Tweeting and Deleting:
Strategic Narratives and Impression Management by U.S. Federal Agencies

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When, if ever, do democracies permit and encourage the deletion of posts on government social media accounts? This qualitative study employs Freedom of Information Act requests as the primary method of determining and tracing what different federal agencies have removed from their Twitter feeds during the Obama and Trump administrations. By putting the records of deleted tweets in conversation with federal agencies' internal emails and statements to the U.S. press, this paper examines the informal decisions made by government social media managers and also suggests alternative methodologies that communication law and policy scholars can employ in order to engage meaningfully and critically with not only the removal of specific tweets but also the disappearance of entire government feeds. Drawing on a recent collaboration with the Harvard Law Cyberlaw Clinic, I tease apart the communicative strategies that governmental institutions and by extension, federal agencies' social media managers have employed in their tweeting and deleting. I also argue that the Federal Records Act in its ambiguity has begotten an informational environment, wherein certain types of governmental deletion are dramatically hyped by journalists, while others remain undocumented and left in the government's archival backstage. This is ultimately a paper about the challenge of tracing the behaviors of social media managers working for U.S. federal agencies over time and the ways in which Freedom of Information Act requests can reveal patterns in information disappearance and erasure on corporate social media platforms.

Introduction

Twitter is one of the social media platforms that U.S. federal agencies are reliant upon for their strategic digital communications, and yet much ambiguity remains over how government social media managers determine what to tweet and what to delete. It is crucial for political communication scholars to consider how government actors negotiate and justify content erasure on third-party social media platforms such as Twitter. Though 'the study of social media in government is still at its infancy," (Criado, Sandoval-Almazan, & Gil-Garcia, 2013, pp. 321), there is a rich and growing research literature on the use of social media platforms by governments around the world and whether or not they ultimately help improve public services, enhance government transparency, and strengthen democracy (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010;

Heverin & Zach, 2010; Lorenzi et al., 2014). Outside of ad-hoc journalistic coverage, however, little is known about the deletion practices of U.S. federal agencies on their official Twitter feeds. Scholarship so far has focused instead almost exclusively on tweeting and deleting by U.S. elected officials, including presidents (Ott & Dickinson, 2019) and members of Congress (Settles, 2016; Meeks, 2018).

Studies have shown that information sharing and engagement through Twitter specifically can result in greater transparency and a higher level of confidence of citizens in their local and state government agencies (Heverin & Zach, 2010). Much of the scholarship to date has ignored the communication practices of the U.S. federal government; this paper offers a first analysis of communication practices on Twitter by social media managers acting on behalf of U.S. federal agencies. In this study I focus specifically on deletion practices and subsequent organizational impression management across a variety of randomly selected U.S. federal agencies.

Through content analysis of deleted tweets disclosed by U.S. federal agencies as well as analysis of email exchanges between government employees that preceded or followed deletion, this paper shows how, through the limits of the U.S. Federal Records Act, federal employees are able to exercise considerable discretion over what they tweet and delete. While these decisions are clearly challenging, they are made with varying degrees of transparency, consistency, and accountability. I show that decisions regarding deletion are at times made through human negotiations over the appropriateness of certain tweets. These deletion practices do not map evenly onto those that have been adopted by U.S. politicians and studied by Meeks (2018), as they involve impression management for government organizations, federal agencies, not elected officials focused on maintaining their own individual reputations. This paper is premised on the

following principle: To analyze and study political communication on Twitter, researchers need to consider not only how frequently politicians delete tweets or the implications of those deletions, they also need to consider the broader landscape of government tweeting and deleting on third-party social media platforms.

This research consists of five distinct parts. First, I discuss the U.S. federal laws that dictate the relationship between third-party social media platforms and U.S. federal agencies. Then, I detail my methods and results of the study. I analyze records of deleted tweets and email exchanges that proceeded and followed moments of deletion to demonstrate how agencies justify actions and inaction, or more often struggles to, in the context of editorial decision-making around tweeted content. I also consider the role that the U.S. press has played in allowing U.S. federal agencies to develop post-deletion strategic narratives. I conclude with a discussion of the ongoing technological and organizational challenges that U.S. federal agencies face in the aftermath of deletion.

Background: Studies of Deletion Practices

Over the past decade, there has been growing scholarly interest in considering when and why users of social media platforms choose to delete content. This literature has evolved but generally restricted itself to consider deletion practices among individuals as opposed to institutions. To date, studies of deletion have focused primarily on Wikipedia (Geiger & Ford, 2011; Yam, 2016), Instagram (Tinati, Madaan, & Hall, 2017), Twitter (Bhattacharya & Ganguly, 2016; Meeks, 2018).

