**EXECUTIVE TIME:**
**THE MEANING AND REACH OF PRESIDENTIAL TWEETS REGARDING**
**MIDDLE EAST POLICY IN THE PRESS**
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ABSTRACT

This research looks at tweets about the Middle East by former President Barack Obama and President Donald Trump to determine whether there is a pattern in coverage of the tweets by the news media. It takes tweets from the first year of Obama's second term and Trump's first year and codes them for tone and purpose, then examines the number of media outlets which quoted each tweet. It demonstrates a significant discrepancy between Obama and Trump in the number of tweets made about the Middle East, as well as the tendency of the press to cover tweets about the Middle East which contain criticism. Through analyzing journalists' responses to types of tweets made about the Middle East, this work highlights developments in press-state relations in the Twitter era.

# INTRODUCTION

President Donald Trump announced on Dec. 19, 2018, via a video posted to Twitter, that the US military would withdraw from Syria. The decision was met with bipartisan backlash — both on and off Twitter. "I want troops home too, but leaving Syria abruptly is betrayal to Kurds who have sacrificed and shed blood for Americans and it leaves Syrian Christians as sitting ducks," tweeted Mike Huckabee, a TV personality and a former Republican governor of Arkansas[1]. Quoting a tweet in which Trump said the US has defeated ISIS in Syria, Rep. Adam Kinzinger — a Republican representing Illinois — said, "This is simply not true."[2]

Just after midnight the next morning, Trump took to the social media platform to defend his widely criticized decision. "Does the USA want to be the Policeman of the Middle East, getting NOTHING but spending precious lives and trillions of dollars protecting others who, in almost all cases, do not appreciate what we are doing? Do we want to be there forever? Time for others to finally fight," he tweeted, going on to cite support from Republican Sens. Rand Paul and Mike Lee.

While one could certainly engage in a fascinating analysis of the reasoning behind Trump's policy in the Middle East, I am more interested in the mode of communication the head of state used in this spat — Twitter — and how the media engages with this speech.

Since Trump took office, journalists have made checking the commander-in-chief's Twitter feed part of their daily morning routine. The president makes many of his major announcements — and inflammatory remarks — on the social media site. Throughout the administration's first year, Trump's tweets addressed a wide range of issues, including the still raging Syrian Civil War and the decades-long Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

This thesis is part of research conducted by Dr. Shannon McGregor at the University of Utah and Dr. Regina Lawrence at the University of Oregon about how journalists have navigated coverage of tweets made by both Trump and former President Barack Obama. Many in the media are still debating what tweets mean legally and diplomatically, as well as how they impact public opinion. As politicians, specifically the president, increasingly turn to Twitter to make statements and disseminate information to the public, this project analyzes how journalists choose which tweets to cover and embed in stories, and how that decision is influenced by assumptions about the site's effect on the political climate.

Within this framework, my thesis takes a closer look at tweets related to the Middle East. The research considers how presidential press relations have evolved throughout time, how presidents use social media, and how the press covers social media. In my work, I will attempt to answer the questions: How have presidents addressed issues in the Middle East on social media? How have journalists covered statements made by presidents regarding the Middle East on social media?

To address the topic, we collected all tweets sent by Obama in the year following his inauguration in 2013 and all of those sent by Trump in the year following his inauguration in 2017. I then used a dictionary of terms to separate tweets that discussed the Middle East. I coded whether the tweets have a tone that contains praise, criticism, or is neutral. I then coded each tweet by purpose — call to action, announcement, ceremonial, attack on the press, other forms of attack, policy, commentary, personal, or unknown. Using the database Factiva, I searched news media sources for the text of presidential tweets, enabling me to track through time the tweets that were — and were not — fodder for news stories. I subsequently examined which types of presidential tweets make the news.

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[1] https://twitter.com/govmikehuckabee/status/1075605274268971008?lang=en
[2] https://twitter.com/repkinzinger/status/1075414512482668544?lang=en

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditionally, the relationship between the president and the press is one that has been theorized as being simultaneously symbiotic and competitive. In 1990, W. Lance Bennett debuted his indexing theory, which contends that news organizations base the range of perspectives in a story on the dominant viewpoints of those whom reporters perceive as having the authority to impact the outcome of an issue (Bennett 1990). He argued that journalists were dependent on official lines of communication from the White House in their coverage. So, under the indexing theory, the relationship between the administration and the press is mutually beneficial, as the president creates the news and the media disseminates the president's message. This approach to journalism can be either beneficial or problematic, depending on the state of American politics. When the government is operating democratically and elected officials come to the table with some valid alternatives for solving policy issues, coverage includes a variety of viewpoints that helps the public think critically about solutions. However, if political actors are sending messages that are deceptive or untruthful, those viewpoints are frequently given equal credence as those alongside its more plausible competitors (Bennett 2016). As the media turns to politicians and political actors for news content, these parties are meanwhile competing to determine who and what will shape the news (Cook 2005).

While these theories still contain truth, and help to explain the way the media covers government and politics, the environment in which news happens has changed. The White House no longer relies solely on a press corps to spread its messages. Presidents now have direct access to the public through numerous social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The latter, however, has emerged as the preeminent platform for political discourse and has been used frequently in recent years for presidential communication to political actors, journalists, and the public. Twitter was founded in 2006 as a microblogging social media site which initially allowed users to post messages in 140 characters or less, along with photos and videos. In 2017, the character limit was doubled. Since the site's inception, two presidents have used it to share information and interact with the public, often circumventing the press. Before becoming president, Donald Trump in 2012 described the platform as "like owning your own newspaper — without the losses" (Aldroubi & Karam 2017). Twitter, especially in Trump's case, has allowed the commander-in-chief to take on an additional role — one popularly known as "tweeter-in-chief." Emily Bell in 2017 observed in the Columbia Journalism Review, "Trump's behavior is not that of a 'normal' president, or even a regular politician per se, but of a loud, competitive, digitally attuned, populist media organization. For Trump, the medium is not just the message, it is the office, too" (Bell 2017). Trump has gone beyond using Twitter as his own personal media outlet to attack the press, transforming the relationship between the president and journalists away from being symbiotic, or even competitive, to being predatory. Although there has at times been contention, and even anger, between the media and past presidents, no other executive has worked to undermine the credibility of the press in the same way Trump has. While the changing communication methods of presidential administrations make the question of press coverage significant, journalists' response to this behavior takes on particular interest.

