



PRESIDENTIAL
RECORDS ACT
IN THE AGE OF
TWITTER

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Brief Introduction

Political Scientist

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Frequent user of libraries and archives

Sometimes need to be corrected or redirected in my
use of libraries and archives

Please also note that I am not an attorney.

Presidential Records

We begin with a story (Karni, 2018)

Staffers in the White House tasked to tape documents

President Trump's "filing system"

- Review documents

- Tear documents when finished with them

Likely violation of the Presidential Records Act (1978)

Presidential Records Act (1978)

Federal law

Governs the official records of Presidents and Vice Presidents created or received after January 20, 1981

Redefined such documents as public rather than private

Amended in 2014

Important change

Presidential records are assessed for preservation, not by the media used to store the information, but rather by the content of the information (Stuessy 2019)

PRA differentiates between presidential and personal records.

The PRA and New Modes of Communication

Presidential records identification challenged by the introduction of new modes of communication

Radio – keep the text or a recording?

TV – keep the text or a recording?

Commercials – presidential or personal records? Incumbent versus challenger

White House Website

Clinton Administration first to have a website

How to preserve it?

Decided to archive websites “frozen in time”

From the National Archives website:

White House websites are Presidential records. The files that make up a Presidential administration’s website are preserved in our Executive Office of the President Electronic Records Archive, however, the user interface is not. The National Archives has taken an additional step to “freeze” White House websites for access purposes. These “frozen in time” sites are representations of the original websites and approximate the interface and functionality for easy access by the public. These websites are no longer updated so links to external websites and some internal pages will not work.

Twitter and Presidential Records

Candidate Trump viewed Twitter as key to his campaign
Tweets are considered part of the presidential record

What about deleted tweets?

NPR presented an interesting story about the issue last
October (Treisman 2019).

The lede:

President Trump made a high-profile, short-lived
typo this past weekend when he referred to
Defense Secretary Mark Esper as "Mark
Esperanto" in a tweet that was deleted after an
hour.

Tweets and Deletes

The Library of Congress was granted the ability to store all tweets.

Decided to stop archiving all tweets in 2017.

Press release mentioned that selective captures would be archived.

Deletes

Could not determine if the Library of Congress would have included deletes in vast Twitter archive.

Unclear if anything was done with the tweets provided to the Library before 2017.

Lessons Learned

It may surprise some that researchers such as myself do not always fully grasp the importance of archival norms and practices.

“I want to see that document now.”

We have not had social media like Facebook and Twitter for too many years.

Working to develop strategies for collecting and preserving information.

Must care for people’s reputations while preserving “slices of life.”

Reputations versus researchers’ need to know

Check out Zwaard, et al. (2018) for a solid overview of the issues related to archiving social media.

Also Zwaard (2019).

COVFEFE Act

Aside: I teach a class on Congress

Usually like to have the students investigate how a piece of legislation is titled

The title will determine to which committee the bill is sent

One of my students found the COVFEFE Act

Communications Over Various Feeds Electronically for Engagement Act

Similar to the USA PATRIOT Act of 2001

Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT)

COVF EFE?

May 21, 2017:

President Trump tweeted, “Despite the constant negative press covfefe”

Retweeted more than 100,000 times before the President deleted it

Tweeted on @realDonaldTrump

Later determined that he meant to type “coverage”
– obvious from the context

The President has a personal Twitter account that he uses unmediated by staff

Rausch: Not sure this is a good thing

Personal record or presidential communication?

Rep. Mike Quigley (D-IL)

Founder of the Transparency Caucus in the US House

COVFEFE Act

The bill amends the PRA to include the term “social media”

“Ensuring additional preservation of presidential communication and statements while promoting government accountability and transparency”
(summarized in Wamsley 2017)

In early June 2017, the White House press secretary confirmed that Trump’s tweets should be considered official statements.

My “evidence” that the Twitter archive that was being built at the Library of Congress was not going to include deleted tweets.

What Can Be Done?

Write your member of Congress

Tell your member of Congress to enact legislation requiring someone (probably the National Archives or the Library of Congress) to record all presidential tweets, from personal accounts and the official @POTUS account

Recommend through op-eds that Presidents should not have access to personal accounts

Makes some opposition research too easy when reelection time comes around

Politwoops

<https://projects.propublica.org/politwoops/>

An American version of the European collection of deleted political tweets

Subtitle: “Explore the tweets they didn’t want you to see”

Tweets are interesting largely because they were deleted

Takes some effort to figure out why they were deleted

European version

<https://www.politwoops.co.uk/>

Trump Twitter Archive

Private people and groups can provide a service

<http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com/>

Another aside: I found this while looking for ways to learn R and Python

Created by Brendan Brown

As of 1/27/17, the site monitors Trump's twitter feed in real time. Prior to this, tweets were collected a few times a day.

The archive goes back to 2009, there are approximately 4,000 tweets missing from the database (Su and Gibson 2018, 61).

Your Own Twitter Archive

It is possible to access your own Twitter archive:

<https://help.twitter.com/en/managing-your-account/how-to-download-your-twitter-archive>

Last Word: Wayback Machine

The Wayback Machine archives some tweets.

Not very friendly, but there have been numerous programmers working on access tools:

<https://staringispolite.github.io/twayback-machine/>

Have to know the twitter handle:

@jdrausch

Can find just about anyone's Twitter handle:

<https://www.sbh4all.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/116th-Congress-Twitter-Handles.pdf>

Some concern about saving tweets:

Search committee might find the tweet critiquing the "killer rave" you posted at 21.

Later Word: Documenting the Now

Learned about this recently.

A community working to collect, use, and preserve social media content.

Seems more focused on political activism and recording historically important events

<https://www.docnow.io/>

Might be worth examining at length.

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