At the same time, over the past decade, in the field of political communication, there has been a surge in work on the topic of social media use by government stakeholders. Much of the contemporary research on government use of social media has pointed to the ways in which

Twitter can play an important role in disseminating information and enhancing the transparency of public administration (Bonsón, Torres, Royo, & Flores, 2012). While scholars have been researching Twitter use by government officials, they have only just begun to turn their attention towards erasure practices on third-party social media platforms. To date journalists have been the most aggressive in tracking deleted tweets. They have maintained this effort through two specific channels: Politwoops and ad-hoc articles. The Sunlight Foundation conceived the Politwoops project, now run by ProPublica, as an archive of politicians' deleted tweets; they intended for it to serve as "the only comprehensive collection of deleted tweets by United States politicians. From minor messaging changes to major changes, Politwoops offers a window into what they hoped you didn't see" (Our Mission, 2015). Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey has spoken about the need to hold government employees accountable, and stated, "We have a responsibility to continue to empower organizations that bring more transparency to public dialogue, such as Politwoops" (Crowell, 2015). Sunlight Foundation President, Christopher Gates (2015), said, "A member of Congress does not and should not have the same expectation of privacy as a private citizen. Power can only be accountable with a generous application of transparency." This principle has not yet been applied to U.S. federal agencies, as there is no Politwoops equivalent for them.[1]

This lack of a steadily maintained archive has made it challenging for scholars in political communication to study deletion practices by U.S. federal agencies. Given this, I specifically seek to build on Meeks' (2018) extensive look at deleting practices by U.S. Congressional officials. Meeks' article is the most comprehensive analysis to date in the literature on deletion practices by U.S. government stakeholders on Twitter. To situate how and why politicians delete tweets, Meeks draws largely on a process called impression management, which refers to when

individuals keep track of what information they share and present to others. In my work on deletion practices, I draw on Meeks (2018) and Hall (1979). Hall, in his seminal writing on political impression management, notes that impression management is just as much about what is said as what is not said. It encapsulates "what controls are placed upon the inward and outward flow of information" (Hall, 1979, pp. 1979).

Governments, even democracies, have a legacy of controlling information flows. Governance is generally understood as "the prevailing patterns by which public power is exercised in a given social context" (Jenkins, 2002, pp. 485). To put it in other words, it refers to the ways in which public power is exercised in a particular context or situation. Government itself might be considered as the organization of information for the use of power by the public interest. Patrick Birkinshaw puts it best in saying, "Take away a government's preserve on information, and its preserve of when and what to release, and take away a fundamental bulwark of its power" (2010, pp. 31). By seeking to control what types of public information are available to citizens, deletion is a communication practice through which the government wields its power on Twitter.

Studies on government deletion offer important insights; however, they are limited in crucial ways. For instance, Meeks (2018) focuses on the study of tweets that are deleted by members of Congress and subsequently made accessible to the public with the use of a Twitter Application Programming Interface (API). No effort is invested into imagining methodological alternatives or considering specifically how researchers might go about creating their own archives of deleted tweets. Furthermore, to my knowledge, no research has explicitly analyzed the differing deletion practices by U.S. federal agencies on Twitter. This paper therefore fills an important gap in the literature in offering an analysis of policies and processes that federal social media managers develop and maintain their official handles. As such, this paper asks: What

typologies of deletion underlie agency-specific policies and practices on Twitter? What

rationales do U.S. federal agencies provide for action in deleting content on third-party social

media platforms? What tensions evolve between U.S. federal employees, if any, in the 'deletion

management' that occurs in the aftermath of content removal on official government-run Twitter

handles?

Method

This research consisted of six separate stages. In the first stage, I created an inventory of Twitter

handles managed by U.S. federal agencies. In the second stage, I relied on a random number

generator to select 100 Twitter handles and use as objects in this study. In the third stage, I

created a Freedom of Information (FOIA) template that sought the following records and sent

them to each of the U.S. federal agencies managing the selected Twitter handles:

- records of all tweets deleted by the Twitter handle associated with the agency's
  Twitter handle, including any tweets that were published on Twitter and subsequently
  deleted for any reason

- any tweets published by other accounts that were retweeted by the Twitter handle and
  subsequently deleted for any reason

- records of tweets that have been kept in draft form beyond their expected date and
  time of publication, on Twitter or in a third-party social media management platform,
  for any reason.

- any correspondence or record of correspondence regarding the drafting or deletion of
  specific tweets including correspondence sent through official government email
  addresses, messaging services, or private third-party services such as Gmail or Slack.

In the fourth stage, I gathered all the responsive documents from the 17 agencies that responded positively to my FOIA requests: (1) the Office of Government Ethics (@OfficeGovEthics), (2) the U.S. Navy (@USNavy), (3) the U.S. Agricultural Research Service (@USDA_ARS), (4) the U.S. European Command (@US_EUCOM), (5) the U.S. Northern Command (@NoradNorthcom), (6) the U.S. National Central Bureau – INTERPOL (@INTERPOL_USA), (7) the U.S. Army (@USArmy), (8) the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (@uspto), (9) the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (@EACgov), (10) the U.S. Department of Defense (@DeptofDefense), (11) the Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Medicare and Medicaid (@HealthCareGov), (12) the National Park Service (@CavernsNPS), (13) DARPA (@DARPA), (14) the Department of Justice (@TheJusticeDept), (15) the official portal of the United States Government in Spanish (@GobiernoUSA), (16) the Federal Aviation Administration (@FAA), and (17) the Department of Health and Human Services (@HHSGov).

