of the FMT, anecdotes, such as the “bring in mommy” episode, are insufficient. In addition, the FMT requires more than simply Trump’s ability to generate headlines and media mentions for himself. The actions of Trump’s opponents also require consideration. For instance, if Trump’s opponents also used social media similarly for equivalent amounts of news coverage then it would be difficult to argue that social media played any role in Trump’s

surprising victory. In other words, absent a comparison, it would be impossible to know if Trump had a *net advantage* in free media news coverage.

A report from the Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy found that Trump consistently received the most press attention during the nomination phase of the election (Patterson, 2016a). The author of the report, Thomas Patterson (2016a), detailed the media coverage of the various Republican candidates and noted:

There was not a single week when Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, or John Kasich topped Trump's level of coverage. During the time that Rubio was an active candidate for the Republican nomination, he got only half as much press attention as Trump.

Given that this previous research has already established Trump's advantage in the nomination phase of the election, this article focuses instead on the general election period. Based on the expectations of the FMT, we would expect a similar news coverage advantage for Trump in the general election, leading to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Donald Trump generated more free media coverage, especially during the key months of the election cycle, than did his chief opponent, Hillary Clinton.

Of course, social media is not solely dependent on press coverage to reach people. A Twitter post, for example, can reach millions of people instantly independent of any third party facilitator. At the time of the 2016 election, about 21% of all Americans reported using Twitter (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). Although this is only a minority of the population, Twitter users still constituted millions of potential voters. More significantly, Twitter allows a presidential candidate to communicate directly to those users without any filter from the media. The larger the Twitter following, the more people that the campaign can reach in this direct and unfiltered fashion. In theory, this would give a candidate with more Twitter followers a social media advantage over a candidate with a smaller number of Twitter followers. This leads to a second hypothesis that, if validated, lends additional support for the FMT:

Hypothesis 2: Donald Trump had more followers on Twitter than Hillary Clinton, especially during the key final months of the election cycle.

An additional premise requires validation for there to be support for the FMT. Free media exposure and more Twitter followers alone does not necessarily mean that more people actually saw more social media posts about Trump than about Clinton. If the FMT is accurate, we would expect the following third hypothesis to be confirmed:

Hypothesis 3: A higher percentage of people reported seeing more social media posts supporting Donald Trump than Hillary Clinton.

The FMT further requires that not only did the news media provide greater free media coverage to Trump, but that people actually reported seeing more news stories about Trump than about Clinton. This leads to a fourth hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: A higher percentage of people reported seeing more news stories about Donald Trump than about Hillary Clinton.

All of this additional exposure for Trump also may have influenced the personal conversations that people had about the election. This leads to a fifth hypothesis:

Table 2. 2016 and 2012 Presidential Election: Free Media Totals.

Candidate	Free Media Value
Donald Trump (2016)	\$4,960,000,000
Hillary Clinton (2016)	\$3,240,000,000
Barack Obama (2012)	\$1,150,000,000
Mitt Romney (2012)	\$700,000,000

Note. For Trump and Clinton, totals reflect the 12-month period through November 1, 2016. The totals for Obama and Romney reflect a comparable 12-month period in 2012.

Hypothesis 5: A higher percentage of people reported that they spent more time talking about Donald Trump in their personal conversations than about Hillary Clinton.

To be clear, support for all five hypotheses does not demonstrate causality. The causal mechanisms for Trump’s victory would require additional data and testing that are beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, support for these five hypotheses lends some added empirical weight to the FMT beyond mere speculation and anecdotal evidence.

Free Media Coverage

To examine whether Trump received more unpaid news coverage than Clinton, I rely on data from MediaQuant, which tracks so-called “earned media” or content about a topic covered in newspapers, magazines, broadcast and cable news, and other forums (for more information, see <http://www.mediaquant.net>). To quantify free media exposure, MediaQuant computes a “media value” measure, which is defined as the “monetized value” that one would put on an “earned media mention.” Put another way, free media value is the approximate amount of money that candidates would be willing to spend if they had to purchase the otherwise free news coverage and online discussions that they generate. As MediaQuant explains, “If a source has 100,000 *potential* readers/listeners of a mention (in an article, broadcast, blog post, tweet, forum post, etc.), then what are those 100,000 readers worth?” (for more information on how the measure is computed, see <http://www.mediaquant.net/2016/09/its-not-advertising-value-its-media-value>).