When Barack Obama began campaigning for president, he used social media unlike any other candidate before. Because he took advantage of new communication technologies, the public associated him with youth, progress, and volunteerism (Losh 2012). Obama's use of these new media platforms ushered in an era of increased intimacy and communication that is more widespread and targets specific audiences. Throughout his time in office, Obama distanced

himself from some of the online activities that he used in his campaign as he confronted the subversive side of technology brought by projects such as Wikileaks. However, many members of his staff continued to stay connected to social media, including Twitter, to spread political messages with few incidents of controversy (Losh 2012). Obama used Twitter primarily as an official platform, having his staff compose tweets for the official White House Twitter account — @POTUS. Although he didn't personally produce the tweets on the account, he reportedly approved each one before it was sent out (Lanktree 2016).

During his campaign and presidency, Donald Trump has taken a different approach to social media than his predecessor — especially on Twitter. On November 10, 2012, he tweeted, "Thanks- many are saying I'm the best 140 character writer in the world." Although many users challenged this opinion, it reflects his attitude toward the platform and how he uses it to influence his followers (Ott 2017). The current president primarily tweets from his personal account, @realDonaldTrump, rather than from the @POTUS account. The account was created in 2009 — years before he entered politics — as a marketing tool. His staff reportedly composed all tweets on the account until 2011 (Brooking & Singer 2018). After being elected president, Trump said of the account in an interview with The Times of London, "I think I'll keep it," citing his following (Diekmann & Gove). He now has approximately 2.3 times as many followers as the @POTUS account.

Trump tweets an average of 7.5 times everyday (Anderson 2017). On 17 percent of these days, the president creates "tweetstorms" when he tweets more than average and stirs up widespread controversy, which corresponds with an average 0.86 point fall in his Gallup approval rating the following day (Cassino 2017). According to research by Brian Ott at Texas Tech University, Twitter is separated from other social media sites by its simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. Ott argues that every communication medium conditions its users to behave in a certain way, and that Twitter ultimately trains users to "devalue others, thereby, cultivating mean and malicious discourse." Ott suggests that one of the reasons Twitter appeals to Trump is that he is able to mirror the simplicity and aggressiveness of his speech in tweets (p. 60, Ott 2017). In March 2016, a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology programmed a Twitterbot named "DeepDrumpf" to create tweets using an algorithm based on Trump's speech in hundreds of hours of debate transcripts. Many of the tweets came out remarkably similar to those posted on the president's account (Garfield 2016).

Trump's behavior on Twitter has raised questions as to whether or not his tweets should be taken as official presidential communication. Then-White House press secretary Sean Spicer told reporters in June 2017 that Trump's tweets are official statements, however, his handling of content and interactions with the public on that account have raised legal challenges. The National Security Archive, a nonprofit focused on government secrecy, sued the Trump administration in June 2017 over deleted tweets, which it contended was a breach of public records laws. In July 2017, the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University sued the president to stop him from blocking Twitter users who criticized him or his policies (Allsop 2017).

As Trump has increasingly used Twitter for a wide variety of purposes, from announcing policy decisions to criticizing lawmakers, the news media has devoted more coverage to his statements on the site. In 2017, Pew Research Center reported 67 percent of U.S. adults got their news from social media (Shearer and Gottfried 2017). For the remainder of American adults, however, the press remains a gatekeeper of presidential messaging. In a landscape where the press' relationship with the president is not the symbiotic one it once was, the way in which the media relays his Twitter messaging to the public becomes a significant question. It becomes even more critical when the demographics of Twitter — specifically political Twitter — are taken into

consideration. The social media site is dominated by political elites, and they are to whom journalists look for news. Research indicates that on Twitter, journalists are especially attuned to other journalists, as well as to politicians and other political actors (McGregor & Molyneux 2018; Hanusch & Nölleke 2018; Molyneux & Mourao 2017; Mourao 2015; Usher, Holcomb & Littman 2018). Many political journalists report checking Twitter on almost a minute-by-minute basis (Bane 2017; Lawrence 2015; McGregor 2018), lending credence to the aphorism that "If the news is the first draft of history, Twitter is the first draft of journalism" (Stross 2016).

In accordance with Bennett's indexing theory, the issues which ratchet up the most controversy and public debate are also those which can best reflect the health of the news media. Throughout both the Obama and Trump presidencies, issues in the Middle East and how the country should approach them have remained in the headlines. From terrorism to oil, Middle East policy has been a hot topic among American politicos. When Obama began his second term in 2013, Syria was already in the midst of its civil war. ISIS, formed in 2004 under the name "al-Qaeda in Iraq," began to reemerge in 2011. As its presence intensified, it changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2013 (Caves, Glenn, Nada, & Rowan 2019). At the time, there were only 150 American troops in Iraq (Nelson 2016) and troops in Afghanistan had declined to 46,000 (Associated Press 2016). Obama in 2013 began negotiations with Iran that would result in the 2015 nuclear deal (Nelson 2016). Meanwhile, then-Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi was deposed in a coup d'etat in July 2013. Although the first year of Obama's second term appears eventful in terms of American policy in the Middle East, it seems significantly less so relative to Trump's first year. Syria's civil war was still raging and ISIS had developed into a more threatening force. There were 11,000 troops in Afghanistan, which Trump ordered be increased by 4,000 in August of that year. In Iraq, there were 5,200 troops and in Syria there were 500 — although the Defense Department acknowledged that both of those numbers were most likely undercounts (Cooper 2017). A war in Yemen wreaked havoc in the region, and joined the war in Syria as yet another proxy war between Iran and its allies and Saudi Arabia and its allies — the U.S. favoring the latter. Trump intensified tensions in the region by recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and threatening to leave the Iran nuclear deal — which he eventually followed through with in 2018.

To take a closer look at both presidents' use of Twitter, my first research question is:
**RQ1:** How frequently did each president tweet about the Middle East?

The apparent disjunct and the widespread discourse regarding issues that fall within the realm of policy in the Middle East makes tweets surrounding the subject a topic of interest when considering journalists' coverage of presidential communication. To analyze the presidents' behavior and how the press responds, respectively, my second and third research questions are:
**RQ2:** What kinds of tweets did each president post about the Middle East in terms of their tone and function?
**RQ3:** What kinds of presidential tweets about the Middle East did journalists feature in their news stories?

METHODS

Through a quantitative analysis of tweets about the Middle East by the two presidents of the Twitter era, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, I document how frequently each president took to Twitter, as well as the function and tone of their tweets. I then match these tweets to news stories, quantitatively assessing the extent to which each tweet was, or was not, featured in news media.

**Twitter Data**

In preparation for the larger study, Dr. McGregor and Dr. Lawrence gathered the full corpus of tweets sent by President Obama in the first year of his second term, January 20, 2013, through January 20, 2014 (N=2,212). Likewise, they gathered the full corpus of tweets sent by President Trump in the first year of his term, January 20, 2017, through January 20, 2018 (N=2,516). The Twitter data was collected via Crimson Hexagon, a suite of social media analysis tools that access the full Twitter firehose. They created a query for each president's handle, @barackobama and @realDonaldTrump, respectively, and gathered all the tweets for the given time periods.

