

University of Dayton

eCommons

A Rhetorical Study of Twitter Discourse about
Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney
Barrett

University Honors Program

4-22-2022

Episode 1: About the Research

Lauren Durham
University of Dayton

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/podcast_durham



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Law Commons](#), and the [Mass Communication Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Durham, Lauren, "Episode 1: About the Research" (2022). *A Rhetorical Study of Twitter Discourse about Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett*. 1.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/podcast_durham/1

This Podcast is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in A Rhetorical Study of Twitter Discourse about Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlengen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

This transcript was exported on Apr 12, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Lauren:

Hi there! I'm Lauren and lately I've been reading tweets. Profound, I know, for a 22 year old to pay attention to social media, I'm aware. And it's true, almost everyone reads tweets from time to time, but lately I've been reading tweets a little differently. I've combined some of my passions writing, following current events and using social media to study the discourse around two of the most talked about, and perhaps influential women of the past year and a half – Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Amy Coney Barrett. The two women, different in fundamental ways, share a common thread, the Supreme Court. After the passing of Ginsburg on September 18th, 2020, Amy Coney Barrett became her replacement in a record six weeks. The time period was filled with anxiety, fear and uncertainty as the United States battled a raging pandemic in a violently polarized election scene. Some mourned the loss of Ginsburg while others waited for her younger, more conservative replacement. Tensions were high, and what did people do about it? They tweeted.

Lauren:

In this podcast, I'll break down my study of tweets from this six week time period between Ginsburg's death and Barrett's nomination. Together, we will examine the actual ways in which the two women are connected through the examination of thousands of tweets. Let's go.

News Anchor 1:

This is a CBS News special report. I'm Norah O'Donnell in Washington. We are coming on the air at this hour because CBS News has confirmed that Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has died at the age of 87 from complications from metastatic pancreatic cancer.

News Anchor 2:

Supreme Court associate justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg has died at the age of 87, just weeks before the start of the court's Fall session and in the shadow of a presidential election, now just 45 days away. Now a time for mourning for a remarkable career and life well lived, but also a loss rocking the political universe tonight. The battle lines over the court's future are already being drawn.

Lauren:

Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death on September 18th, 2020 sent shock waves through the world. Known for her fiery legal opinions and years of legal advocacy for women's equality, Ginsburg herself predicted what her death would mean for the political fabric of the United States. As she told her granddaughter, "My most fervent wish is that I will not be replaced until a new president is installed." Nevertheless, only eight days after Ginsburg's death, then president Donald Trump announced that judge Amy Coney Barrett would be his nominee to replace Ginsburg on September 26th, 2020. Already serving on the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, Barrett was a favorite amongst religious conservatives, a devout Catholic and strong supporter of the pro-life movement. Trump had Barrett waiting in the wings for years.

Lauren:

Barrett's rushed nomination was aided by the Republican controlled Congress who saw an opportunity to change the ideological leanings of the court just in time for the November, 2020 presidential election. Mitch McConnell, who served as Senate majority leader under both Donald Trump and Barack Obama,

This transcript was exported on Apr 12, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

was quick to bring Barrett to the Senate for confirmation, angering many Democrats. Not only did McConnell ignore Ginsburg's dying wish, but also, and most strikingly, McConnell's push to confirm Barrett revealed what many Democrat dissenters saw as downright hypocrisy, given his 2016 refusal to consider, then president, Barack Obama's appointment of judge Merrick Garland as a replacement for the late Supreme Court justice. Nevertheless, only 13 days after Trump's nomination, the Republican majority ushered Barrett into confirmation hearings. The Senate Judiciary Committee voted to advance Barrett's nomination for a full Senate vote on October 22nd, 2020. After four years of hearings, the Senate voted 52 to 48, confirming Barrett for the justice seat on October 26th, 2020.

Speaker 5:

[inaudible 00:04:07] in the chamber who wish to vote or change their vote. If not, on this vote, the yays are 52. The nays are 48. The nomination of Amy Coney Barrett of Indiana to be an associate justice of the Supreme Court of the United States is confirmed.

Lauren:

Americans reacted to the news on social media, further advancing the political and social discourse. As I watched Barrett's nomination and confirmation play out during a highly contentious election season, one in which I was heavily involved in local organizing and campaigning for a US congressional candidate, Desiree Tims, I found myself paying much closer attention to the national political news of the day. I was intrigued by the ways in which trending topics and hashtags developed and persisted over the six week time period. On a personal level, I've always been intrigued by the life and legacy of Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The way in which a distinguished intellectual became a cultural icon fascinates me. Even though Ginsburg had passed, conversations about Barrett still seemed to focus on her predecessor. #RBG did not go away and most conversations about Barrett, even still, seem to connect to Ginsburg. The described six week period provides a poignant lens through which we can study discourse about women in power, specifically Ginsburg and Barrett.

