The Use of Social Media by Religious Leaders: Evangelical Leaders and Twitter

Abstract:

Social media is altering how some religious leaders communicate with their followers and with the public. This has the potential to challenge theories of religious communication that have been developed in the study of traditional modes such as sermons. We examine how leaders in U.S. evangelicalism use the public platform provided by Twitter. Using over 85,000 tweets from 88 prominent evangelical leaders, we find that these leaders often use their social media platforms as a natural extension of their current modes of communication. However, our findings also suggest that for some leaders social media may be a medium for political communication. Our analysis provides support for the belief that religious leaders that have gained a following for being politically active use their Twitter accounts to spread their political message in contrast to the clear majority of other leaders in our sample who remain relatively silent on political issues. We conclude with a discussion of how our analysis advances theories of religion and communication.

Introduction

In February of 2011, controversial preacher Rob Bell tweeted out a link to a video that he had produced to promote his newly released book, *Love Wins.* (*Rob Bell - LOVE WINS: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived.* 2011). The central purpose of Bell's book was to closely consider the role that Hell played in Christian theology. The video, highlighting that theme, featured Bell telling a story about Mahatma Gandhi that ended in him asking the question, "Gandhi's in Hell, and you know this for sure?" Up until this point Rob Bell had been seen as a somewhat controversial, yet still accepted member of mainstream evangelicalism (Sanneh 2012), but reaction to the video and the underlying message came quickly on social media. The most famous tweet about the incident came from another prominent evangelical on Twitter, Pastor John Piper. On February 26, 2011 Piper tweeted out three simple words, "Farewell Rob Bell,"[1] followed by a link to an article written by another author on Piper's website that expressed the opinion that "Bell himself shows that he is moving farther and farther away from anything resembling biblical Christianity" (Taylor 2011). That moment on Twitter has been rehashed numerous times in online publications (LaTondresse 2011; Menzie 2011), and there was even a follow up article three years later entitled, "Whatever Happened to Rob Bell?" (Bailey 2014)

While the John Piper tweet was an important moment in American evangelical theology, it was virtually unnoticed in the larger social media world. Evangelicals' Twitter use has moved into a more prominent position following the 2016 presidential election. Donald Trump, who used Twitter to great effect during his campaign (Hess 2016), would often take to the social media platform to respond to his critics, often by insulting them (Quealy 2016). Russell Moore, who serves as the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote an Op-Ed in the New York Times where he went on the attack against Donald Trump. Moore wrote, "The man

[1] https://twitter.com/JohnPiper/status/41590656421863424

on the throne in heaven is a dark-skinned, Aramaic-speaking 'foreigner' who is probably not all that impressed by chants of 'Make America great again'" (Moore 2016). Trump fired back on his Twitter account three days later writing, "Russell Moore is truly a terrible representative of Evangelicals and all of the good they stand for. A nasty guy with no heart!"[2] This resulted in a Twitter exchange where Moore likened Trump to King Ahab who chose to follow false gods and had to be punished by Elijah (Dias 2016). After Trump's unexpected victory in the presidential election, Christianity Today ran a column entitled, "Is It Too Late for Russell Moore to Say Sorry?" (Shellnutt 2016)

These two events speak to a larger question of how opinion leaders in evangelical Christianity engaged with their followers and potential converts in the world of social media. For instance, some nationally known pastors such as Joel Osteen have used the platform to great effect, amassing nearly five million followers. The question is whether such success is uncommon. How do other, possibly more controversial figures use platforms like Twitter, especially when it comes to the volatile mix of religion politics, and social media?

Literature Review

If one were to describe the relationship between clergy and politics it would be tenuous. On its face, clergy are ideally suited to not only engage in politics themselves, but to also use the power of their pulpit to try to mobilize and persuade their congregations to support candidates of their political persuasion. Clergy are by and large highly educated (Guth, Green, Smidt, & Kellstedt, 1997; Perl & Chang, 2000; McDaniel, 2008), have many resources at their disposal (P.A. Djupe and Gilbert 2002; Finke and Dougherty 2002; P.A. Djupe and Gilbert 2006), make reasonable incomes (Perl and Chang 2000; Trawick and Lile 2007), and have a great deal of latitude when it comes to how they spend their time (Brunette-Hill and Finke 1999; Andersen 2004). This combination is exactly what most political scientists believe are ideal conditions for a politically active individual (Nie and Verba

[2] https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/729613336191586304

1987; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Despite this perfect opportunity for political action, clergy have been notoriously reluctant to speak publicly about political issues or engage in any sort of political participation outside basic civic requirements such as voting in primaries and elections (P.A. Djupe and Gilbert 2002).

While clergy may have a great deal of flexibility regarding their economic situation, as well as their use of time, they are highly constrained in how they can use those resources. Pastors and priests from almost all traditions face pressure internally (their personal theology regarding religion's role in political life), and externally (members of their congregation who tithe to provide the pastor's salary). Either of these factors can compel a religious leader to speak or tweet about a political issue, but each of them could also give pause to a member of the clergy before they take to the pulpit or to the keyboard.

When an individual decides to dedicate their career to religious service it is without question that a driving cause of that choice is a religious conviction that they have been anointed or called by a divine power to serve (Christopherson 1994). While each individual priest can feel the call into ministry, the way that their calling is evidenced in day to day life can be highly variable. Some pastors, for example, feel that the call to ministry does not end at being the religious leader for a community of faith but also the congregation's political voice to government officials (Owens 2007). One study of nearly one hundred Protestant ministers found that the pastors who did choose to speak out on political issues did so because they felt called by God to be prophets for their congregation and their denomination (Olson 2000). This analysis was done long before the advent of social networking, but a worthwhile extension may ask whether this prophetic message is carried forward only in the pulpit or is reinforced on a regular basis in the more public sphere of Twitter.

This divine need is rooted in what scholars refer to as "social theology," which refers to how a member of the clergy views the role of the Church in relation to the rest of the world (Guth et al.

1997). Many denominations and pastors have struggled with how to guide their congregation in engaging those outside the church in order to seek transformative change. Pastors who have a social theology that teaches separation create a strong sense of social identity among their flock (Burris and Jackson 2000); however, these churches often struggle with how to engage the larger culture and, thus, how to bring in new converts (Paul A. Djupe and Calfano 2013; Burge and Djupe 2014). This tension was described nearly five decades ago by Jeffrey Hadden, who called this "the gathering storm," where the clergy urge the congregation to "move beyond the four walls of the church," while the congregation, "seeks comfort and escape from the world in the sanctuary of God" (Hadden 1969, 99).

