**CONNECTing across the Country: Twitter and the Public Sphere in the 2012 Presidential Debates**

**Sponsor: Political Communication Division**

**Sun, 11/24: 8:00 AM  - 9:15 AM**

**Marriott Wardman Park**

**Room: Thurgood Marshall Ballroom East - Mezzanine Level**

Debate Watch events in the 2012 presidential campaign continued the tradition of citizens gathering to watch and discuss issues in debates. This year, however, there was a new means of sharing these ideas: the use of social media, specifically Twitter, which allowed for real-time communication among viewers, creating connections through a "virtual" public sphere (Habermas, 1970). This panel will provide a critique of the Twitter commentary and discuss approaches used to facilitate Debate Watch events.

**Chair**

*Joseph Mazer*, Clemson University  - Contact Me

**Presenter(s)**

*Barbara Pickering*, University of Nebraska, Omaha  - Contact Me
*Adam Tyma*, University of Nebraska, Omaha  - Contact Me
*Stephen K. Hunt*, Illinois State University  - Contact Me
*Mary Sorenson*, University of Missouri, Columbia  - Contact Me
*Leslie Rill*, University of Nevada, Reno  - Contact Me
*Leah Murray*, Webster State University  - Contact Me

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# CONNECTIONS to Political Rumors, Conspiracies and Anxiety

**Sponsor: Political Communication Division**

**Sun, 11/24: 8:00 AM  - 9:15 AM**

**Marriott Wardman Park**

**Room: Delaware A - Lobby Level**

This session features papers that examine rumor communities, rumor networks, conspiracy theories and anxiety in politics.

#### Chair

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#### Respondent

*R. Lance Holbert*, Ohio State University  - Contact Me

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## Presentations

### Rumor Communities: The Social Dimensions of Internet Political Rumors

This study reconceptualizes political rumors as beliefs shared and sustained within a community, illuminating aspects of rumoring processes overlooked by more traditional psychological approaches focused on individual beliefs, individual decisions to repeat rumors, and individual level effects of debunking messages. Online, user-generated content from the "vaccines cause autism" rumor community, a grassroots group engaged in political activism through resisting government-mandated vaccine requirements, is examined. Community members publicly counterargue debunking messages, arming the community with argumentative resources and reaffirming the community's solidarity. Members also assert authority to speak, claiming the validity of personal experience equal to that of scientifically obtained data. Moreover, by highlighting their interconnection with more conventional social groups and venerable social truisms, members assert the social legitimacy of their beliefs. Thus, the process of rumor debunking does not solely involve psychological persuasion but must also account for the social geography of rumor communities.

#### Author

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### A Network Analysis of Political Rumor

The rise of the worldwide web has changed the dynamics of rumor transmission and control. The paper examines the origin and evolution of two comparable rumors that arose during the 2004 Presidential campaign in a changed information environment. To analyze rumor dynamics, we examine three streams of data: (1) web-pages that either advance or control the rumors, (2) Google searches on the rumors, and (3) mainstream media coverage of the rumors. We find that the web alone does not appear to have an independent effect on rumor transmission but that the web contributes to polarization via the growth of rumor networks and the tendency of partisans on the right to hold fast to their beliefs. We also find support for partisan selective exposure among active, political Web publics.

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### "Build Your Own Conspiracy Theory!" Conspiracy Discourse after the Osama Bin Laden Assassination

When President Obama announced Osama bin Laden's assassination, the country erupted in celebration. Unfortunately, it was quickly drowned out by a pessimist media discourse. It predicted that a new conspiracy group, the "Deathers," would claim that the assassination was faked. The media discourse asserted that the Deathers' paranoia and refusal to accept evidence would create an inhospitable public sphere. Ultimately, the Deathers did not become the next great American conspiracy theory. However, this essay argues that the anti-Deathers discourse was itself a conspiracy rhetoric. It exhibited the same tendencies that it criticized; mainly paranoia, faulty reasoning, and scapegoating. As such, the anti-Deathers discourse was not only symptomatic of a serious lack of trust in the public sphere, it performed the tendencies that it believed to be harmful, thereby calling that public sphere into existence. This discourse demonstrated the need for rhetorical scholars to recognize the permeation of conspiracy rhetoric as well as its influence on conceptions of and operations of the public sphere.

Keywords: rhetoric, conspiracy theory, public sphere, Osama Bin Laden, Deathers

#### Author

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### Echoes of a Conspiracy: Birthers, Truthers, and the Cultivation of Extremism

A significant number of Americans express sympathies for conspiracy theories about Barack Obama's birth and George Bush's role in the 9/11 attacks. This study sought to test the role of ideological media in perpetuating these beliefs. Specifically, experiments were conducted to determine if ideologically homogeneous media echo-chambers could cultivate belief in conspiracy theories and whether debunking information would reverse this belief. Results found that media echo-chambers increased belief in conspiracy theories though debunking information reversed or minimized this effect. Results confirm the role of ideological media in spreading extremist attitudes but also demonstrate the value of debunking efforts.