To compile tweets regarding the Middle East, I compiled a list of terms used by both presidents when discussing the region. I then searched for and compiled all tweets from the collected set that contained those terms. The terms included: 9/11, Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, Arab, Beirut, Benghazi, Coptic, Egypt, Extremism, foreign oil, Guantanamo, Iran, Iraq, ISIS, Islam, Israel, Jerusalem, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Middle East, Muslim, Netanyahu, Palestine, Palestinian, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Syria, Taliban, terror, terrorist(s), terrorism, Travel Ban, and Turkey. This list is obviously not an exhaustive list of all terms related to the Middle East, but was instead based on the language both presidents used in their tweets. Between the two presidents, there were a total of 149 tweets made about the Middle East.

**News Media Data**

I also collected information about whether or not — and with what intensity — tweets from presidents were featured in news stories. In order to gather this information, I queried the Factiva news database for the text of each of the 149 collected tweets about the Middle East. If the tweet text resulted in a match, I recorded the number of media outlets which published a story containing the tweet.

**Content Analysis**

Each tweet was coded for two mutually exclusive variables: tone and function.

*Tone*

The tone variable was intended to capture the character of each tweet with classifications of *praise*, *criticism*, and *neutral*. Tone was selected as an operationalization because Twitter, as a social media platform, is a public forum which is most commonly used to express opinion. In terms of tweets, if its message is positive or negative, that is because someone or something is being targeted with praise or criticism. In this analysis, for a tweet to be coded as praise or criticism, it must also contain an object (person, country, party, policy, etc.) of the criticism or praise. Generally, "positive" or "negative" sounding tweets that did not single out someone or something for praise or criticism were coded as neutral.

*Praise* tweets were defined as those that praised someone or something else or included self-praise. For example, this tweet from Trump would be coded as praise: "Unprecedented success for our Country, in so many ways, since the Election. Record Stock Market, Strong on Military, Crime, Borders, & ISIS, Judicial Strength & Numbers, Lowest Unemployment for Women & ALL, Massive Tax Cuts, end of Individual Mandate - and so much more. Big 2018!";

as would this tweet from Obama: "FACT: Since President Obama took office, America's dependence on foreign oil has decreased every year. #ActOnClimate."

*Criticism* tweets that critiqued other people or entities were coded as such even if they also contained praise. For example, this quote from Trump contains some self-praise, but also a criticism of the news media, so it was coded as criticism: "At some point the Fake News will be forced to discuss our great jobs numbers, strong economy, success with ISIS, the border & so much else!!"

*Neutral* tweets were defined as tweets that contained neither praise nor criticism. For example, this tweet from Trump would be coded as neutral: "Looking forward to meeting with Prime Minister @Netanyahu shortly. Peace in the Middle East would be a truly great legacy for ALL people!"

## Function

The function variable intended to capture the apparent purpose of the tweet. The function categories were mutually exclusive: if more than one category was present in a tweet, I chose the code that encapsulated the evidently dominant function of the tweet, except in certain circumstances. Tweets were coded as either a *call to action*, *an announcement*, *ceremonial*, *press attack*, *other attack*, *policy statement*, *commentary*, or *personal*.

Tweets in the *call to action* category must feature an explicit call to action, like this tweet from Obama: "We #ActOnClimate to save the planet, grow our economy, create jobs and reduce carbon pollution. Will you act?" This category also includes tweets that contain a call to interaction, asking people to do things like retweet, reply, or answer a question, like this tweet from Obama: "Retweet if you are proud that immigration is a part of our nation's heritage."

*Announcement* tweets included statements about what a president is currently doing, like this tweet from Trump: "Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Middle East were great. Trying hard for PEACE. Doing well. Heading to Vatican & Pope, then #G7 and #NATO."; or this tweet from the Obama feed: "Watch live: President Obama addresses the nation on Syria." Announcement tweets also include those announcing an accomplishment (called "credit-claiming" in political science literature), like this tweet from Trump: "Few, if any, Administrations have done more in just 7 months than the Trump A. Bills passed, regulations killed, border, military, ISIS, SC!"

*Ceremonial* tweets include holiday messages, like this tweet from Obama: "'I wish Muslims across America & around the world a month blessed with the joys of family, peace & understanding.' — President Obama #Ramadan." They may also express pride or sadness to commemorate something historically significant happening on that day, such as the death of a world leader or other well-known figure, as well as tweets memorializing certain moments in time, like this tweet from Trump: "May God Forever Bless the United States of America. #NeverForget911." This category also includes broad statements of American values, like this Trump tweet: "America's men & women in uniform is the story of FREEDOM overcoming OPPRESSION, the STRONG protecting the WEAK, & GOOD defeating EVIL! USA🇺🇸" or this Obama tweet: "We, the people, recognize that this government belongs to us ... we can't just sit on the sidelines."

*Press attack* tweets included those attacking the press as an institution, particular news media organizations, and/or on individual journalists. For example, this tweet from Trump was coded as an attack on the press: "The Failing New York Times foiled U.S. attempt to kill the single most wanted terrorist, Al-Baghdadi. Their sick agenda over National Security."

*Other attack* tweets were those which attacked someone or something other than the media. The attacks could be implicit, like this tweet from Trump: "At some point, and for the good of the country, I predict we will start working with the Democrats in a Bipartisan fashion. Infrastructure would be a perfect place to start. After having foolishly spent $7 trillion in the

Middle East, it is time to start rebuilding our country!" The attacks could also be more explicit, like this tweet from Trump: "The people of Iran are finally acting against the brutal and corrupt Iranian regime. All of the money that President Obama so foolishly gave them went into terrorism and into their 'pockets.' The people have little food, big inflation and no human rights. The U.S. is watching!" Attacks on the press, news media, or specific journalists were not included in this more general attack category, and were coded instead as "press attack."

   *Policy statement* tweets included specific statements of policy intent, policy beliefs (values), or policy changes. Trump's tweets promoting Executive Order 13769, which prevented individuals from Syria, Libya, Iran, Somalia, Yemen, and North Korea from entering the country, would fall into this category. An example of a policy statement tweet is this one, from Trump: "That's right, we need a TRAVEL BAN for certain DANGEROUS countries, not some politically correct term that won't help us protect our people!"

   *Commentary* tweets were those which included statements about current events that express the president's opinion on those events, including non-attack reactions to current events — for example, this tweet from Trump: "Horrible and cowardly terrorist attack on innocent and defenseless worshipers in Egypt. The world cannot tolerate terrorism, we must defeat them militarily and discredit the extremist ideology that forms the basis of their existence!" This category also captures President Trump's well-known habit of watching the news and tweeting his reactions to what he is seeing on the news, as well as retweeting those pieces. For example, this retweet would be coded as commentary: "RT @foxandfriends FOX NEWS ALERT: ISIS claims responsibility for hostage siege in Melbourne, Australia that killed 1 person and injured 3 cops." Such tweets were coded as commentary unless they included an attack or an attack on the press, in which case the attack aspect overruled the commentary and the tweet was coded as an attack or an attack on the press. This methodological choice was made because Trump's use of Twitter to attack others is frequently noticed among the public, and because we suspected that attack tweets might garner more news attention than those not containing an attack.