In the fifth stage, I collected memory narratives of tweets deleted by U.S. federal agencies, as represented in the U.S. journalistic record. I searched Factiva, Google News, and Lexis databases using each Department name with different combinations of the following search terms: "deleted tweet," "took down a tweet," "deleted a tweet," "removed a tweet." When articles found in these corpuses link to other outlets' coverage of deleted tweets, I include them. I exclude from my analysis articles referring to government agencies that are outside the U.S. context and outside the federal level of U.S. governance. I collected 15 relevant articles through this search method from the following 11 publications: *Free Beacon, New York Times, Washington Post, Newsweek, Buzzfeed, CNBC, The Hill, New York Magazine, Time.com, Wall Street Journal,* and *Engadget.*

Data analysis, the sixth and final stage of this study, started with a system of open coding. All the narratives involving deleted tweets were broken into units of meaning (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which were then grouped under themes, themes that evolved considerably over the past several months.[2] In line with the requirements of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1990), the literature review was *not* drafted until long after coding began, so as not to impose pre-defined themes or narrow arguments upon the collection of data. What happened instead is that the literature review developed in the later stages of analysis, as specific findings were compared to historical findings within the subfields of communication and media studies. These analyses, taken together, led to the emergence of a post-deletion impression management practices by U.S. federal agencies. The final total of requests, as Table 1 shows below, made for this specific study was 100. Of the total, 17 requests for deleted tweets were granted, as Table 1 demonstrates below.[3] 71 were denied. Outcomes of the remaining 13 are still pending. Collectively this study thus draws on emails (n=385) exchanged between U.S. federal employees about deletion, newspaper articles written in the aftermath of deletion (n=16), and records of deleted tweets (n=36).[4]

Table 1.   Summary of Email Exchanges and Deleted Tweets Obtained via FOIA Requests

Federal Agency	Twitter Handle	Date Request Filed	Date Request Fulfilled	Number of Emails Disclosed	Number of Tweets Disclosed
Department of Justice	@TheJusticeDept	12/03/2016	07/09/2019	24	0
Office of Government Ethics	@OfficeGovEthics	12/03/2016	01/04/2017	225	0
U.S. Navy	@USNavy	01/10/2017	07/03/2017	0	1
U.S. Agricultural Research Service	@USDA_ARS	07/01/2017	07/27/2017	6	0
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	@HHSGov	10/06/2017	11/25/2019	20	4
U.S. Army	@USArmy	10/06/2017	12/15/2017	0	2

U.S. Department of Defense	@DeptofDefense	10/10/2017	07/24/2018	17	2
U.S. European Command	@US_EUCOM	11/05/2017	11/07/2017	0	3
U.S. Northern Command	@NoradNorthcom	11/06/2017	11/09/2017	0	1
U.S. National Central Bureau – INTERPOL	@INTERPOL_USA	11/06/2017	12/08/2017	23	0
U.S. Patent and Trademark Office	@uspto	11/06/2017	01/11/2018	22	9
U.S. Election Assistance Commission	@EACgov	11/06/2017	01/24/2018	4	0
National Park Service	@CavernsNPS	08/23/2018	10/09/2018	0	0
Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency	@DARPA	08/23/2018	01/18/2019	6	0
Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Medicare and Medicaid	@HealthCareGov	08/24/2018	09/20/2018	0	3
Official portal of the United States Government in Spanish	@GobiernoUSA	12/06/2018	09/19/2019	14	0
Federal Aviation Administration	@FAANews	08/24/2018	09/26/2018	24	11
Total				385	36

Findings: Understanding Deletion Management by U.S. Federal Agencies

Agencies differ with respect to what decisions they make in the context of their tweeting and deleting practices and within many agencies there are active and ongoing debates among federal employees about content. In analyzing the impression management that precedes, accompanies, and follows deletion, I draw on four specific data sources: (1) records of deleted tweets disclosed to the researcher, (2) internal agency emails about deletion practices, and (3) newspaper articles covering deletion by single U.S. federal agencies. By considering these sources together, we can edge towards developing a more nuanced understanding of the communication practices adopted by U.S. federal agencies. Here I draw on Schatzki's (2001) definition of *practice* as "a set of doings and sayings organized by a pool of understandings, a set of rules" (pp. 61). Focusing on practice theory offers us few distinct benefits. First, it allows us to avoid "focusing too much on

the spectacular and ignoring the routine, the everyday practices of late modernity" (Bigo and

Tsoukala, 2008, pp. 3). It also helps us consider "patterned actions that are embedded in

particular organized contexts" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, pp. 5). This paper considers two types of

communication practices: deletion itself and post-deletion impression management that occurs

when U.S. federal employees engage with the U.S. press.