#### Author

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### Anxiety and Politics: Applying Terror Management Theory to Political Decisions

Anxiety is often induced in political campaign discourse to goad voters into political decisions based on fear and distrust. This study uses Terror Management Theory to explore the influence of anxiety on the reliance of religion in political decisions. Using experimental design, participants were either randomly assigned to a mortality salient or non-mortality salient condition; participants then responded to measures about religion and the use of religion in political decisions. Results show a significant interaction between anxiety and religiosity in the influence of religion on political issue choice, but not candidate choice. As anxiety increases, use of religion in political issue decisions also increases. Conservatives rely on religion more than liberals for both issue and candidate guidance. Moreover, physical death and social death were both examined – while physical death did not significantly influence issue or candidate choice, social death significantly influenced both issue and candidate choice. The implications for using anxiety-inducing messages in political persuasion are discussed.

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# Political Identity at Home and Abroad

**Sponsor: Political Communication Division**

**Sun, 11/24: 9:30 AM  - 10:45 AM**

**Marriott Wardman Park**

**Room: Thurgood Marshall Ballroom East - Mezzanine Level**

This session features papers that examine political identity and citizenship domestically (in presidential and Supreme Court rhetoric) and abroad (in Great Britain and Ukraine).

#### Chair

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#### Respondent

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Political Communication Division

## Presentations

### “Britain is at her best when she is bold”: British National Identity and the 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony

The nation exists primarily in a tenuous identification engendered by connecting disparate peoples into a sense of collective belonging (Anderson, 1991). However, to what extent do these connections foster a coherent, stable, and universally acceptable national identity? This study used newspaper comment on the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London as an avenue to discuss and contemplate British national identity. Through the analysis of 45 editorials and opinion columns in the mainstream press, we uncovered four prominent themes in newspaper discourse: the "greatness" of Great Britain; the ceremony as a challenge to the current political order; the emphasis on a United Kingdom; and, encapsulating the discourse as a whole, the difficulties of defining and articulating a coherent, "catch-all" definition of British identity. These results are demonstrative of the inherent challenge to connect multiple and contradictory conceptualizations of national identity into a coherent whole.

#### Author

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### Courts Constituting Citizenship: A Rhetorical Analysis of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission

In 2010, the Supreme Court issued a landmark 5-4 ruling in the case Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. In the decision, the Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment free speech clause prohibits government from censoring political broadcasts in candidate elections when those broadcasts are funded by corporations or unions. In essence, the Supreme Court determined that corporations and labor unions are to be treated as equal to citizens in the political sphere. In this paper, I explore the implications of treating corporations as political citizens by conducting a rhetorical analysis of the opinion of the court written by Justice Kennedy, the concurring opinions written by Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Scalia, and the dissenting opinions written by Justice Stevens and Justice Thomas in the case of Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission. My analysis is grounded in Asen's discourse theory of citizenship in which he reformulates the relationship between citizen and citizenship and reveals differences in enactments of citizenship. I conclude that Asen's conception of citizenship as a mode of public engagement is dangerous as it relates to campaign finance. An expanded definition of citizen to include entities such as corporations and labor unions confuses the public's understanding of political citizenship and may reduce individual citizen's willingness to engage in the electoral process through an expression of free speech. Additionally, the ruling will result in corporations exercising undue influence on the political process through financial contributions; therefore undermining the power of true citizens.

#### Author

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### Constituting a Post-Cold War National Identity in President Clinton’s Economic Program

Abstract: On February 15, 1993, President Clinton outlined the economic program he was sending to Congress. The address came at the confluence of two transitions. First, the world was still adjusting to a post-Cold War era. Without the threat of nuclear destruction or a Soviet invasion, the American public lacked the unifying mechanism that had defined the previous fifty years. Second, a Democrat was in the White House for the first time since President Carter ran the oval office over twelve years ago. Taken together, these breaks offered Clinton the change to constitute what it meant to be an American in the post-Cold War era.
In this essay, I argue that Clinton managed these dual transitions by grounding national identity in his economic program. Reagan was able to build support for capitalism by juxtaposing the system alongside communism; Clinton had no such opposing foreign economic system. The president instead posited a new contradistinction by contrasting the economic policies of Reagan and Bush with his proposed economic program. By artfully redefining America's relationship with the economy, he concurrently defined his ethos as president and ultimate overseer of the economy. Additionally, constituting national identity behind economic ideology allowed Clinton to manage the transitions away from the Cold War and away from his Republican predecessors.