This friction between the two approaches to Christianity is crucial because it speaks to a larger concern that a member of the clergy must always consider: keeping congregants happy. The earliest scholars of religious clergy found that pastors and priests were overwhelmed with the necessity to maintain good relationships with members of their congregation and believed that if they spoke out on political issues that they ran the risk of alienating a significant portion of their membership (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Hadden 1969; Quinley 1974). These early works take special care to note that clergy's positions are unlike any other in the workforce. He or she must walk into a parish that "has an ongoing social structure of its own" (Quinley 1974, 43). Having to quickly understand the unwritten rules of structure and culture is complicated by the fact that clergy are asked to be preachers, teachers, counselors, arbiters, and leaders all at once (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959).

To add further complexity to this relationship, pastors face an employment situation where they have essentially no legal protection from termination for any reason (Totenberg 2012). This tenuous situation is heightened by the fact that they often move away from family and friends to seek employment and some churches require that pastors live in houses owned by the church,

circumstances that would make an unexpected termination detrimental to both financial and spiritual health (Quinley 1974). Given these factors, it would seem apparent that pastors would be reluctant to speak out on political matters. These constraints are so profound that they either force a change in social theology, or at least put restraints on how that social theology is presented to the congregation. Stark writes, "we become convinced that silence is not something imposed on clergy, but something they impose on themselves." (Stark 1971, 97). One must consider however, that with the somewhat permanent nature of social media, that there could be potential evidence of evangelical leaders dipping their toe in the waters of political discourse and then making corrections based on the instantaneous feedback they receive from their followers.

While there have been a great deal of analyses on how and when local clergy engage in political activities in their local parishes, there has been little scholarship on how denominational leaders approach the delicate topic of church and state. While pastors at the congregational level can follow the lead, or advice, of those above them in their church hierarchy (Campbell and Pettigrew 1959; Calfano 2009), how do the opinion leaders decide what is appropriate or inappropriate when it comes to discussing matters of government and politics? Do these denominational leaders take advantage of the freedom they enjoy on social media to say what is on their mind or are they too constrained by larger factors themselves?

However, while little research on denominational leaders' use social media as a platform for engaging issues related to politics exists, several studies of celebrity use of social media offer some general clues as to the factors that may motivate and constrain the online activities of church leaders. There is, for example, an important correlation between attitudes toward fame—namely, a strong desire for visibility—and frequent, active online engagement, such as posting and responding to posts as opposed to simply reading posts (Greenwood 2013). Denominational leaders who desire

some level of fame, or who are motivated by their role as leaders to maintain a high degree of visibility, therefore, may have a more active online presence.

According to Marshall (2010), there are three levels of self-presentation whereby celebrities exhibit their lives to a public audience online. The first is the "public self." The public self is most interested in, what can be put simply as, self-promotion or self-marketing—i.e., ticket sales, public appearances, new book or music releases, etc. The use of social media as a marketing tool by celebrities has been highlighted by several studies, including Kaplan and Haenlein's examination of the viral marketing strategy utilized by Britney Spears (2012).

The second form of public self-presentation is what Marshall calls the "public private self" (2010). This is a more personal presentation of self, meant to convey publically the celebrity's private life (albeit, at times, a choreographed version of it). Twitter is most often the vehicle of choice for displaying the public private self, mostly due to the platform's facilitation of "short textual bursts" that promote immediacy and possess a level of mobile connectivity not readily afforded by other varieties of social networking (Marshall 2010, 45). This particular sort of self-presentation is akin to the fan-celebrity relationship exemplified by Lady Gaga and her "Little Monsters," which is aided by her passionate online engagement with fans (Click, Lee, & Holladay 2013). It is this engagement with followers that is likely to most characterize the public private self.

The "transgressive self" is the third form of self-presentation proposed by Marshall (2010)—it is also the hardest to measure. Marshall describes the transgressive self as "an accelerated pathway to notoriety and attention both in the wider world of on-line culture for all users and very visibly for celebrities whose behavioural transgressions expressed in interpersonal registers move swiftly into the powerful viral on-line juggernaut" (2010, 45). This self is most motivated by emotion, and it is often considered by audiences as the most honest form of self-presentation, often visceral and/or

highly intimate in nature. The transgressive self is also the most likely to "go viral," and is likely to be picked up quickly by traditional media outlets and entertainment news.

Regarding the more narrow relationship between the dimensions of self-presentation and engagement with politics, the public self and the public private self could potentially constrain denominational leaders from speaking out about politics more than compel, depending on the pressures exerted on them by their personal theology, the attitudes of church members, and the level of acceptance for such online behavior on the part of fellow denominational leaders.

Of course, the extent to which church leaders are motivated by the nature of their celebrity image may further determine the extent to which they engage with political issues on platforms such as Twitter. If addressing political issues could hurt a church leader's image or hamper celebrity, such activity is likely avoided. On the other hand, if an evangelical leader's trademark message is uniquely political, political engagement on Twitter may be more likely. However, to date, little research on the online activities of evangelical leaders exists.

Data

To capture a general sense of how evangelical leaders used Twitter, the first task undertaken was to compile a list of prominent Twitter accounts; however, two factors complicated this task. First, there is no universally accepted definition of the concept "evangelical." The scholarly literature has constantly evolved on the topic (see (Bebbington 2003; Hackett and Lindsay 2008), and the evangelical community struggles internally with the criteria (Kurtzleben 2015). The approach that we took was straightforward. We chose to analyze the accounts of prominent religious leaders that most individuals who attended traditionally evangelical churches would see as "one of them." This led us to compile a list that contained a great number of denominational leaders, especially of the Southern Baptist Convention, including Richard Land, and Russell Moore. In addition, the authors of

bestselling books on Christian living like Rick Warren, Joyce Meyer, and John Hagee were added to the sample.

The other problem we encountered was how to define influential Twitter accounts. In general, we worked under the assumption that the Twitter accounts that have a larger number of followers are more likely to have their tweets read and responded to, therefore the total number of Twitter followers was taken into account as well. The average account that was included in our sample has over 370,000 followers. The most popular account was Joel Osteen with 4.68 million followers while the fewest number was Ted Haggard's (the former President of the National Association of Evangelicals) with 938 followers.[3]

Our final list was a collection of 88 total accounts that were scraped using the twitteR package, which was written for R statistical analysis software.[4] Twitter has a number of APIs available to scrape tweets from their database, however the public API was chosen for this analysis because it is provided without charge to researchers. There are several limitations to using the public API, and the one that constrains this analysis to the greatest degree is that a user can only download the last 3,200 tweets from each user account. This does truncate the dataset for some accounts; however, only one of the accounts that we analyzed contained more than 3,200 tweets and therefore we could capture the entire history of nearly our entire sample. The final dataset contained 85,543 tweets with over 1.2 million total words. The scraping process was conducted during the first half of September of 2016. The earliest tweet was created on December 13th of 2008, and the most recent tweet in the dataset was September 17th, 2016.