   *Personal* tweets contained self-disclosure or descriptions of the president's personal characteristics. For example, this tweet from Obama was coded as personal: "Of all that I've done in my life, I'm most proud to be Sasha and Malia's dad. To all those lucky enough to be a dad, Happy Father's Day!" A tweet about a holiday without self-disclosure, such as, "Happy Father's Day to all the dads out there!" was not coded as personal, but as ceremonial.

My analyses of presidential tweets and their news coverage were conducted using descriptive statistics. I did not include tests for statistical significance because my analysis included the census of tweets about the Middle East for each president during their first year in office. Inferential statistics were not necessary.

First, with respect to the frequency of each president's Twitter use, as earlier stated Obama in the first year of his second term — January 20, 2013, through January 20, 2014 — tweeted 2,212 times. In the first year of his term — January 20, 2017, through January 20, 2018 — Trump tweeted 2,516 times. The spread between the executives' total tweets was 304. In other words, Trump tweeted about 13.7% more than Obama. Addressing RQ1, the difference between their tweets about the Middle East was much starker. During the respective time period, Obama tweeted about the Middle East eight times, while Trump made 141 tweets about the region. Trump made 133 tweets more than Obama about the Middle East, or 1,662.5% more. Proportionately, about 0.4% of Obama's tweets were about the Middle East, while about 5.6% of Trump's tweets were about the Middle East.
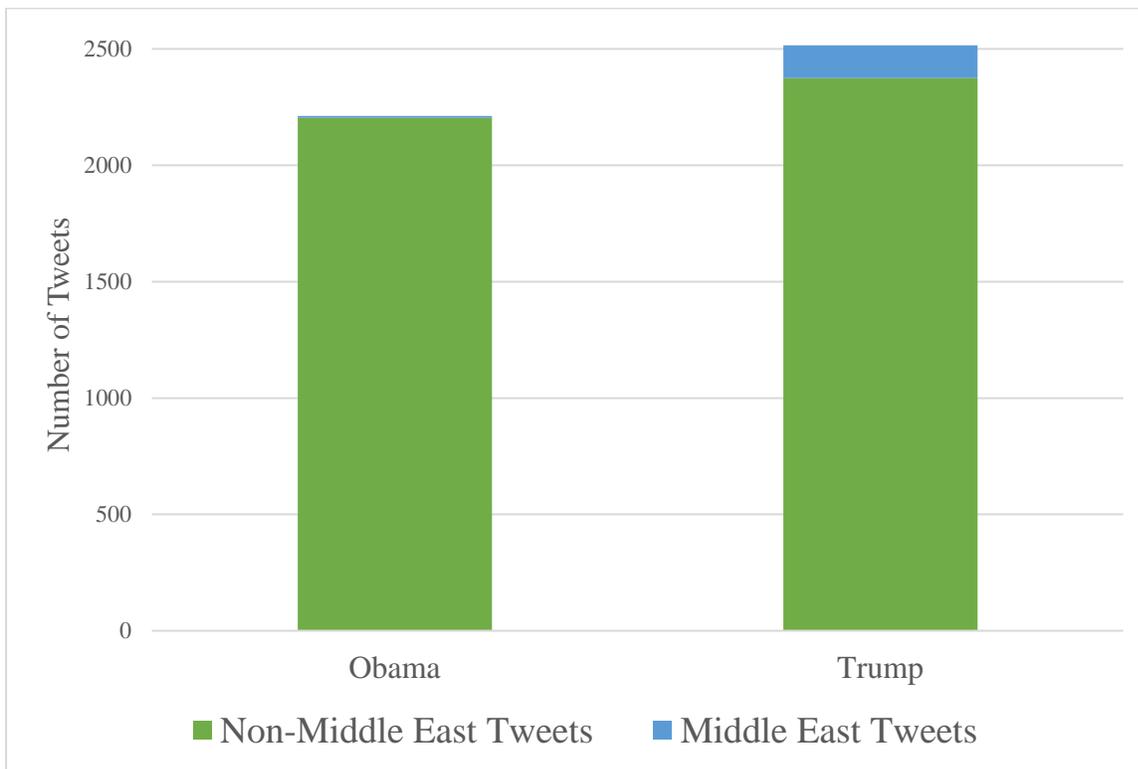


**Figure 1.** Proportion of presidential tweets about the Middle East

**Tone and Function of Tweets**

In regard to RQ2, because Obama tweeted so few times about the Middle East, it is impossible for me to effectively and fairly compare the tone and function of his tweets to Trump. I will still, however, look at each president's tweets on an individual basis.

**Table 1.** Tone of presidential tweets about the Middle East (percent)

|  | Obama | Trump |
|---|---|---|
| Neutral | 87.50 | 41.13 |
| Praise | 12.50 | 14.18 |
| Criticism | 0.00 | 44.68 |
| Total | 100.00 | 100.00 |
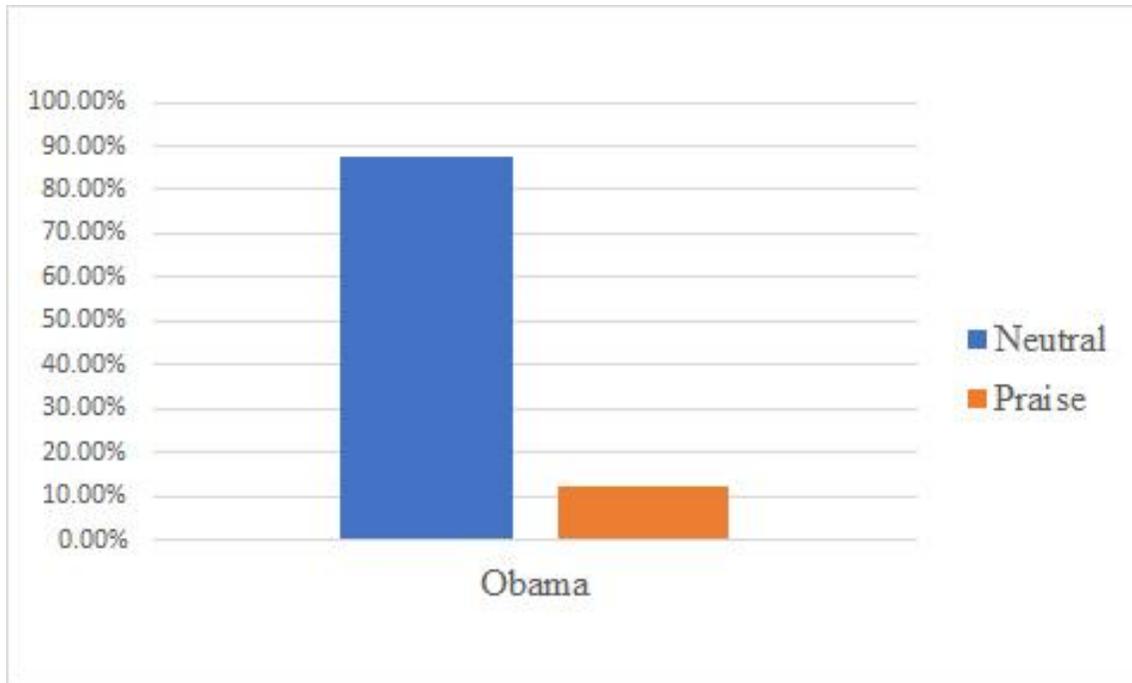