#### Author

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### Cossack Consubstantiality: The Ukrainian Pursuit of a Unified Nationalist Discourse

For the latter half of the twentieth century, the unique cultural, religious, historical, linguistic and ethnic features of nations covering 8.5 million square miles of Russia were forcibly submerged under the red hammer and sickle flag as Soviet identity subsumed them all. The Soviet Union's collapse created almost overnight many new nations springing forth from Russian rule, and the people living within those roughly defined national borders needed a way to make sense of their changing reality. These new nations required nationalist rhetoric, and in no country was this nationalist identity discourse more bifurcated than Ukraine. The Soviet Union's collapse forced both sides of the Dnipro River into the same geographic nation, and bitter, centuries-old divisions reemerged. Thus, with two entrenched nationalist discourses in one nation, how can Ukraine create a unifying nationalist rhetoric? The two most important characteristics through which Ukrainian nationalist discourse is currently constructed are questions of religion and questions of the nation's place in international communities, and the recent debate over a proposed gay and lesbian propaganda law illustrates the failure of these rhetorical features to help Ukrainians come to a collective nationalist discourse and act in a unified fashion. This essay argues that as of 2013, Ukraine has failed to construct a nationalistic discourse that will unite its factions in pursuit of unified national action.

#### Author

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# CONNECTing with New Media: Political Participation, Expression and Efficacy

**Sponsor: Political Communication Division**

**Sun, 11/24: 11:00 AM  - 12:15 PM**

**Marriott Wardman Park**

**Room: Thurgood Marshall Ballroom East - Mezzanine Level**

This session features papers that examine new media influences on the political efficacy of young people, the appropriateness of political expression on Facebook, Facebook users' political participation and the role of social networking sites in campaign 2012.

#### Chair

*Lindsey Meeks*, University of Washington  - Contact Me

#### Respondent

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#### Sponsor/Co-Sponsors

Political Communication Division

## Presentations

### Civic Benefits and Civic Risks: New Media Influences on the Political Efficacy of Young Citizens

This study assesses the influences of new media on two civic orientations: political self-efficacy and political information efficacy. This study employed mixed methods, combining focus groups, in-depth interviews, and essay responses to directed questions. This study explored the processes by which users become motivated by or discouraged from engaging in civic affairs and found that new media use has both positive and negative influences on young citizens' political efficacy.

#### Author

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#### Co-Author

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### Connecting with Politics: Is Facebook an Appropriate Forum for Political Expression?

A survey of university students (N= 186) examined how emerging adults are using Facebook as a place to communicate about politics. The first hypothesis used regression analysis to test whether or not perception of Facebook as an appropriate space for political deliberation significantly predicted political engagement on Facebook. The results of the regression indicated that 13.9% of the variance of an individual's political engagement on Facebook could be accounted for by their belief in Facebook as an appropriate political forum. The second hypothesis advanced that those who perceive Facebook as an appropriate political forum will be more likely to disclose political preferences on Facebook. This hypothesis was supported and indicated that 11.6% of the variance of an individual's political disclosure on Facebook could be accounted for by their belief in Facebook as an appropriate political forum. The third hypothesis, which is supported, suggests that those who engage politically on Facebook will be more likely to welcome comments than voice disagreement, as well as show support for a candidate over dislike of a candidate. The final hypothesis advanced that one's political consciousness on Facebook will predict the amount of political engagement and political preference disclosure on Facebook; regression showed support for this hypothesis as well.

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### It’s Getting More Complicated: Facebook Users’ Political Participation in the 2012 Election

This research explored changes in political participation among users between the 2012 and 2008 presidential elections. Results from a survey of undergraduate students (N=167) found young voters' political participation offline and on Facebook has changed since 2008, although some elements remain the same. In 2012, as in 2008, political activity on Facebook and political knowledge both significantly predict offline political activity; however, intensity of Facebook use and political interest no longer do. Several factors that predicted political activity on Facebook in 2008 did not in 2012. Additionally, as Facebook's user base grew and diversified since 2008, we explore how context collapse may influence user choices concerning management of their contacts and content when discussing politics.

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### Using Social Network Sites To Improve Communication Between Political Campaigns and Citizens in the 2012 Election

During the 2012 United States election the prevalence of political campaigning permeated throughout social network sites. It was not uncommon for political candidates on all levels of government to integrate an array of social network sites in their campaign communication strategies. Despite their vast use in elections and the recognition of their significance in the media, there is a lack of empirical research that examines the complex relationship between political campaigns and social network sites. The present research responds to this gap in the literature as it seeks to understand how two Congressional campaigns employed social network sites to facilitate campaign communication. Following the collection of data from qualitative interviews with campaign staff, analysis revealed that social network sites were used to improve the effectiveness of their campaigns' messages, to generate online engagement and offline activism, and to improve understanding the needs and opinions of the electorate.

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