Findings

The growth in Twitter volume

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[3] A full list of each account in the sample is available in the Appendix.
[4] Jeff Gentry (2015). twitteR: R Based Twitter Client. R package version 1.1.9. https://CRAN.R-project.org/package=twitteR

Figure 1 shows the change in the volume of Twitter activity of evangelical leaders during the period we sampled. One can easily see that Twitter use has increased exponentially in recent years. Due to the potential usefulness of rapid updates when it comes to sharing material, many have likely turned to Twitter as a social networking tool since one of the key features of Twitter is the speed with which it allows users to make updates (Levinson 2009). In April of 2016, there were 3,453 tweets scraped, and in August of the same year that total rose to 6,377 total tweets. The trajectory we observed would indicate that the number of tweets doubles every six to nine months.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

The most effective and influential tweeters

Evangelical tweets can be examined by two broad metrics: *prolific-ness* and *effectiveness*. The former can be measured by simply comparing the total number of tweets per evangelical included in our analysis. The latter can be measured by comparing the number of Twitter followers per evangelical Twitter account and the frequency that evangelical tweets are retweeted and favorited by other Twitter users. Joel Osteen is, by far, the most prolific tweeter, followed by Beth Moore. However, while Joel Osteen has the greatest number of tweets that have been retweeted, Joyce Meyer and John Piper have had a greater proportion of their tweets retweeted by other Twitter users. Billy Graham is the least prolific tweeter among the top 35 evangelical Twitter accounts; although, a large share of (what few) tweets he has produced have been retweeted. When it comes to favorites, the share of tweets per evangelical Twitter account that have been favorited by other Twitter users is quite high. Joel Osteen, again, appears especially dominant. This would provide support for a clear association between the number of retweets and favorites received per tweet; however, favorites are more often received in comparison to retweets. Additionally, the number of

followers per evangelical Twitter account appears to have a positive correlation with retweets and favorites; although, there are some exceptions. [5]

Figure 2 plots the mean number of retweets per tweet and the mean number of favorites received per tweet for each of the top 35 evangelical Twitter accounts. To make the plotted points more distinguishable, the mean number of retweets and favorites are placed on a log10 scale. The number of followers per Twitter account is denoted by the size of the plotted points: a larger point denotes more followers.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Effectiveness by one metric is positively associated with effectiveness in the other. While Joel Osteen is not only the most effective on Twitter, his number of followers is also the greatest. Meanwhile, Tim Tebow, who has the second most effective Twitter account, has fewer Twitter followers than Joel Osteen, but many more than the individuals who appear in the lower left corner of the plot. However, there are some exceptions to this pattern. Joyce Meyer and Lecrae, for example, have nearly equal levels of effectiveness even though the former has substantially more followers on Twitter than the latter.

Word Usage

When analyzing the words used by the evangelical leaders in the sample, the most straightforward and effective way to visualize frequency is a word cloud, which can be seen in Figure 3. It is not surprising from the sample that the evangelicals we analyzed used religious language with a great amount of regularity. "God" was the most used word in the sample, appearing a total of 10,656 times, which is over twice as much as the second most used word "us". It is somewhat intriguing that this sample was three times more likely to use the word "God" than "Jesus", and the

[5] See Appendix Figures 1A, 2A, and 3A for visualizations of how frequently the top 35 Twitter accounts receive both favorites and retweets.

word “Christ” is invoked half as much as “Jesus”. The overall tone of the words used by evangelicals could most aptly be described as encouraging and collective. For example, “will”, “love”, “new”, and “life” all appear in the top ten word counts. In addition, the sample writes in an inclusive manner, with words like “us” and “team” having counts of over 4,000 occurrences each. It thus seems that many of the individuals who are preachers or evangelists use their Twitter accounts as an extension of their religious message. Many high-profile evangelicals like Joel Osteen use tweets as a way to encourage both their local congregation as well as the wider audience that follows them on social media. These results provide support for the notion that evangelical leaders both focus on the promotional use of social media but also the ability for Twitter to create a connection between author and followers, although that connection could be considered particularly weak. What is also notable is that none of the top 250 words in the sample have any sort of overt political meaning. This will be explored in greater depth later in the analysis.

[FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Engagement with Other Users

While the previous analysis seems to indicate that evangelical leaders try to use their tweets as a way to be inclusive of their audience, we wanted to further explore how often these individuals engage with the larger “Twitterverse”. One simple way to measure engagement is the number of replies to, or mentions of, another user via use of the “@” symbol either at the beginning, or in the body of the text. Both of these actions lead followers to believe that an evangelical leader wants to draw attention to other users or to directly engage in a conversation with someone that follows them on Twitter. Each of these would provide direct evidence that social connectedness is a primary motivator for the use of Twitter by evangelical celebrities.

[FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 4 displays the results from an analysis of the level of engagement that is evident among the most popular accounts in our sample (based on followers). It is quickly evident that there is a stark difference in the amount of engagement that occurs even in the three most popular accounts: Joel Osteen's, Beth Moore's, and Victoria Osteen's. In each of these cases a substantial number of interactive tweets occur, especially in the case of Beth Moore who includes the @ symbol in nearly 80% of her total tweets. The balance for Joel Osteen is much closer to fifty/fifty. However, when one looks at the fourth, fifth, and sixth most popular accounts of Joyce Meyer, John Piper, and Rick Warren, an even starker pattern emerges. Joyce Meyer is nearly the opposite of Beth Moore, with just 156 out of nearly 2,900 total tweets that engage other users. From comparing the style and substance of Beth Moore and Joyce Meyer it seems evident that Moore is in control of her own Twitter account, while Meyer's seems to be run by a social media team.[6] This difference could explain why Meyer's account is more reluctant to personally engage, while Beth Moore uses Twitter for primarily social engagement. We then broadened our analysis to the entire sample as a means to determine whether engagement is a causal factor for a more effective or popular Twitter account, but we saw no evidence for either of those two claims. From the data that we have collected it seems to matter very little to followers whether an account engages other users or not, either through mentions, or direct replies.[7]

Analyzing Unique Words

In addition to measuring the total engagement our sample had with other users of Twitter we wanted to determine if each individual account had specific words or hashtags that they used which differentiated themselves from other Twitter users. Analyzing the uniqueness of users can be a

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[6] The evidence for this claim can be found in the fact that many of Joyce Meyer's tweets are signed "-JMM" which is an abbreviation for Joyce Meyer Ministries. This would provide support for the belief that Ms. Meyer is not composing the tweets herself, but instead someone on her staff is in charge of social media.