Using the MediaQuant measure of *free media value*, the results in Table 2 show the sum media value totals for a 12-month period ending on November 1, 2016. Consistent with the expectations of the FMT, Donald Trump had the highest free media value at \$4.96 billion, far outdistancing Hillary Clinton’s free media value total at \$3.24 billion. For further comparison, Table 2 also includes the free media totals for the 2012 presidential candidates, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. As the results show, neither candidate in 2012 came close to reaching Trump’s totals. Obama earned \$1.15 billion in free media value over an equivalent 12-month period in 2012, whereas Romney generated a free media value of roughly \$700 million. This comparison reveals how truly extraordinary Trump’s free media exposure was in the 2016 election.

To delve further into the numbers, Table 3 examines free media value over the last 5 months of the 2016 election. Trump held a decisive advantage in June with more than \$435 million in media value compared to \$299 million in media value for Clinton. While the totals ebbed and flowed from month to month for both candidates, Trump led in every month from June through October, finishing the final 5-month period of the election with more than \$2.4 billion in free media value compared to just over \$2 billion in media value for Clinton. These patterns are also consistent using a separate measure, the raw number of media mentions, shown in parentheses in Table 3. Quite clearly, Trump dominated Clinton in unpaid media, significantly reducing the “air time” advantage that Clinton held in paid advertising.

Table 3. Donald Trump Versus Hillary Clinton: Media Value and Media Mentions, June–October 2016.

	June 2016	July 2016	Aug. 2016	Sep. 2016	Oct. 2016	Total
Donald Trump	\$435,374,385 (71,029,693)	\$543,712,760 (86,155,811)	\$482,966,428 (70,124,397)	\$459,976,733 (69,967,542)	\$568,472,657 (73,802,984)	\$2,490,502,963 (371,080,427)
Hillary Clinton	\$298,767,825 (40,576,744)	\$505,324,483 (72,175,075)	\$340,878,265 (45,320,187)	\$418,339,706 (61,782,564)	\$479,094,664 (60,378,488)	\$2,042,404,943 (280,233,058)

Note. Media value is the monetized value of earned media attention. The numbers in parentheses reflect media mentions, which are a tally of raw mentions from qualified media coverage.

Source. MediaQuant (<https://www.mediaquant.net>).

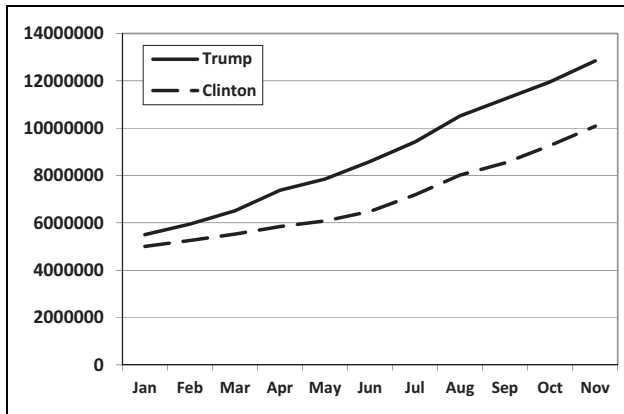


Figure 2. Donald Trump versus Hillary Clinton: Twitter followers, 2016. The number of Twitter followers was calculated using service provided by MediaQuant. Source. MediaQuant (<https://www.mediaquant.net>).

Social Media Followers

In January 2016, Donald Trump had 5.5 million Twitter followers compared to roughly 5 million for Hillary Clinton. However, as the election progressed, Trump’s Twitter following grew as did his advantage in Twitter followers over Clinton (see Figure 2). By Election Day, November 8, Trump’s Twitter following had grown to 13 million compared to 10.3 million for Clinton—a net advantage of 2.7 million followers.