Emails: Internal Negotiations over Deletion Practices

To illustrate some of the debates within U.S. federal agencies that proceeded and followed

deletion on Twitter, here we consider email exchanges between social media managers and other

federal employees. These email exchanges reveal a) how content decisions are made and debated

internally; how individual U.S. federal agencies struggle to coordinate messaging, b) the active

discussions that at times occurs between U.S. federal agencies and journalists in discussing

whether a deletion was intentional or not and d) the fear of journalistic amplification of deleted

content. In this section, I consider four substantive emails that demonstrate these

aforementioned four elements.

I focus first here on an email sent by an employee at the FAA Office of Communications

that sought to justify the deletion of a tweet about drone deliveries. The tweet, originally posted

to @FAANews read, "Did you know that drone deliveries are a cost efficient way for small

businesses to ship products to local customers? Drones [*sic*] deliveries help small companies

avoid hefty delivery fees. #SmallBusinessWeek." While this exchange provides a window into

organizational decision-making and deleting, it also reveals that content decisions are debated

internally. Even within a single agency, there is not necessarily agreement over who has the

ultimate power in crafting content and subsequently, in maintaining an agency's regime of

impression management:

> Allison and I just deleted today's Twitter and FB posts for Small Business Week. The posts were up for 4 hours so we anticipate that Allison is going to face a lot of questions and possible insults from the drone community at XPonential. Here's the problem with the posts: drone package delivery does not yet exist. It is completely wrong for the FAA to say that drone delivery helps anyone since it has not yet happened. The major stakeholder involved in drone delivery is Amazon, one of our largest U.S. companies with a 2 very high-profile CEO. I never saw the plan. In the future, please send ANYTHING with drone content to me for approval. You can loop other people in but I should be included. If I had seen that draft post, I would have removed it from the plan. I'm sorry I did not catch the posts early this morning. I know Allison replied 'thanks' to your plan but she assumed that it had been carefully reviewed. She trusts us and we just blew it.

We can see here a clear organizational desire to develop a plan to manage the disruption caused

by deletion. The federal employee provides a general guideline that all content appearing on its

Twitter handle should be evidence-based and not speculative. These are not formal guidelines,

but we can tell that this social media manager wishes to ensure that future content are based on

facts as opposed to imagined futures of aviation. This exchange also reveals that within U.S.

federal agencies, such as the Federal Aviation Administration, there is not considerable

transparency about what decision-making goes into the process of writing tweets and removing

them. There is a clear effort here to take into account and also control potential blowback from

major corporate actors, whose reputations might also be tied up in government advisories about

contemporary technologies.

We can see that, for many federal agencies, deletion of Twitter is ultimately a

collaborative affair with multiple government employees often being involved in the

coordination of messaging in the aftermath of deletion. When content gets deleted, it is not

always immediately clear to the public why a message has been taken off of Twitter, and this

non-knowledge can also permeate within an agency itself with others subsequently trying to

understand who made the decision to delete and why they chose to do so. Social media managers debrief and discuss deletion, but much of these communications occur orally, leaving no written record behind, as one email from a United States and Trademark Office demonstrated:

> Just letting you know Paul stopped by and talked about the deleted tweet. You were right, it was because it was Bismarck and he's an important figure at USPTO, but to have anyone blocked by an object would make a bad photo, especially if they were important enough to be on stage.

Many social media managers pointed to having similar issues in coordinating in the aftermath of deletion and ensuring that everyone within an agency is on the same page. Another challenge, however, can arise in negotiating the act of deleting content, for not everyone involved in a federal agency's impression management has access to its social media passwords. Determining who has control over acts of tweeting and deleting is therefore a deeply fraught and institutionally subjective process—where ad-hoc managerial decisions are often made and can have repercussions that are not always known or foreseen beforehand. In the case of some agencies, social media managers and other government employees involved in impression management of a single agency can be spread across time-zones. One deleted tweet from the Department of Defense illustrates the organizational challenges of coordinating impression management, when an agency has a transnational presence. In this instance, the Pentagon posted the following tweet: "#PACOM Commander: Pearl Harbor vets 'never took a knee. [*sic*] ever failed to stand" during National Anthem. #PearlHarbor75 @PacificCommand" (c.f. Gibbons-Neff, 2016, pp. 1).

> **Email 1:** https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/12/08/an-admiral-basically-took-a-dig-at-colin-kaepernick-the-pentagon-tweeted-the-quote-then-deleted-it/

> Sir, this is a good example of why we do not pull back posts. Even if a little controversial—this was an open event. Saw maybe one or two people with negative comments, we have a strong following and our followers policed up any stray voltage.

Caused a much bigger ripple. Saw it on CNN, MSNBC, Fox, etc. This is a good lesson to add to our SM training.

Email 2: Agreed. However the tweet was pulled by OSD not us. Pulling the tweet was a bad call.

Email 3: Posting the item was done in consultation with our entire DMA social team and Mr. Shepherd. So, perhaps it didn't work so well on Twitter, but I think it was still the right thing to do. The clip was used from CBS (from their cameras), and it was less of a commentary on Colin Kaepernick as it was a commentary on the heroes of Pearl. If you're drawing up talking points anyway, removing the post will only fan the flames. Now the removal is part of the narrative (https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/08/us/navy-admiral-colin-kaepernick-speech-trnd/index.html).