[7] Scatterplots comparing engagement to both follower counts and retweets are available in Appendix Figures 4A and 5A.

valuable way to understand whether evangelical leaders are using their tweets as a way to teach followers about theology, to encourage them in their faith, to talk about their personal lives, or to promote their work. The approach that we took to finding unique words used by each account was tf-idf analysis, which is a measure of how often a term is used adjusted for how rarely it is used. In this case, we are comparing tweets of one user to the tweets of every other user in the dataset to see if they use unique words frequently. We conducted this analysis using the tidytext package written for the R statistical software program.[8] The results of this tf-idf analysis can be seen in Figure 5.

[FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

It is crucial to note that tweets are inherently a difficult media to assess with textual analysis because they often contain many troublesome elements to parse such as hashtags and hyperlinks, which is evident in the results displayed in Figure 5. Instead of displaying the entirety of the sample, we have chosen the top ten Twitter accounts based on number of followers. It becomes quickly apparent that certain personalities are much more likely to use their social media as a promotional vehicle. The clearest example of this is Tim Tebow's usage of the phrase "avosinspace," an advertising campaign for avocados from Mexico, which Tebow was paid to promote.[9] Other evangelical leaders did not use their Twitter account to do paid promotion, but instead chose to promote their own projects. Examples of this in Figure 5 include author and pastor Max Lucado, who frequently mentioned the name of several of his books, including "Grace: The Book", and "Glory Days." This same concept also appears multiple times in the account of Lecrae, a Christian rapper, who mentions the name of his book "Unashamed" as well as the hashtags that he used for his musical tours, including "higherlearningtour" and "destinationtour." These findings evince strong support for the public self (often interested in self-promotion) described by Marshall (2010).

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[8] Silge J and Robinson D (2016). "tidytext: Text Mining and Analysis Using Tidy Data Principles in R." _JOSS_, *1*(3). doi: 10.21105/joss.00037 (URL: http://doi.org/10.21105/joss.00037), <URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21105/joss.00037>.
[9] http://gridironnow.com/tim-tebow-twitter-chat-categories-run-the-gamut/

In contrast to the accounts of those such as Tebow, Lecrae, and Lucado, are the Twitter accounts of evangelicals who are more likely to be seen as pastors by the public. In Figure 5, there are two clear examples of pastors using Twitter as an extension of their church ministry: Rick Warren and John Piper. Looking through the tf-idf results for either of these two reveals very little in the way of self-promotion. Rick Warren mentions the name of his church, Saddleback, frequently but only mentions once his popular book, "Purpose Driven Life." John Piper's tweets are even less promotional. The unique terms that Piper uses are books of the bible including Psalms, Proverbs, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Luke. It seems, therefore, that people like Piper and Warren are forging a path on social media that does not fit neatly into the three levels of self-presentation proposed by Marshall (2010). It appears that a fourth dimension—"extension of professional career"—represents another likely use of Twitter by well-known individuals.

Mentions of Political Issues

As a means to understand the extent that our sample engaged in political discourse we chose a number of words that either have general political inclinations or were focused on specific political issues. Of the 24 words that were chosen, ten were considered to be more general—i.e., words such as "Obama", "Trump", "election", and "politics"—while fourteen were more focused on political issues that were popular during the timeframe of our sample—i.e., "ISIS", "abortion", "gay", "immigration", "taxes", and the "economy." Figure 6 indicates the frequency of each of the 24 words in the sample. In total 2,881 tweets contained at least one of these political terms. Names of nationally known politicians such as Obama and Trump were the most used by the accounts we scraped. For President Obama this might be due to the fact that he was in the White House for the entirety of our sample, but it is readily apparent that Trump's name was very popular, despite the fact that he was only a national political figure for 18 months before he was elected President.

When it comes to specific political issues, evangelicals frequently mentioned the problem of ISIS in the Middle East, which may be due to the fact that the battle had a religious component that could have been used as fodder for evangelical Christians to discuss. The second most frequently used term however was "abortion." We attempted to capture as many permutations of the gay marriage debate as possible by searching for "gay", "homosexual", and "homosexuality", but even combined those three terms were still used with less frequency than abortion. This becomes an even more interesting finding when one considers that during the time period that our tweets were composed the United States Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in the United States (Yoshimo 2015). It may be that evangelical leaders have come to the conclusion that the gay marriage fight is over, with public opinion shifting rapidly in favor of legalization (Brewer 2014), while abortion is still a highly divisive issue among the general electorate (Pacheco 2014).

[FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Looking beyond how much these political terms were mentioned generally, it is important to understand how these political tweets are distributed throughout the sample of 88 accounts that were analyzed. Figure 7 displays the frequency of political term mentions by the 35 most politically active evangelicals in our sample. A cursory glance at the results paints a clear picture: a small number of evangelical leaders are doing the lion's share of the political discussion. Two individuals stand out from among the rest when it comes to who was most likely to discuss political topics. The Twitter account that contains the most political language is Jay Sekulow's, who is the chief counsel of the American Center for Law and Justice, an organization that is committed to fighting for the religious liberty of evangelical Christians in the United States.[10] The other prominent political tweeter is David Barton, who is the founder of Wallbuilders, LLC, an organization that promotes the argument that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and that there should be no

[10] http://aclj.org/jay-sekulow

separation between church and state.[11] The fact that these individuals tweet frequently about political matters provides support for the idea that they use Twitter as a vehicle to promote the message that made them popular in the first place. These individuals exist largely outside the constraints that are placed on pastors who preach to the same congregation on a weekly basis. The evidence for this conclusion becomes strengthened by the fact that none of the top ten political accounts are those of pastors of individual congregations but instead are those of evangelicals who have strong ties to politics, like Sekulow, Barton, Ralph Reed, and Tony Perkins. These individuals are not constrained by politics; rather, their influence may be amplified when they speak on political issues.

[FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE]

While it is apparent that there is a fair amount of political tweets being written by evangelical leaders, it is important to note how much or little of the other overall sample is composed of political messages. Figure 8 displays the number of tweets that are non-political, contain discussion of general politics, and contain terms related to specific political issues.

[FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE]

In total, our sample contained over 85,543 tweets from 88 total accounts. Of those tweets just 1,653 contained words generally related to politics such as Obama, Trump, or election and 1,395 contained discussion of ISIS, abortion, taxes, and other hot button political topics. Taken together just 1.8% of all the tweets in our sample were political in nature. In addition, while we found that 70 of the 88 accounts did contain general or specific political language, very few accounts could be described as being especially political. As Figure 8 indicates, over half of all the political mentions in the sample came from three accounts, and nearly two thirds of the total mentions come from the top five accounts. Taken together, those five highly political accounts comprise a total of

[11] http://www.wallbuilders.com/abtbiodb.asp

approximately 215,000 followers,[12] which is just five percent of the followers of either Joel Osteen or Joyce Meyer, two accounts who hardly ever engage in political discourse. It seems entirely possible that an evangelical Christian could follow a dozen or more of the accounts in this sample and never see a mention of politics at all.

Discussion

As a first cut, this analysis provides few hard conclusions; however, it does reveal numerous interesting insights. It is most obviously clear that Twitter use has exponentially increased in the past several years, suggesting that evangelical leaders see growing value in Twitter as a social media platform. It is further evident that evangelical leaders' Twitter activities vary substantially in both their prolific-ness and their effectiveness. The latter, measured via average counts of both favorites and retweets per tweet, shows a noticeable association with the number of followers per Twitter account (with only some exceptions) while the former lacks an equally strong, though still relevant, association with the share of favorites and retweets received per tweet.

Regarding the three dimensions of online celebrity activity proposed by Marshall, we have found evidence of the presence of both the public self and the public private self in the Twitter activities of evangelical leaders; however, evidence of the transgressive self proved difficult to identify, and thus quantify, given the large body of text analyzed and the uncertainty of gauging when a tweet is a true instance of transgression (e.g., an uncalculated emotional outburst), or simply a calculated use of emotion and sentiment.

Through use of a novel technique for text analysis (term frequency – inverse document frequency, or "tf-idf"), we were able to identify unique portrayals of public self by top evangelicals. While some engage in various degrees of self-promotion/advertising, others use their public

[12] This number does not take into account the number of people who follow several of the accounts in the top 5, and therefore the likely number of unique followers for these five individuals is less 200,000 in total.

portrayal of self as an extension of their ministry, as evidenced by the highest tf-idf terms per Twitter account. Furthermore, in addition to functioning as a means of marketing or the extension of a ministry, the public self of evangelicals also may have some relationship with the extent to which leaders actively engage (the public private self) with fellow Twitter users. Our analysis shows that presentation of the public private self is likely constrained by the primary purpose of a given leader's Twitter account. While some evangelicals' accounts seem to be run by a marketing or ministry team, other accounts are used by evangelicals personally. The latter scenario may make it much easier to actively interact with others on Twitter and thus engage in the public private self.

Regarding politics, the public self may further constrain political activity. Some evangelicals whose popularity and image are founded upon their uniquely political message have significantly more political tweets compared to others. Meanwhile, those whose image is more firmly grounded in ministry, music, art, athletics, etc. are less politically active. Of course, it should be noted that even among the most politically engaged evangelicals on Twitter the share of tweets that contain terms that are either generally political or unique to specific political issues are in the minority. Matters of church and state, therefore, seem to only occasionally comingle in evangelicals' activities in the "Twitterverse".

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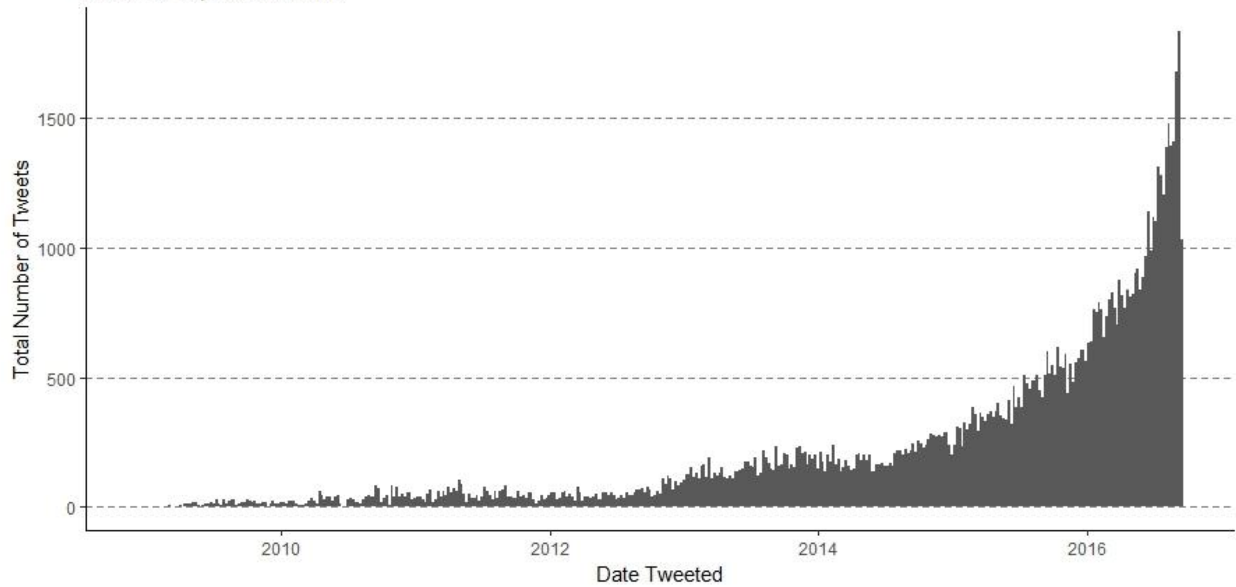
<u>Figures</u>