Aside from the raw number of Twitter followers favoring Trump, Twitter delivered the equivalent of \$402 million in free attention for Trump as compared to \$166 million for Clinton based on MediaQuant estimates. In the month of May alone, Trump generated nearly \$195 million in free media attention from Twitter compared to \$23 million for Clinton (Stewart, 2016). Trump’s controversial “taco bowl” tweet on Cinco de Mayo created the most discussion. In the tweet, Trump posted a picture of himself eating a taco bowl at his Trump Tower desk with a posting that read, “Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!” (Tatum, 2016). Many of Trump’s opponents seized on the tweet, including a scathing attack from comedian, Samantha Bee, who tweeted back, “The best taco bowls are made by immigrants who resent a rich p—k calling them rapists. Love inauthentic Mexican!” (quoted in Mazza, 2016). Other critics called the tweet “offensive” (Lombrozo, 2016). Trump aide, Paul Manafort, responded, “It was a holiday for the Hispanic community, and I thought he [Trump] thought it was in the spirit of the holiday” (quoted in Hensch, 2016). The controversy, whether one interpreted it positively or negatively, corresponded with a spike in free media exposure for Trump.

Table 4. Reaching Voters through Advertising, Social Media, New Stories, and Personal Conversations, June and August 2016

	June	August
Television advertising		
Have seen more ads supporting Clinton	33%	47%
Have seen more ads supporting Trump	10	7
Have seen equal ads for Clinton and Trump	18	24
Have not seen ads for either candidate	31	15
Not sure	8	7
N	998	997
Social media posts		
Have seen more posts supporting Clinton	15%	14%
Have seen more posts supporting Trump	19	22
Have seen equal posts for Clinton and Trump	19	21
Have not seen posts for either candidate	39	31
Not sure	9	12
N	997	996
News stories		
Have seen more news stories about Clinton	12%	13%
Have seen more news stories about Trump	43	40
Have seen equal news stories for each candidate	35	38
Have not seen news stories for either candidate	5	3
Not sure	5	7
N	996	996
Personal conversations		
Spent more time talking about Clinton	12%	13%
Spent more time talking about Trump	34	29
Spent equal time talking about each candidate	33	35
Have not talked about either candidate	16	18
Not sure	5	6
N	995	994

Source. YouGov Poll (2016).

Finally, not only did Trump have more Twitter followers and more free media attention from Twitter, he also outperformed Clinton in other social media platforms. Trump was the most Googled candidate in the 2016 presidential election and received the most mentions of any candidate on Facebook (Khan, 2016). In sum, by almost every measure available, Trump dominated Clinton in the social media arena, lending further support to the FMT.

Voter Perceptions and Activities

While media value comparisons, as well as the number of social media followers and tweets favoring Trump, offer one piece of the puzzle to support the FMT, a second important piece involves what the voters themselves actually experienced and reported during the election. Table 4 reports results using data from public opinion surveys conducted by YouGov (for more information, see <https://today.yougov.com/publicopinion/archive/>). The surveys asked questions about what likely voters reported seeing via television ads, social media, and in the news during the months of June and August of the 2016 general election.

The first set of results in Table 4 confirms that Clinton held an advantage in the area where we would most expect it: television advertising. In both June and August, a significantly higher

percentage of voters reported seeing television ads supporting Clinton than they did for Trump (see Table 4). In June, for example, 33% of respondents reported that they saw more ads supporting Clinton than they did for Trump compared to 10% who claimed they saw more ads supporting Trump than they did for Clinton—a net advantage of 23 percentage points for Clinton. By August, that net advantage had grown to 40 percentage points for Clinton (47%–7%). Even in a larger poll conducted by YouGov and *The Economist* (2016) in the critical month of October, when television ad buying is at its peak, Clinton’s net advantage remained considerable at 36 percentage points (43–7%). These results confirm, as popular accounts of the election suggested, that Clinton dominated Trump in paid media exposure.

Yet, consistent with FMT expectations, this was not the case when it came to social media posts. As Table 4 also shows, 19% of respondents reported that they saw more social media posts supporting Trump than Clinton in June as compared to 15% who reported they saw more social media posts supporting Clinton than Trump—a net Trump advantage of 4 percentage points. That net advantage for Trump grew to 8 percentage points by August (22–14%).

However, Trump’s most sizable exposure advantage over Clinton came in the form of news stories. A full 43% of likely voters in June and another 40% in August reported that they saw more news stories of Trump than they did about Clinton. By comparison, just 12% of likely voters in June and 13% in August reported that they saw more news stories of Clinton than they did about Trump, providing Trump with a net advantage of 31 percentage points and 27 percentage points in June and August, respectively. Consistent with previous results and FMT expectations, Trump topped Clinton in unpaid media exposure.