Lauren:

And Twitter, the social network that gave us the social phenomenon of the hashtag, is a useful place to study this discourse. In addition to being a network where news journalists can immediately share information, Twitter provides a rich space for everyday citizens to share and comment on the news of the day. The introduction of Barrett, who could, in some ways be labeled as the antithesis of Ginsburg, offers a timely look into what it means to be a woman in power. Does it matter how you get to a place of authority, as long as you get there? Are certain values, whether political or religious, more defining than others for women in political power? How does a legacy continue when a successor has the potential to reverse the work of the previous woman in power? I wanted to work through these issues and we'll work through them in the forthcoming episodes, drawing on my own year-long study of Twitter discourse. As a new form of communication media, Twitter is what [inaudible 00:06:33] call a multimodal platform of availability and accessibility that welcomes political and social dialogue.

Lauren:

Individuals can participate in social discourse with these allowing for a propagation of opinions and original thoughts. Collective memory or indicators of social and political change lives within the fabric of social media. Discourse on Twitter, for example, can help create alternative interpretations of history or current events. Thomas [inaudible 00:02:13] and Andre [inaudible 00:07:03] described digital media as a

This transcript was exported on Apr 12, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

social memory or ways in which to remember moments in digitally network times. They identify three prototypical forms of journalistic treatment of the past that influence collective memory. One being commemorations or reportage of past events, two, historical analogies or learning from past events as the goal and three, historical contexts or specific types of memorial journalism. According to [inaudible 00:07:33], "Debates about a reinterpretation of local or national history, and especially the discourses besides the mass media give insight into the fragmentation and polarization of societies." [inaudible 00:07:45] and June [inaudible 00:07:47] further described the phenomenon saying that individuals who participate in the specific type of discourse remember the events or concepts of a social context in a way that rationally orders and organizes them, through that same social construction or social framework from memory.

Lauren:

In other words, social media users can come to understand particular moments in history in new ways, after engaging in discourse with others who are also experiencing the same events. This social nature of creating and sharing content on the social media platform provides opportunities for in-the-moment, firsthand accounts that traditional media such as broadcast or newspapers may not offer. For these reasons, this project only looks at Twitter posts. Whether thoughts be original or dependent on previous posts, the analysis of tweets will provide organic, transparent and real time sets of data that reflect the chosen time period of analysis. The design elements of Twitter, including, but not limited to retweets, comments, hashtags and sharing of links allows for the mapping and overlapping of discourse.

Lauren:

Given the observations I saw through tweets and the ways in which collective memory can be shaped and created on social media platforms, I sought out to discover the following: how are Ginsburg and Barrett rhetorically linked to one another? I hypothesized that most of the tweets that originated from the happenings around Barrett's nomination and confirmation would reference Ginsburg and vice versa. It seemed that no mention of Amy Coney Barrett excluded Ruth Bader Ginsburg, even though she was no longer living. When one woman was tweeted about, the other was implicitly or explicitly mentioned, at least in my initial findings. The interconnectedness of the two women was indeed evident in both the initial findings and the coding after keywords were identified and applied to the data set. I sought out to find why the two women are linked and how it played out on the social media platform and spoiler alert, I got some answers.

Lauren:

In order to collect the necessary data, I utilized web scraping tools, specifically Octoparse, to gather tweets directly mentioning Ginsburg and Barrett within the chosen six week period of the Fall of 2020. Because the timeframe of analysis is quite expansive and would likely include an abundance of data, I used a grounded theory approach in which I established keywords or categories after assessing the collected data. Thousands of tweets were gathered. So, in an effort to make the sample size a little more manageable, but also still valid, I eliminated tweets that received less than 100 likes. This allowed me to focus more on the tweets that were widely circulating at the time. Through careful analysis of the day data, I developed eight emergent codes or themes. Calling to action, empowering women, memorializing, passing down legacy, processing the moment, quoting, reporting, and summarizing. Using these codes, it was necessary to segment some of the tweets that could have multiple codes within one tweet.

This transcript was exported on Apr 12, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Lauren:

After segmenting the tweets and assigning a code to each piece of data, an interrator coded a sample of the data. An interrator meaning an English student who helped me with the project. When compared to my coding, I found a significance that had to p-value right around 0.4. This number indicates that the codes I developed had significance and the trends and the data were significant enough that others would come to similar conclusions about the tweets if they were to do the same study. After analyzing and organizing thousands of tweets, I found three main answers to my research question. How are Ginsburg and Barrett rhetorically linked to one another? The answers or observations are the following: one, discourse focused on the presence and absence of the iconic status of the pop culture figure of RBG, two, discourse portrayed Ginsburg and Barrett as opposites with Barrett, following in the footsteps of Ginsburg and three, Twitter discourse portrayed Barrett as a "figure in the making." The answers to my research question will guide the next few episodes of this podcast.

Lauren:

So now that we've established the technical foundations of the study, we'll dive into the fun stuff, analyzing the passionate tweets and what they tell us about the time period. We'll also delve into what Barrett's confirmation process might tell us about future legislation and the future of Supreme Court justice. Tune in for the next episode where we'll be exploring RBG's pop icon status and the ways in which her presence and absence still dominates the conversation. Thanks for listening.