Email 4: FYSA [For Your Situational Awareness]. This is going to be a thing. People have already noticed that we deleted the tweet. PA is working on talking points. I told peter that our policy for removing tweets is if it's incorrect or a mistake. I guess this would fall into mistake category.

We can see from these exchanges that regarding this single tweet, there was not agreement internally on the communication practices associated with impression management. In the third email, one of the social media managers is providing evidence that the act of tweeting was in fact predicated on collaborative input. The emails point to one post-deletion challenge that federal social media managers face; they must negotiate potential inquiries from the public and more specifically, journalists and in this process, offer a strategic narrative justifying deletion.

Sometimes deletion follows typological errors: hyperlinking to the wrong site, confusing one Twitter handle for another. In one instance, the Department of Health and Human Services took down a tweet "when link was identified as going to a porn site." In another, INTERPOL-Washington opted to remove a tweet, after a federal social media managed noticed that it linked mistakenly to a jewelry company instead of the official Twitter handle of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement: "Hi, (b)(6)-Sorry to be such a nag about this tweet. But one of the tweet [*sic*] still has the @ICE tag…I suggest that we change it to @ICEgov."

Newspaper Articles: External Negotiations of Deletion Practices

Journalists have played an integral role in documenting the deletion practices of U.S. federal agencies. They shine a light on communications that government social media managers often want forgotten. I examined newspaper articles (n=16), wherein journalists made single instances of deletion on Twitter feeds run by U.S. federal agencies the focus of their stories. We may consider these articles as negotiations between federal employees and journalists over the strategic narratives that emerge in an attempt to justify tweeting and deleting. Although many tweets disappear without attracting journalistic attention, the erasure of a single tweet *can* prompt an immediate response and longer-term acts of remembrance. These stories are remembrances and represent forms of resistance against government impression management. They generally consist of the following elements: (1) context behind a single deleted tweet, (2) an official quote from representative from the official agency justifying the deletion, and (3) criticisms from other social media users about the originally tweeted content.

In their stories about government deletion, most journalists give U.S. federal agencies an opportunity to hide internal debates about tweet erasure from public view and offer a single narrative explicating their deletion practices. Two elements tend to accompany these single narratives: (1) an admission of error and (2) a reaffirmation to supporting the information needs of the public. Yet both of these elements allow government deleters to avoid discussing their deletion practices in significant depth. What do deletions demonstrate about journalistic coverage of tweeting? Screenshots of deleted tweets provide a simple and formulaic trope. It is easier to ask *what was deleted* than *what was tweeted*. Content analysis of newspaper articles about government deletion reveal that journalists cover deletion practices somewhat uncritically,

focusing on agencies' post-deletion narratives as opposed to the preconditions that laid the groundwork for information erasures.

That newspapers now devote such extensive space—generally a whole article—to a single deleted tweet is frustrating, at best. It underscores a willingness on behalf of journalists to frame information erasure by government agencies as infrequent. It also demonstrates that in most cases, U.S. journalists stop short of classifying deletion practices or situating them comparatively. There is a bewildering refusal to figure out the contours of government use of Twitter. Subsequently, while deletion is often in the news, it is rarely thoroughly explained. This uncritical analysis obfuscates the complex organizational decision-making that, as we saw in email records earlier, can often go into tweeting and *deciding* to delete.

Newspaper articles about single tweets, listed below in Table 2, provide windows into what we might term "deletion management"—efforts to minimize the repercussions of erasing content, when it is announced and amplified by journalists and other social media users. Deletion management tends to fall into a few distinct categories in that we can see federal agencies adopt different approaches in justifying and/or apologizing for retracted content.

Deletion management vis-à-vis the U.S. press tends to involve one or multiple of the following steps: acknowledging the public outrage, admitting error, contextualizing the tweet, apologizing, and reiterating support to the public's information needs. The first and last of these steps are evident in the below disclosure cited in a *Washington Post* article (Rosenberg 2016):

> The State Department said that it understood that the "10" tweet was "construed negatively." "We see many U.S. citizens fall victim to scams each year, and we want to provide as much information as possible to keep them safe while traveling," it said in an emailed statement.

In the case of the U.S. Strategic Command, the spokeswoman chose to apologize, contextualize

the tweet, and also express support for information needs of its followers, as illustrated in a

Washington Post article (qtd. in Paul, 2017):

> "We admittedly erred in connecting it to New Year's Eve festivities, and we apologize,"
> said Meghan M. Liemburg-Archer, a U.S. Strategic Command spokeswoman. "We
> remain dedicated to the security of America and our allies." …. "This post, which has
> since been deleted, was part of our Year in Review series meant to feature our command
> priorities: strategic deterrence, decisive response and combat-ready force. It was a repost
> from earlier in the year, dropping a pair of conventional Massive Ordnance Penetrators
> (MOP) at a test range in the United States," a U.S. Strategic Command spokesman told
> The Post.