**Figure 2.** Tone of Obama's tweets about the Middle East

      In terms of the tone of his tweets about the Middle East, Obama was primarily neutral, with one instance of him using praise — in this case it was a tweet about his policy, in which he said, "FACT: Since President Obama took office, America's dependence on foreign oil has decreased every year. #ActOnClimate." Obama did not make any tweets about the Middle East that were critical of someone or something.
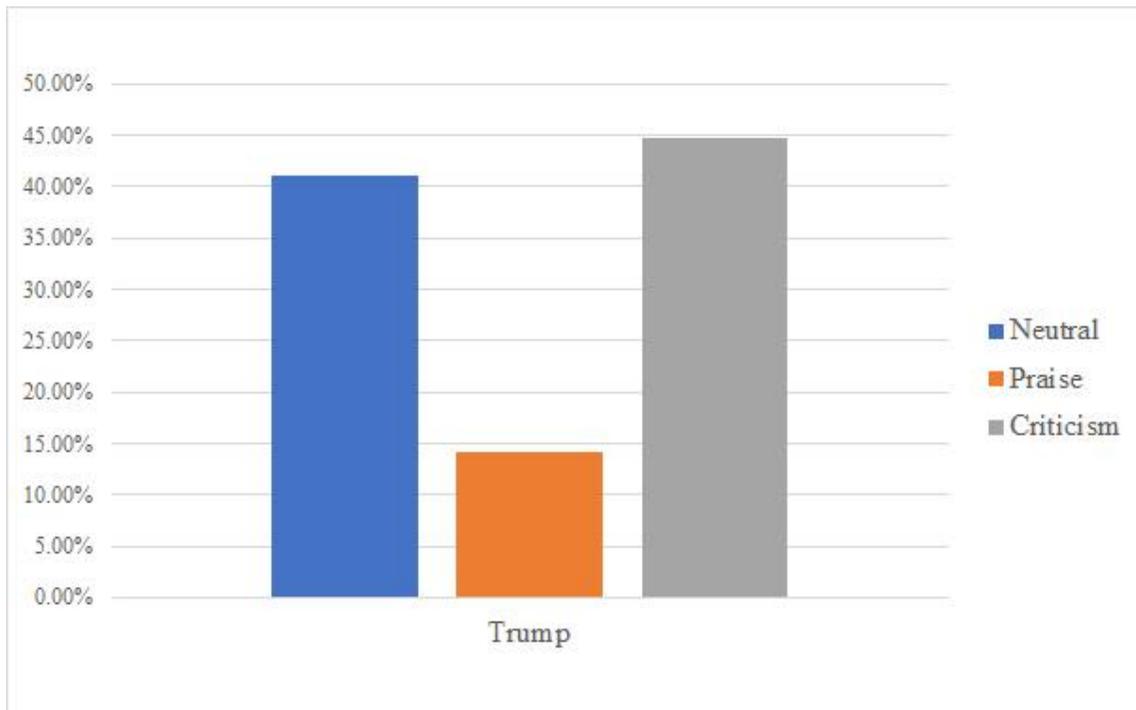
**Figure 3.** Tone of Trump's tweets about the Middle East

When it came to the tone of his tweets, Trump's account was noticeably negative. Of the three categories, Trump most frequently made tweets that were classified as criticism, with 44.68% of his tweets falling into that category. Targets include the Democratic party and its politicians, including Obama, as well other countries and their leaders, like the UK's prime minister, Theresa May. He also made a point to include the press in much of his criticism, like in this tweet: "At some point the Fake News will be forced to discuss our great jobs numbers, strong economy, success with ISIS, the border & so much else!"

The next category that Trump's tweets most frequently fell into was neutral, with a close 41.13%. Generally, those were announcements, ceremonial, or commentary. Only 14.18% percent of his tweets about the Middle East were praise. All of these praised military leaders, other world leaders, or his own administration, like this tweet: "Few, if any, Administrations have done more in just 7 months than the Trump A. Bills passed, regulations killed, border, military, ISIS, SC!"