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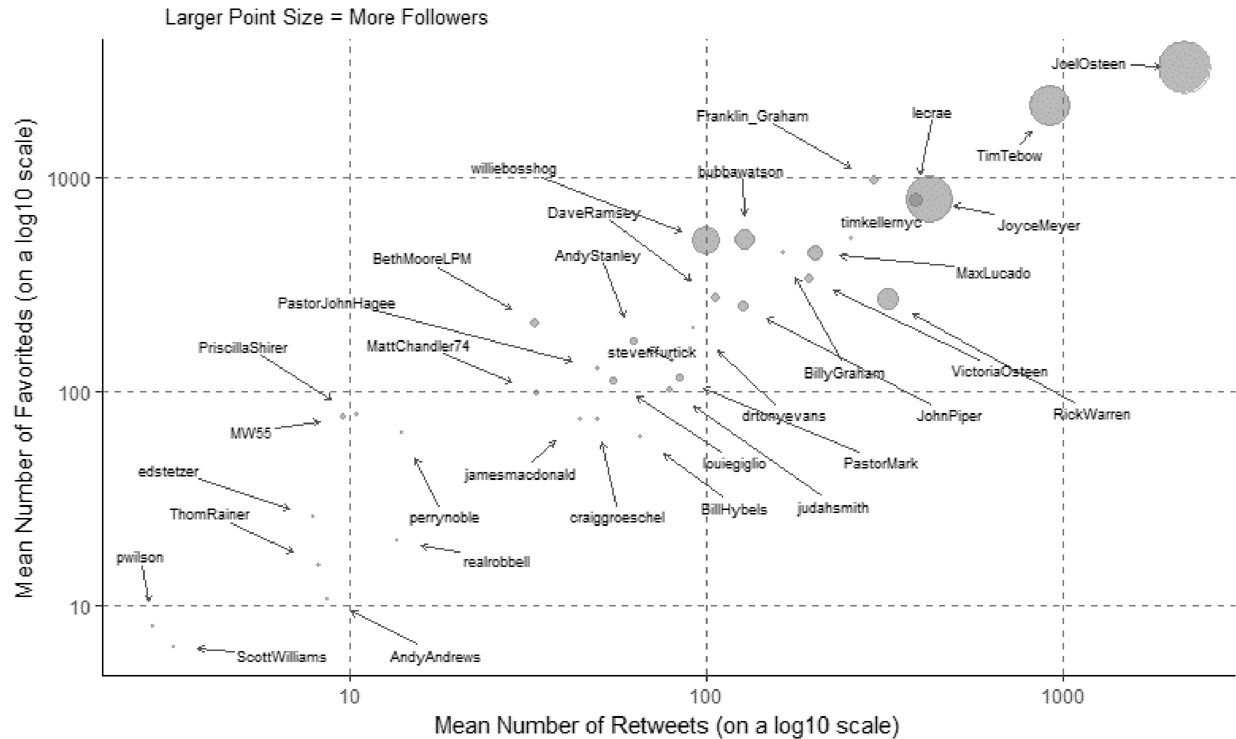

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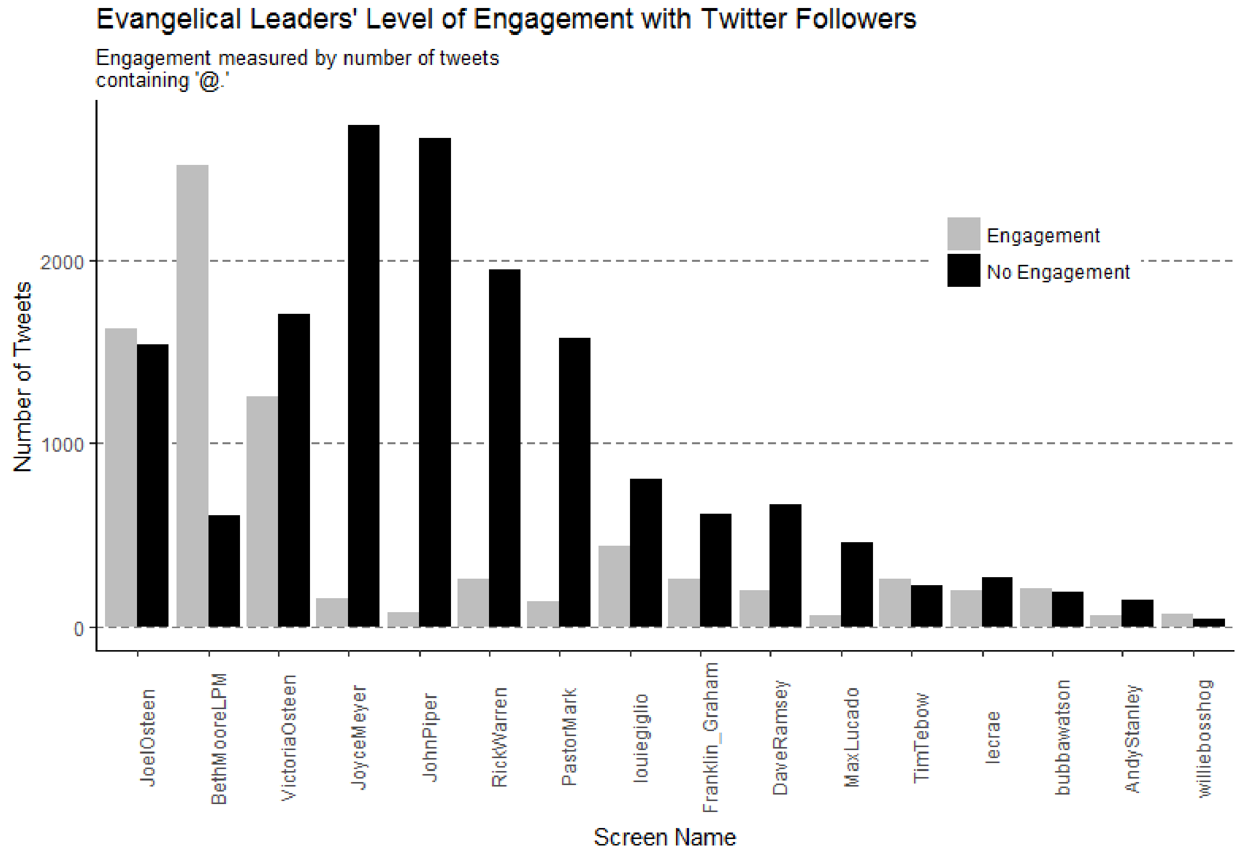