Journalists overwhelmingly describe government deleters as solo agents, not part of an

organizational collective. This framing appears in an article that describes a "staffer in the public

affairs office [who] erroneously used the official Department of Justice Twitter handle to post a

tweet that was intended for a personal account" (Wheeler 2016); the agency added:

> "The tweet does not represent the Department's views and was inappropriate for the
> Department of Justice's official account, so it was immediately deleted," an agency
> official said. The agency said it has revoked the staffer's access to all Justice social
> media accounts. "As a result of this incident, the Office of Public Affairs has
> implemented procedural changes to the way we use our social media accounts and will
> provide additional social media training for employees," the agency said. "The Justice
> Department takes this matter very seriously and will continue to take the appropriate
> steps to prevent it from happening in the future."

Overwhelmingly, in the aftermath of deletion, the strategic narrative put out by U.S. federal

agencies is that tweets represent a one-off error. As the Defense Intelligence Agency

demonstrated in one public statement, "Earlier today, a tweet regarding a news article was

mistakenly posted from this account & does not represent the views of DIA. We apologize"

(Paletta 2016). When the press is involved, deletion tends to be publicly justified on non-

substantive grounds (i.e.: a mistake, a claim that it doesn't represent 'the Department's views' or

'social media strategy'), but this in turn obfuscates some of the actual reasons for content

removal and also obscures who, within a U.S. federal agency, ultimately makes the decision to

take a tweet down.

Table 2.   Newspaper Articles about Deleted Tweets by U.S. Federal Agencies

Federal Agency	Twitter Handle	Newspaper Article	Outlet	Journalist	Date of Publication
State Department	@StateDept	State Dept. deletes tweet, calling Israel attacks 'tragic, outrageous'	Free Beacon	Adam Kredo	October 15, 2015
State Department	@TravelGov	State Department deletes tweet suggesting you're not a '10'	New York Times	Eli Rosenberg	March 21, 2016
U.S. Department of Justice	@TheJusticeDept	Justice Department revokes confused staffer's Twitter privileges	New York Magazine	Madison Malone Kircher	July 19, 2016
Justice Department	@TheJusticeDept	DOJ: Staffer's tweet about Melania Trump was 'inappropriate'	The Hill	Lydia Wheeler	July 19, 2016
U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency	@DefenseIntel	U.S. Spy Agency tweets, deletes, then apologizes	Wall Street Journal	Damian Paletta	September 4, 2016
U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency	@DefenseIntel	US spy agency tweets China 'classy as always,' apologizes	The Hill	Jessie Hellmann	September 5, 2016
U.S. Department of Defense	@DeptofDefense	An admiral basically took a dig at Colin Kaepernick. The Pentagon tweeted the quote, then deleted it.	Washington Post	Thomas Gibbons-Neff	December 8, 2016
Badlands National Park	@BadlandsNPS	National park tweets, then deletes, climate data after gag order	Engadget	Andrew Dalton	January 4, 2017
National Park Service	@NatlParkService	After silent period, Park Service says it regrets 2 Trump-related retweets	New York Times	Eli Rosenberg	January 21, 2017
National Park Service	@NatlParkService	These Park Service tweets were too wild for the Interior department	Buzzfeed	Nidhi Subbaraman	January 23, 2017
U.S. Air Force	@usairforce	U.S. Air Force apologizes for tweet comparing air strikes to 'Yanny' and 'Laurel' meme	Time.com	Katie Reilly	May 17, 2018
Treasury Department	@USTreasury	Treasury Department deletes Trump retweet touting 'Red Wave' that experts say was a violation of the Hatch Act	CNBC	Tucker Higgins	August 15, 2018
U.S. Strategic Command	@US_Stratcom	Military deletes New Year's Eve tweet saying it's 'ready to drop something'	New York Times	Matt Stevens and Thomas Gibbons-Neff	December 31, 2018

U.S. Strategic Command	@US_Stratcom	U.S. military tweets, then deletes, a New Year's Eve joke about dropping bombs	Washington Post	Deanna Paul	December 31, 2018
U.S. Strategic Command	@US_Stratcom	U.S. military deletes bomb-dropping NYE tweet, claiming misfire	Newsweek	Scott McDonald	December 31, 2018
U.S. Embassy in Zimbabwe	@usembassyharare	US Embassy in Zimbabwe removes tweet praising Mugabe after death	The Hill	Tal Axelrod	September 7, 2019

Discussion: Negotiating the Aftermath of Deletion

As email exchanges, records of deleted tweets, and newspaper coverage of deletion make clear, there is ongoing tension at play between U.S. federal agencies' desire to communicate with the public and to avoid needing to engage in post-deletion impression management. It is clear that not all federal agencies adopt the same practices in tweeting and deleting, and indeed, social media managers and others working within a single federal agency may not see eye to eye on how to effectuate impression management, transparency, and accountability during the use of a third-party social media platform, such as Twitter.

Positioned at the intersections of the scholarship on web history, memory, and government policy, this study demonstrates that deleted tweets reveal a web history that is challenged by friction, disruption, and ongoing disappearance. Email exchanges following deletion can be prospective and retrospective insofar as it can serve as a "collective remembrance of what still needs to be done, based on past commitments and promises" (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013: 92) and it can help government deleters "learn the lessons from the past that might impact future attitudes and behavior" (Lindgren and Phillips, 2016: 161).