**Table 2.** Function of presidential tweets about the Middle East (percent)

|  | Obama | Trump |
|---|---|---|
| **Call to action** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| **Announcement** | 50.00 | 38.30 |
| **Ceremonial** | 50.00 | 7.09 |
| **Attack the press** | 0.00 | 4.26 |
| **Other attack** | 0.00 | 26.95 |
| **Policy** | 0.00 | 12.06 |
| **Commentary** | 0.00 | 10.64 |
| **Personal** | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| **Unknown** | 0.00 | 0.71 |
| **Total** | 100.00 | 100.00 |
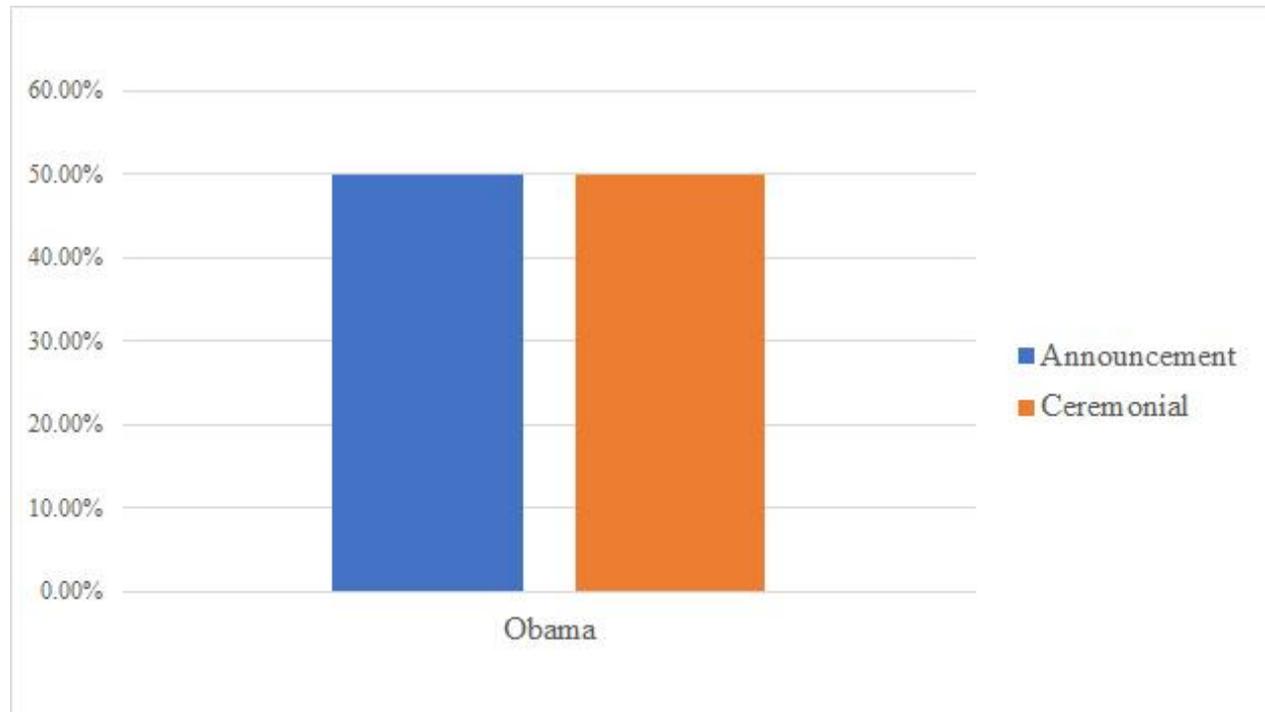


**Figure 4.** Function of Obama's tweets about the Middle East

In his eight tweets about the Middle East, Obama's messages could only be categorized as two functions — announcement and ceremonial. His tweets were divided evenly between the two functions. Most of his announcements were notifying the public of an address he was making to the American people regarding the civil war in Syria, although one was credit-claiming. His ceremonial tweets commemorated 9/11, as well as recognized Muslim and Coptic Christian holidays, like this one on January 7, 2014: "'Michelle and I wish Coptic Orthodox Christians in the United States and around the world a joyous Christmas.' — President Obama."
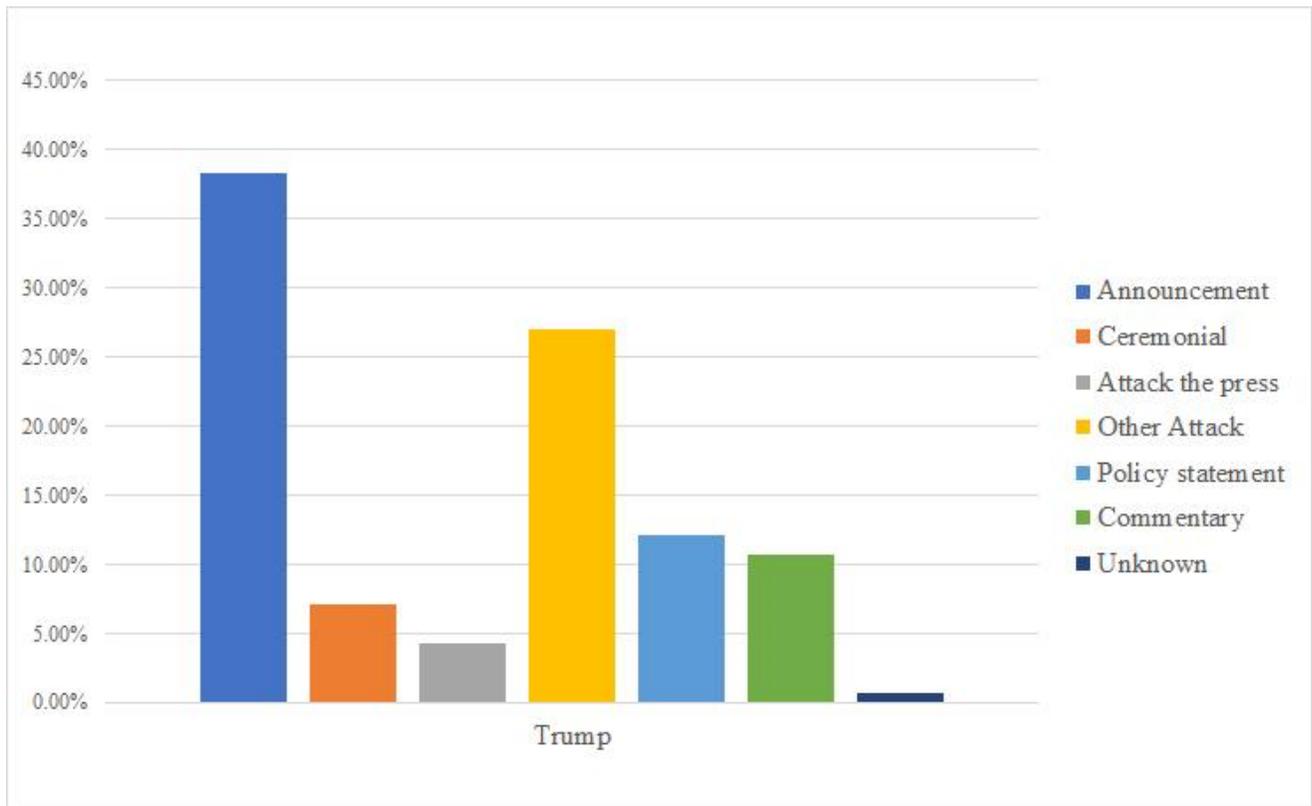
**Figure 5.** Function of Trump's tweets about the Middle East

The most frequent function of Trump's tweets was announcement, which comprised 38.3% of all tweets about the Middle East. Many of these discussed Trump's interactions with world leaders, like this tweet: "Looking forward to meeting with Prime Minister @Netanyahu shortly. Peace in the Middle East would be a truly great legacy for ALL people!" Others included policy announcements, like this one: "I have determined that it is time to officially recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. I am also directing the State Department to begin preparation to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem." There were a few that were classified as announcement because they contained credit-claiming.