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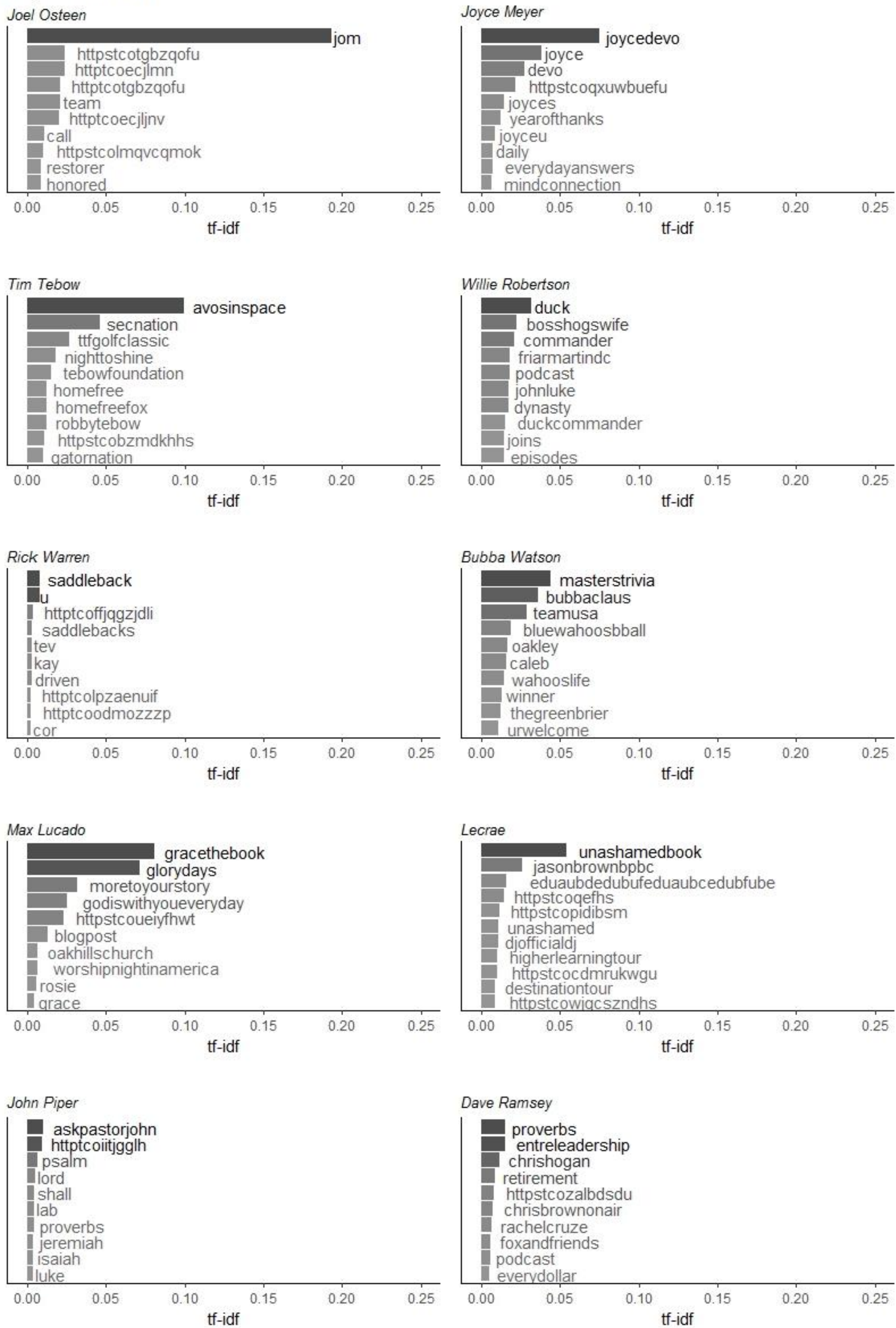

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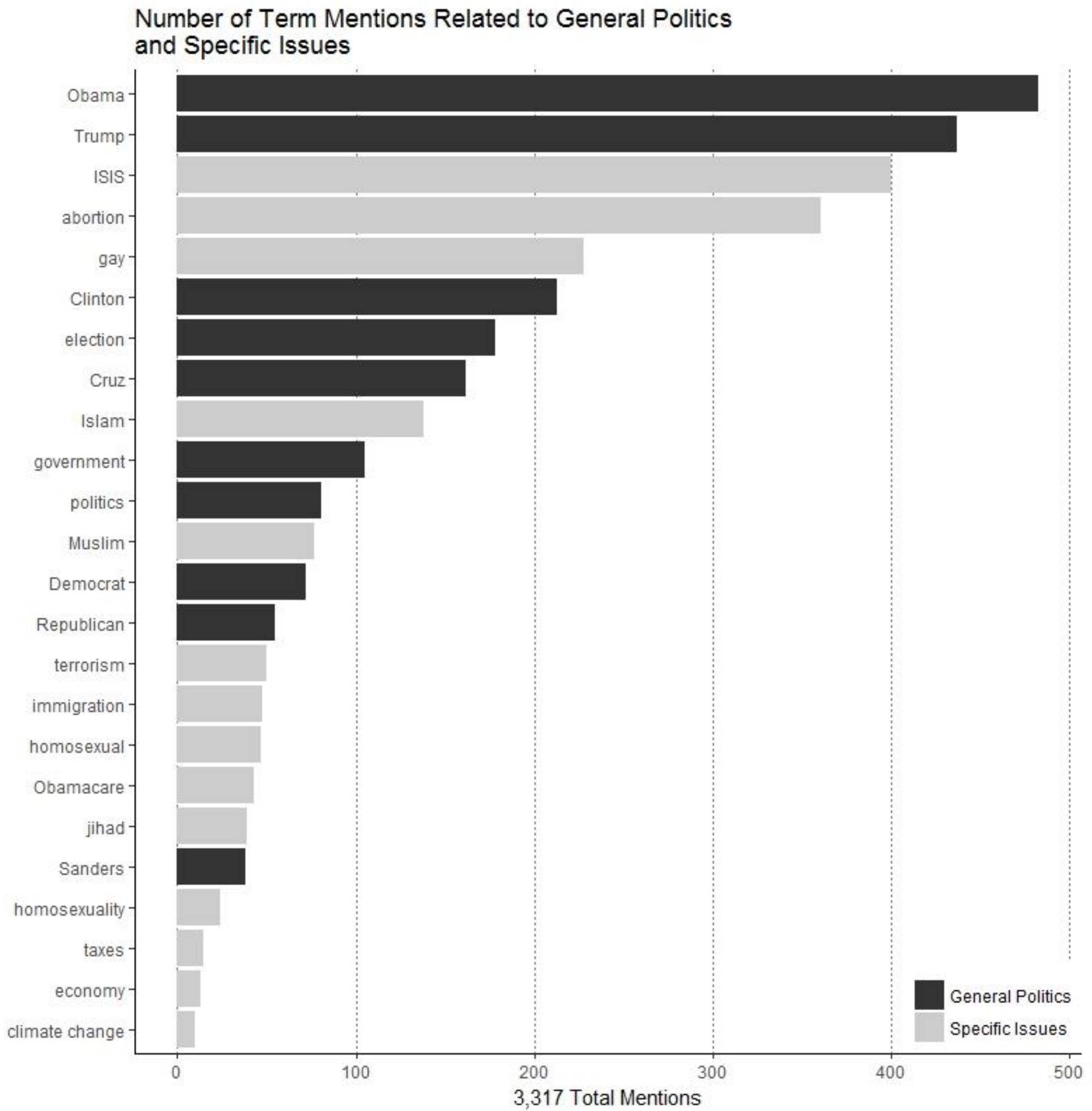