This is not a paper about the precise causal mechanisms that lead to deletion by government actors; rather, it is an attempt to parse the ways in which U.S. federal employees negotiate and justify deletion among themselves and with journalists. That being said, from analyzing email exchanges, records of deleted tweets, and newspaper articles about deletion, it is

clear that deletion itself as a communication practice tends to involve internal organizational

pressures, external public pressures, or a combination of the two.

Government social media managers are not on the same page and have adopted a range

of deletion practices. Indeed, oftentimes the decision to delete comes from someone, who does

not participate in the daily communication practices of a federal agency on Twitter. To take one

example, in an email discussing the Department of Defense's deletion management strategies,

Ray Shepherd, the then Director of the Defense Media Activity, states, "…the tweet was pulled

by [the Office of the Secretary of Defense] not us. Pulling the tweet was a bad call." Yet in

talking to the U.S. press, Gordon Trowbridge, a Pentagon spokesperson offered a different

strategic narrative: "We deleted the tweet because we decided we didn't want to weigh in on

something that could be construed as political" (Gibbons-Neff, 2016). Internally, in disclosed

email exchanges, one employee stated, "This has become a big deal and I made a decision to

delete without knowing any of this." Another employee added, "Yeah, I wouldn't consider it a

mistake, personally….Twitter is where it went a little cuckoo." Here again we see U.S. federal

employees struggling to balance their personal attitudes towards deletion with their efforts to

negotiate what justifications are given to the press to defend an agency's tweeting and deleting

practices.

Deletion management, when involving the U.S. press, ultimately benefits Twitter's

bottom line by directing additional traffic to the platform; stories include screenshots of deleted

tweets but also link back to U.S. federal agencies' official Twitter handles. One solution here

would be to simply not delete any tweets—to maintain a full record of all messages. Another

option would be for agencies to provide more transparency around their decisions to delete.

However, given the fact that journalists seem far more focused on ad-hoc instances of deleting as

opposed to the broader communication practices that accompany day-to-day tweeting, we are

unlikely to see U.S. federal agencies partake in either of these activities.

Future work may also want to consider how needing to engage in deletion management

with the public and the press subsequently impacts future communication practices adopted by

federal agencies' social media teams. Although Twitter is the most widely used social network

for political discussions (Jaidka, Zhou, & Lelkes, 2019), government agencies post messages and

delete content on other social media platforms, including Facebook; political communication

scholars would benefit from conducting more comparative research that focuses on

communication practices across social media platforms and U.S. federal agencies.

Limitations of This Study

This study has a fair share of limitations. First, this study only drew on English-language articles

and focused on media that could be measured in text form. The sampling method was reliant

upon the publications that LexisNexis, Factiva, and Google News included within their

databases.[5] Another limitation is that this study is exploratory, not exhaustive; it relies on the

records federal agencies keep and journalists uncover about the tweets that the government

deletes. As of 2019, the Federal Records Act gives federal agencies considerable flexibility in

letting them establish their own records management schedules, and that in part is why this study

draws on different quantities of materials for each instance of deletion.[6] Some agencies keep

screenshots of their deleted tweets and also have email records, which shed light on how or why

an agency might have opted to take down a post. Some, upon receiving my FOIA requests, relied

solely on the verbal accounts of social media managers, many of whom professed to have never

deleted messages from social media accounts. Taken as a collective, the FOIA response letters

reveal a fracture in how government agencies perceive Twitter as a company and a tool that can help facilitate communication with the public. Additionally, several agencies anticipated that they would be able to recover their deleted tweets by asking for said records from Twitter directly; when this recovery method proved futile, government officials would, on occasion, disclose to me that they had made this effort. We therefore cannot quantify in full how many agencies simply have no records of deletion but have partaken in the process, nonetheless.

A common theme underpinning both popular and scholarly articles about deletion on social media platforms is that this technology has created a shift in power, in who gets to remember and who gets to forget. In his book *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (2009), Victor Mayer-Schonberger asserts that users should be allowed to set expiration dates for information stored online, but he does not put equal effort into considering the repercussions of what happens when representatives acting on behalf of organizations, in this case federal agencies, decide to delete. Government deleters are a largely understudied population in part because they are challenging to identify and sample; email records included in this study demonstrate that the names of the employees responsible for deleting tweets are often not the same ones justifying reasons for deletion to journalists. To complicate matters even further, many of the names of the employees responsible for deletion are redacted under exemption six of the FOIA.