Consistent with the earlier noted negativity of his tweets about the Middle East, the next most frequent function was an attack on people, institutions, or objects outside of the press. These included: Democrats, Obama, Tennessee Republican and former-Sen. Bob Corker, New York Democratic Sen. Chuck Schumer, the US Justice Department, the US 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, British Prime Minister Theresa May, London Mayor Sadiq Khan, Scotland Yard, Qatar, Iran, a variety of terrorists and terrorist organizations, as well as Muslim refugees in general. Among those coded as other attack were his retweets of now-suspended account @JaydaBF, which was run by Jayda Fransen, the former deputy of the Britain First Party. The far-right political organization is known for organizing "Christian Patrols" and "mosque raids." Fransen was convicted under a UK law in March 2019 of stirring up hatred during a speech about Islam in Belfast. One of the tweets Trump retweeted was a video captioned, "Muslim migrant beats up Dutch boy on crutches!" British Prime Minister Theresa May condemned the action, with a spokesman quoted as saying, "British people overwhelmingly reject the prejudiced rhetoric of

the far right, which is the antithesis of the values that this country represents — decency, tolerance and respect. It is wrong for the president to have done this" (Middle East Eye 2019).

One of the least used functions — besides call to action and personal, which Trump didn't use at all — was attacks on the press. He did, however, make six tweets about the Middle East that included attacks on the press. Trump specifically targeted *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *CNN*. Other tweets disparaged the press in general, using the phrases "fake news" and "very biased media." This included tweets like this thread from Trump: "The Amazon Washington Post fabricated the facts on my ending massive, dangerous, and wasteful payments to Syrian rebels fighting Assad..... So many stories about me in the @washingtonpost are Fake News. They are as bad as ratings challenged @CNN. Lobbyist for Amazon and taxes?" As discussed by *New York Times* reporters Alicia Parlapiano and Larry Buchanan (2017), this category of tweets seemed designed by Trump not just to disagree with press coverage, but to undermine the media's credibility among his followers.

**Press Coverage of Presidential Tweets**

Of Trump's 141 tweets about the Middle East, 127 — or 90% — were quoted in at least one news story. Four of Obama's eight tweets about the Middle East — or 50% — were covered in at least one news story. Similar to RQ2, the results of press coverage of Obama's and Trump's tweets cannot be compared because of the low volume of tweets Obama made about the Middle East.

In terms of the function of presidential tweets, all of Obama's tweets that were covered in at least one news story were ceremonial. Of Trump's tweets, 88.89% of announcements were covered, 90% of ceremonial tweets were covered, 83.33% of attacks on the press were covered, 92.11% of other attacks were covered, 94.12% of policy statements were covered, and 86.67% of commentary tweets were covered.
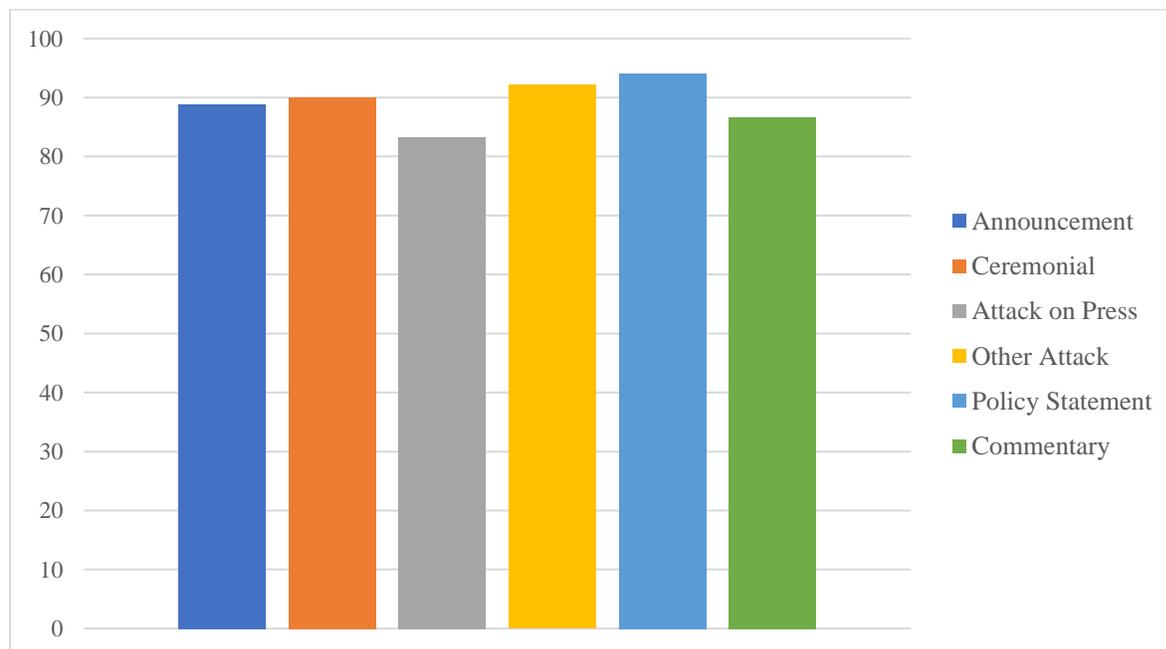


**Figure 6.** Percent of Trump's tweets about the Middle East, by function, featured in news stories

Of Obama's tweets, his one tweet containing praise was not covered, and 57.14% of his neutral tweets were covered. When it came to tone, Trump's emotive tweets were most frequently covered in at least one article published by the news media. Among his tweets,