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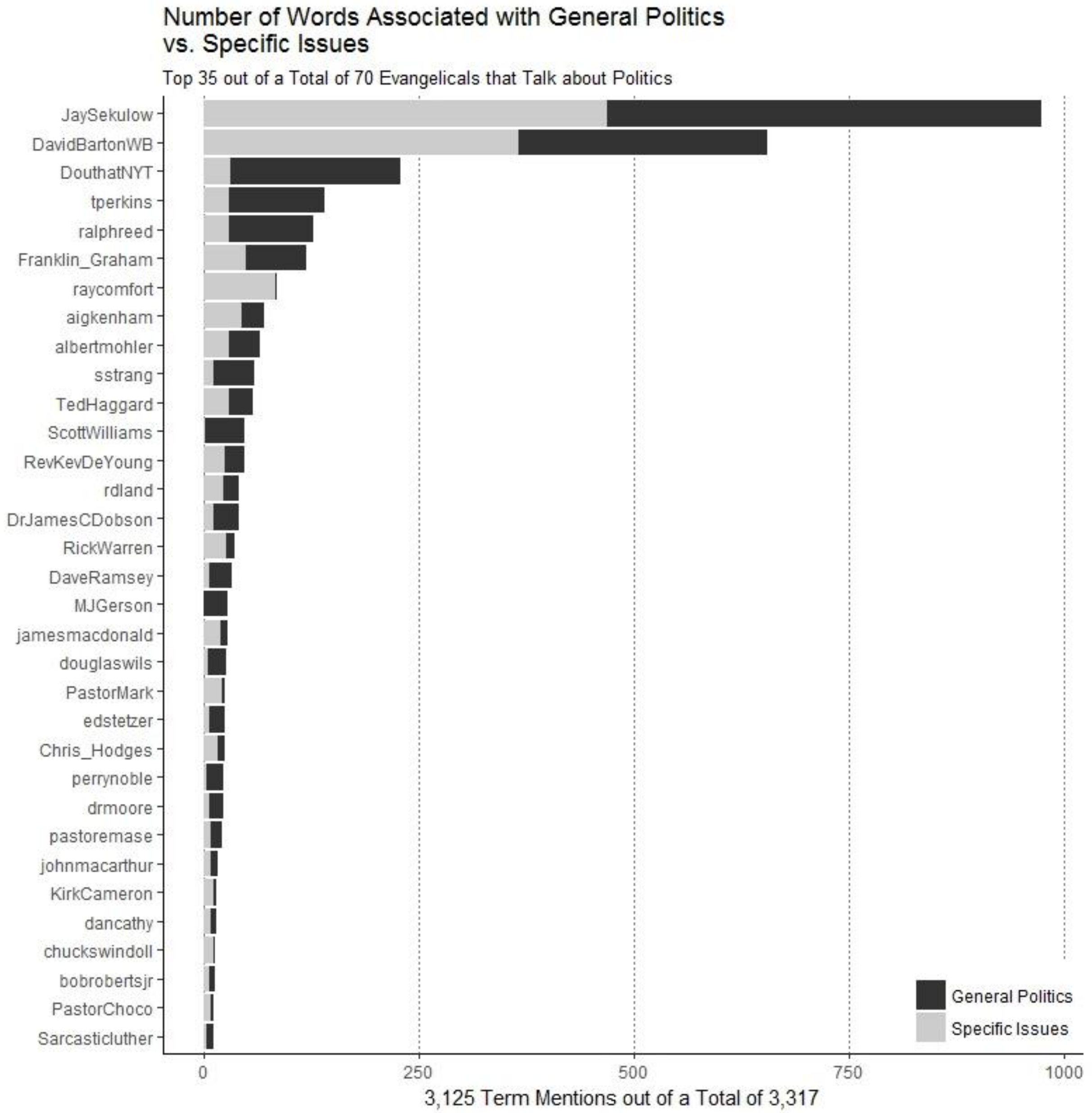

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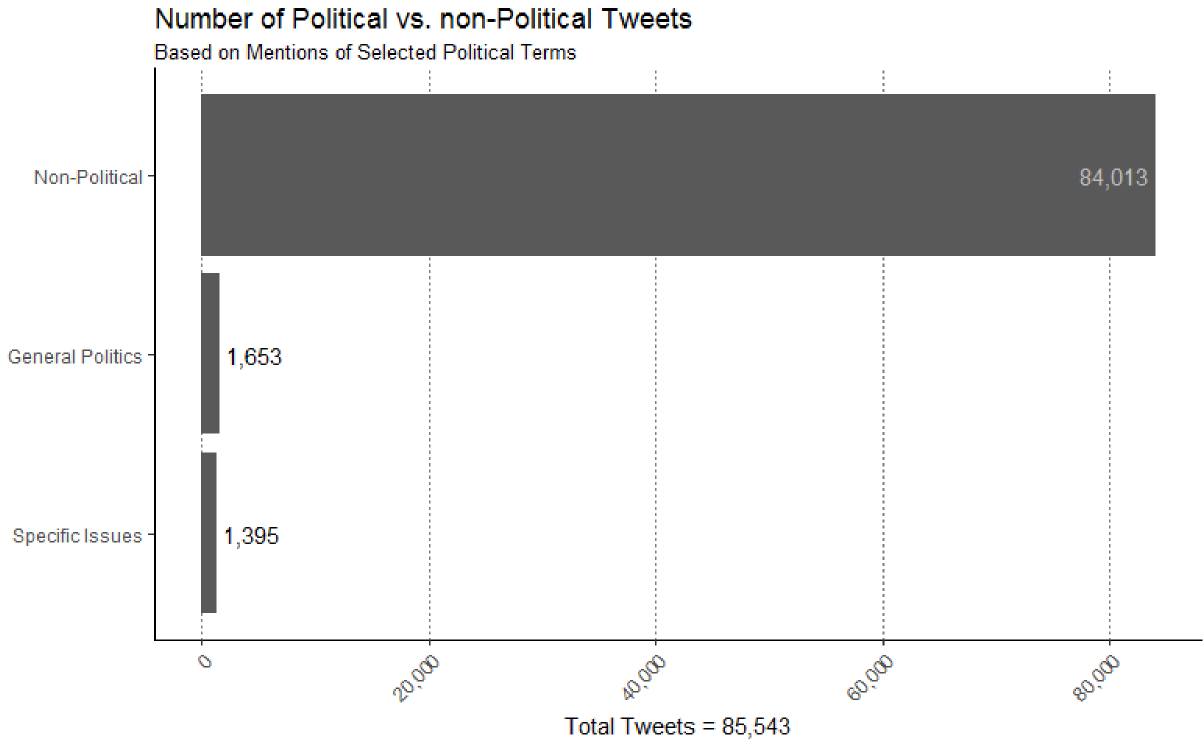

Figure 8.