Conclusion

The government produces and removes public information from Twitter, but not all U.S. federal agencies tweet and delete in the same ways. From the U.S. State Department to the Federal Aviation Administration, agencies use third-party social media platforms to speak to and engage with the public. This paper shows that there is considerable debate internally within U.S. federal

agencies about what types of content should be shared and kept on Twitter. However, decisions

to delete do not necessarily occur arbitrarily; we can trace the government actors involved in

information erasure by analyzing email exchanges that preceded and followed deletion. In

considering the communication practices on Twitter adopted by U.S. federal agencies, it is clear

that there needs to be stronger deliberative processes in place about what kinds of content should

be tweeted. As this paper revealed, U.S. federal agencies are not homogenous entities. It can be

challenging to chart the differing attitudes of social media managers towards government speech

on Twitter. Given these things, U.S. federal agencies with Twitter feeds should purposively

create conditions for more robust internal debates not only about what should be *deleted* but also

tweeted. It seems evident that some agencies are working towards this goal already, but it does

not appear to be the norm.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

[1] It is worth noting that Twitter has not been a consistent supporter of Politwoops; in 2015, the company temporarily moved to block Politwoops' access to Twitter data.
[2] In data analysis, when tweets are included in emails, I count those records as emails.
[3] In my page count of records provided, I include the response letter provided by each agency, which in each case, runs one to two pages.
[4] Materials received through the Freedom of Information Act are available upon request from the author.
[5] As anticipated, the LexisNexis Academic representative, Factiva representative, and Google News representative contacted would not disclose the specifics of how they review and select the media items that are chosen for their database. Some comparative case studies have considered divergences in search practices (Weaver & Bimber, 2008), and there is also an emerging corpus working to pinpoint the inner workings of online news aggregators (Wang, 2019).
[6] 44 U.S.C. §§ 3301-3303a, 3308-3311 (2000). For an overview of the Act's requirements, see U.S. Dep't of Educ., Federal Records Act, http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/fra.html

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melania-trump-from-agency-account

Appendix A

[Redacted to anonymize my identity]

FOIA TEMPLATE FOR DELETED MESSAGES ON THIRD-PARTY SOCIAL MEDIA
PLATFORMS

[Date]

[Addressee]

[Address]

Re: Freedom of Information Act Request

Dear Freedom of Information Officer:

This is a request under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552, to the
[Agency] ("[Acronym]") on my own behalf as a journalist and as an academic researcher.

Requested Records

[If you have examples of tweets deleted from this agency's account, feel free to include a
sentence about that here – it may increase the likelihood of getting responsive documents.]

I request all agency records from [Start date] to the present concerning Tweets deleted or drafted
and not sent from the [@TwitterHandle] account associated with [Agency].

I believe the records that I are located, *inter alia*, within agency headquarters, in email records,
and in third-party platforms used to manage the Agency's social media accounts.

The records I request include, but are not limited to:

1. Records of all tweets deleted by the Twitter handle associated with [Agency]
   ([@TwitterHandle]), including:
   a. Any tweets that were published on Twitter and subsequently deleted for any
      reason; and
   b. Any tweets published by other accounts that were retweeted by @TwitterHandle
      and subsequently deleted for any reason.
2. Records of all tweets that have been kept in draft form beyond their expected date and
   time of publication, on Twitter or in a third-party social media management platform,
   for any reason.
3. Records related to the drafting or deletion of tweets, including:
   a. Any correspondence or record of correspondence regarding the drafting or
      deletion of specific tweets
      i. including correspondence sent through official government email
         addresses or messaging services; and

<ol type="i" start="2">
including correspondence sent through private third-party services such as Gmail or Slack; and
Including any messages, notes, or annotations created on a third-party social media management platform.

<ol type="a" start="2">
Documentation of the agency's existing policy regarding the preservation and maintenance of tweets as per the Federal Records Act, and Federal Records Management Bulletin 2014-02 (available at https://www.archives.gov/records-mgmt/bulletins/2014/2014-02.htm), which stated that "social media content may be a Federal record when the use of social media provides added functionality, such as enhanced searchability, opportunities for public comment, or other collaboration… A complete Federal record must have content, context, and structure along with associated metadata (e.g., author, date of creation). The complete record must be maintained to ensure reliability and authenticity."
Any briefings, reports, memoranda, legal opinions, policy statements, or talking points used or disseminated within the Agency regarding the drafting or deletion of tweets.

I urge [Agency] to process this request consistent with "a general philosophy of full agency disclosure [under FOIA] unless information is exempted under clearly delineated statutory language," *United States Dep't of Def. v. Fed. Labor Relations Auth.*, 510 U.S. 487, 494 (1994), and the Justice Department's policy directing a presumption of disclosure. *See* Dep't of Justice Office of Information Policy, *President Obama's FOIA Memorandum and Attorney General Holder's FOIA Guidelines: Creating a "New Era of Open Government"* (2009), *available at* https://www.justice.gov/oip/blog/foia-post-2009-creating-new-era-open-government).

The records concern the operations or activities of the government. Government social media accounts are used to disseminated information to the public, make official pronouncements, and generally serve as an important touch point for governments to receive public input. *See Social Media Use by Governments: A Policy Primer to Discuss Trends, Identify Policy Opportunities and Guide Decision Makers*, OECD Working Papers on Public Governance, available at https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5jxrcmghmk0s-en. Social media use, including tweets posted by [@TwitterHandle] and then deleted, or never posted, is an important part of this activity.