87.93% of neutral tweets were covered, 90% of tweets containing praise were covered, and 92.06% of tweets containing criticism were covered. Because of Trump's high ratio of tweets that were critical or neutral and his low ratio of tweets that contained praise, of all his tweets quoted in at least one story published by the media 45.67% contained criticism, 40.16% were neutral, and 14.17% contained praise. This compares to the corpus of his tweets, which is comprised of 44.68% containing criticism, 41.13% that are neutral, and 14.18% that contain praise.
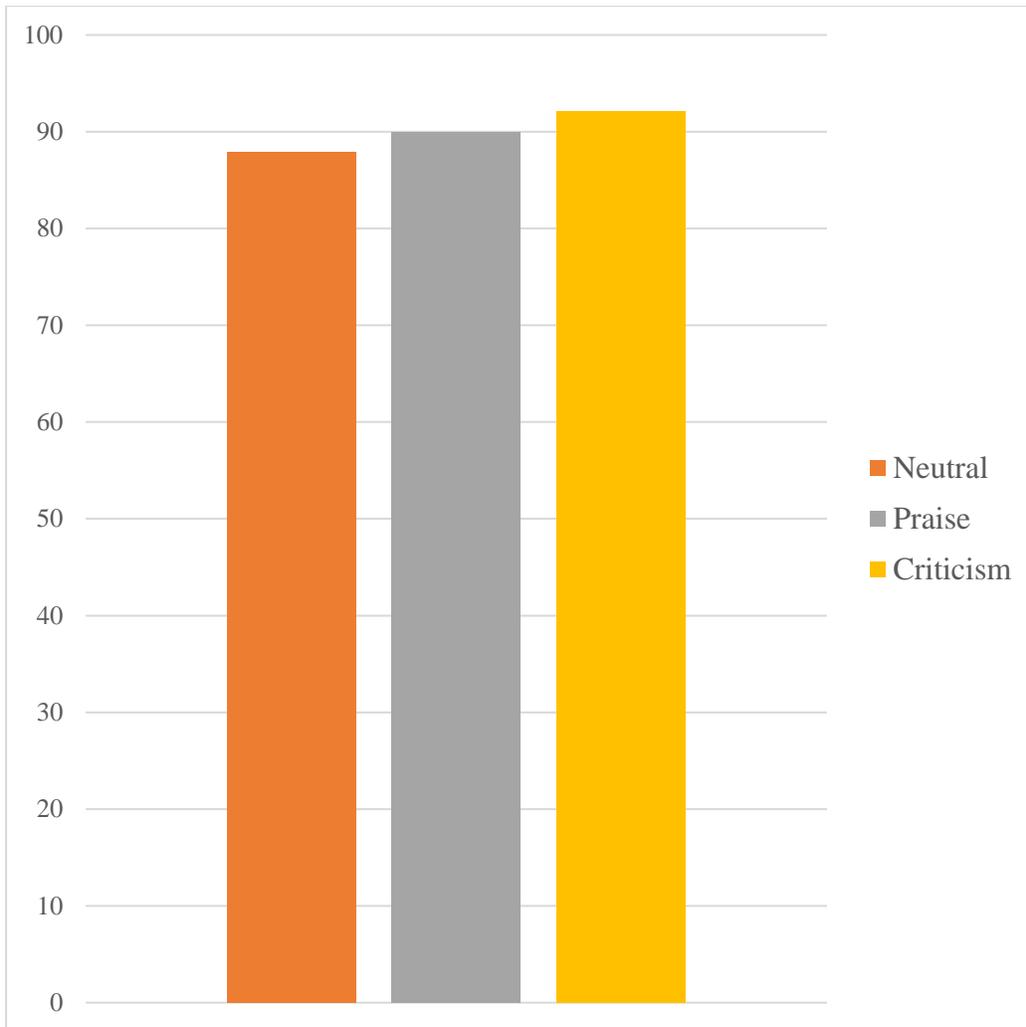


**Figure 7.** Percent of Trump's tweets about the Middle East, by tone, featured in news stories

        The above analysis relies on a dichotomous variable for a news "mention." However, I also collected a count variable — the number of media outlets in the Factiva database that featured a given tweet in at least one story. Using this count variable, we ran an OLS-regression predicting news intensity (Althaus & Coe, 2011), with the tweet author, the tweet's tone, and the tweet's various functions as independent variables. The model suggests that the strongest antecedents for news intensity among tweets about the Middle East are a tweet containing criticism and a tweet functioning as an attack on someone or something other than the press. The prevalence of coverage of tweets containing criticism is especially notable, as there is a 9.9% variation in news intensity around tweet tone.

**Table 3**. OLS Regression Model Testing Tweet-level Antecedents of News Intensity

| | **News Intensity** |
|---|---|
| *Block 1: Tweet Author* | |
| Trump | .154*** |
| $\Delta R^2$ (%) | 2.4% |
| | |
| *Block 2: Tweet Tone* | |
| Criticism | .331*** |
| Praise | .029*** |
| $\Delta R^2$ (%) | 9.9% |
| | |
| *Block 3: Tweet Function* | |
| Announcement | .120 |
| Ceremonial | .161 |
| Press Attack | -.035 |
| Other Attack | .349 |
| Policy | .252 |
| Commentary | .140 |
| $\Delta R^2$ | 5.5% |
| | |
| Total $R^2$ | 17.8% |

$F(11, 1120)=22.158, p<.001.$
*Note*: Sample size = 149. Cell entries are final-entry OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients.
\* $p < .05$; \*\* $p < .01$; \*\*\* $p<.001$.


DISCUSSION

In this study, I set out to explore how the first American presidents of the Twitter era utilized that platform to engage with issues surrounding the Middle East, and how journalists responded, by comparing Obama and Trump's Twitter use during the first year of Obama's second term and Trump's first term. I found that Obama posted far less about the Middle East during that time period than Trump did, respectively. This may be explained by the difference in volume and gravity of current events related to the Middle East during the two time periods. Although media coverage of the tweets is not comparable due to the few tweets Obama made about the Middle East, it is notable that opposed to the 50% of Obama's tweets that were covered, a total of 90% of Trump's tweets about the Middle East were covered. This reflects the sentiment that communication scholar Susan Douglas (2018) observed during the 2016 presidential election — that the press covered nearly every tweet made by Trump — and suggests that this pattern may have carried over into his term.

Trump's tone in his tweets about the Middle East was most frequently critical, which is probably not surprising to those who follow his account on Twitter. The tone he used least was one containing praise. This was also true for Obama — of his eight tweets, only one contained praise. The rest were neutral. For the same reason I cannot compare the tone used in the

presidents' tweets, I likewise cannot compare press coverage of the tweets. On an individual basis, though — specifically when it comes to Trump's tweets — it appears that one of the driving determinants as to whether or not a tweet is covered by the media is its tone. Tweets containing criticism were much more likely to be covered than those that were neutral or included praise. In Trump's case, this may partially be prompted by Trump's tendency to attack the press — a phenomenon that does not go unnoticed by reporters. Another explanation for the media's emphasis on negative tweets may be that the tone of news stories about Trump that featured his tweets were themselves likely to be negative in order to draw up a critical assessment of the administration, as observed in an analysis by the Pew Research Center (Grieco and Gottfried 2017). The attention given to these tweets may also be due to the ways in which they violate the norms of presidential speech. Politico's senior media writer Jack Shafer has said of Trump's tweets, "This is the first time we've had this type of open access to the subconscious of the president" (Ingram 2017).  CNN's senior media correspondent, Brian Stelter, has said that "even after covering Trump for months, he is still surprised by how the president uses Twitter. 'When I've gone on vacation and reinstalled my account and seen the president's Twitter feed, I can't help but be shocked by some of the things he shares'" (quoted in Ingram 2017).

More research is needed to understand presidential communication regarding the Middle East in the Twitter era and how that impacts press coverage of both the White House and the region. Questions to be examined in future research include: How are presidential tweets about the Middle East contextualized in news stories? Are the amounts of retweets and likes on a tweet taken into account when making coverage decisions, or to gauge public opinion? How do the Twitter habits of American executives, as well as patterns of coverage, compare to those of heads of state in the Middle East?

As new presidents are elected, it is unlikely they will revert from the use of Twitter as a mode of communication back to a traditional relationship with the press. Likewise, journalists' tendency to quote messages posted to the social media site, specifically those critical of others, will probably become precedent.

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