Finally, the results also show something quite telling: Trump was more often the topic of personal conversations than Clinton. Among likely voters, 12% reported that they spent more time talking about Hillary Clinton than about Donald Trump in June compared to 34% who reported that they spent more time talking about Donald Trump than about Hillary Clinton. These percentages remained largely unchanged in August, providing evidence for yet another condition consistent with FMT expectations.

Additional Considerations

One important issue not addressed to this point has been the tone of news coverage and social media posts regarding Trump and Clinton. While Trump may have made up for any paid exposure disadvantages he faced in advertising with his unpaid exposure advantage over Clinton in free news coverage, social media posts, and personal conversations, not all attention is necessarily good attention. Indeed, much more of Trump’s free earned media was likely to be negative than positive in tone (Patterson, 2016b) and was more likely to be negative than the free media coverage that went to Clinton (Stewart, 2016). With that in mind, it seems plausible to argue that Trump’s additional exposure may not necessarily have been a positive for his campaign, effectively undermining the FMT.

However, an important rebuttal to that point is worth consideration. Trump routinely made public pronouncements to his supporters that were sharply critical of the journalists and the mass media, calling reporters “dishonest” and “corrupt” throughout the election cycle (see, e.g., Zezima, 2016). Whether these attacks against the media led to or merely reinforced preexisting attitudes, polling data in October 2016 showed Trump supporters to be significantly less likely to trust established news sources such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and even the conservative-leaning *Wall Street Journal* (The Economist/YouGov, 2016). Likewise, a mere 1% of Trump voters placed a “great deal” of trust in the fact-checking of journalists and other experts compared to 39% of Clinton supporters (see Table 5). Additionally, 77% of Trump supporters claimed to trust fact-checking by journalists and experts “not much” or “not at all” compared to 11% of Clinton supporters. These

Table 5. Trustworthiness of Fact Checking by Journalists and Experts.

	Trump Voters (%)	Clinton Voters (%)
A great deal	1	39
A moderate amount	22	50
Not much	54	8
Not at all	23	3
N	342	476

Note. Differences between Trump and Clinton voters are statistically significant at $p < .01$ using χ^2 tests.
Source. The Economist/YouGov Poll (2016).

numbers provide good reason to believe that Trump supporters were very likely to dismiss any negative news coverage about Trump. In such an environment, the old saying—“not all buzz is good buzz”—may not have applied to the Trump campaign.

Conclusion

There was overwhelming consensus heading into and throughout the 2016 election that Donald Trump had little chance of winning the White House. Trump, however, defied the odds, prompting political observers in the immediate aftermath of the election to offer various explanations to understand his surprising success. One of those explanations was Trump’s ability to generate free news coverage, especially through his use of social media.

This article’s purpose was to examine this popular notion, presently coined the FMT, by moving beyond the anecdotal evidence and by instead bringing together the available empirical evidence related to the FMT. The results make clear that Trump did receive more free news coverage than Clinton as measured by free media value and media mentions, he had more Twitter followers, and more people reported seeing posts about Trump on social media and in the news. Of course, as already noted, the results in this article do not demonstrate a causal relationship between Trump’s unpaid media advantage and his victory in the election. The results, however, do provide some initial empirical grounding for future research to investigate the FMT further.

Certainly, it is not unreasonable to speculate that future presidential candidates may look to emulate the social media tactics of the Trump campaign. After all, using social media to generate controversy, and the subsequent unpaid news coverage that follows, is mutually beneficial to both the candidate and the media. The candidate, of course, gets free exposure to a mass audience. The media, in turn, generate ratings and profits. CNN and Fox News, for example, reported record profits in 2016, undoubtedly in no small part due to Trump’s campaign (Stewart, 2016). With such incentives, Trump’s campaign may have done more than shock the world with his victory. His use of social media and his ability to generate free media may end up changing the way future presidential campaigns are conducted in the years to come.

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Note

1. Trump did announce that he would self-fund much of his campaign, which may explain his relatively low standing in fund-raising. However, some reports questioned the veracity of Trump's self-funding claims (see, e.g., Schreckinger, 2015).

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