

“Modern Day Presidential:” Donald Trump and American Politics in the Age of Twitter

Devan Bissonette

Center for General Education, Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401
devan.bissonette@mail.waldenu.edu

The increasing power of social media over American news and politics is difficult to ignore thanks to the visibility of President Trump’s tweets both on online and traditional media. This paper seeks to better understand the strategy behind Donald Trump’s use of Twitter both as a candidate and during his first year as president. Through a careful study of his tweets and their ability to take advantage of the specific user makeup on Twitter and the choice of

mainstream media to often echo his tweets in their coverage, a consistent strategy emerges based on a combination of traditional advertising practice and radicalist discourse that continues to reshape the American political landscape today.

Keywords: Twitter, President Trump, social media, American politics, journalism

“I use Social Media not because I like to,” Donald Trump (2017a) once explained, “but because it is the only way to fight a VERY dishonest and unfair ‘press,’ now often referred to as fake news Media.” While it was not until December 2016 that then President-Elect Trump declared war on “fake news,” his long-standing battle with mainstream media became a centerpoint of his successful campaign for President and a critical moment in the evolution of American politics.

Many discussions, debates, and diatribes have focused on the 2016 US Presidential Election, where, despite numerous polls to the contrary, Republican candidate Donald Trump emerged victorious over Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. The central argument of the paper is that Trump’s use of Twitter helps explain how he was able to win a stable and enthusiastic support base willing to stand *with* him and vote *for* him despite

the many polls that expected a far different result. By analyzing Trump's Twitter feed¹ as well as secondary material, a strategy emerges that emphasizes emotion, interactivity, and the repetition of stereotypes. Not unlike an advertiser offering the public a new product or political propaganda of decades past, Trump erased the line between myth and truth through an informal style built around a radicalist discourse, rooted in populism, that convinced supporters to trust his words over any other source. Recognizing the drive for ratings/readership behind media, Trump effectively sidestepped traditional media gatekeeping to wield an unprecedented power to project *his* truth to the voting public by making coverage of his tweets not just newsworthy but profitable and, in doing so, created a new model for politicians to win public support.

MYTH, MEDIA, & POLITICS IN THE AGE OF TWITTER

Myth, Barthes (1973) contends, “has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal” with its central function to “empty reality” (p. 57-58). Without reality as a basis to check one's facts, a purveyor of myth is free to selectively invoke the past to persuade an audience of their truth. The consequences of this sleight-of-hand becomes clearer through the lens of advertising. As Williamson (1978) argues, advertisements use emotion to “generate a connection between a product and a second ‘product’, love, happiness etc.” She goes on to explain, “Products are thus set up as being able to buy things *you* cannot buy. This puts them in a position of *replacing* you; they do things you can't do, for you” (p. 38). In the act of selling something the product cannot provide by itself, advertisements invoke emotions (such as pleasure

¹ Donald Trump's personal Twitter feed, @realDonaldTrump, was studied between June 16, 2015, the day he announced his candidacy, until January 20, 2018, the end of his first year in office. It was accessed through TrumpTwitterArchive.com. Key terms and phrases were first identified through a study of the full complement of tweets in this time frame. Thereafter, using a find command, the most commonly mentioned news organizations (*The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, etc), political figures (such as Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton) and negatives terms commonly used to describe those individuals and organizations were collected and charted to compare the application and frequency of each negative term to the individuals and groups mentioned in individual tweets to better study the Trump's use of specific language on Twitter. Specific examples were then aggregated from the raw data where a high frequency was found between pejorative terminology and the identified groups and individuals mentioned by Trump to offer a more nuanced understanding of his specific rhetorical strategy. As much as possible, the study focuses on his original tweets rather than retweets to understand the shaping of his discursive tactics, and when the latter is considered, the study aims to clarify their role in better understanding Trump's use of two-way communication on Twitter.

and desire) and rely on the idea that consumption will fill the void the ad tells the customer exists in their lives.

As myth does not have to involve a physical object, it is easily adapted to political discourse. A myth as invoked in politics refers to a narrative/discourse that “plays” with history (in a poststructuralist sense) to promote specific sentiments. This, to build on Flood’s (2001) analysis of political myth, draws individuals “into a network of shared meanings” that “sanctifies social segmentation and political hierarchy” in a way that could either build group cohesion or challenge an existing social order (p. 37). Myth thus becomes “a vital factor in evoking and sustaining the feelings of solidarity and alienation which underpin or undermine communities and their boundaries” (Flood, 2001, p. 41). In a political myth, the product advertised is the message a politician wants to convey, and myth becomes the means to sell it, by convincing the audience of a visceral need to accept and act on that myth through embracing the message-as-product. Thus the product is, in essence, political propaganda packaged as truth. How these political myths involve the past and reinforce or crumble existing social bonds depends on the candidate and his or her goals.

Political myth has hardly lost its relevance in the digital age. If anything, its importance is growing. Esch (2010) has shown the continuing importance of political myth drawing on historical assumptions about the civilized and primitive to shape public understanding of the War on Terror. Boer (2009) also uses this general framework to highlight the power of Biblical myths in American and Australian political discourse to justify political goals. Shteynman (2016) additionally finds political myth has easily enmeshed itself in Russian social media, lending credence to the adaptability of this old idea to new communicative technologies.

While the use of myth in politics is hardly new, the tactics used by Trump, which Douglas Kellner (2018) attributes to his unique ability to create his own self-affirming, critic-proof message through Twitter, are unique. Twitter’s importance to political campaigns evolved slowly, fueled by growth its user base from a few thousand to around 300 million today (Carlson, 2011; Russell, 2017). With 140 characters (now 280), users can share their thoughts to the Twitterverse with a brevity much like one would find in an advertisement. Twitter’s importance to politics is not just a function of total users

however. Who uses Twitter helps make it unusually impactful as compared to other social media. The average American Twitter user tends to be white, in their 30s to 40s, is at least middle class and a professional, and is very interested in politics (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). This population gives Twitter its high political value, because these people tend to be more politically engaged (and vote)—and white voters in particular showed a strong preference for Trump over Clinton in 2016 (Bright et al., 2017; Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Guimaraes, Wang, & Weikum, 2017; Nigam et al., 2017; Parmalee & Bichard, 2012; Roper Center, 2016). Coupled with evidence from Park et al. (2015) that following celebrities (such as Trump was before he became a candidate) may increase the political polarization of followers, Twitter’s potential as a political tool is hard to ignore.

While Barack Obama used various social media during this 2008 campaign, Twitter did not make a significant impact on American electoral politics until 2010 (Enli, 2017; Graham, Jackson, & Broesma, 2016; Kreiss, 2014). Politicians, however, have found mixed results with the medium. Former New York Congressman Anthony Weiner is just one example of how tweeting can torpedo a career (Penzenstadler, 2016). As a means to spread political propaganda, however, Twitter has proven a very useful tool (Bolsover & Howard, 2019; Jones, 2019; Seo, 2014). While researchers have much to learn regarding the relationship between Twitter and voting, these early findings highlight its tremendous potential, especially among certain key voting demographics, in spreading (mis)information, if not shaping voting decisions among users.

THE TRUMPIAN TWITTER STRATEGY

To better understand the impact of Trump’s tweets, two concepts related to extremist online discourse are quite valuable. The first is Chilwa’s (2015) idea of radicalist discourse, one that is based on calls to action that challenge existing social and political norms and, using various threats to oppositional groups and individuals, builds a group identity demanding social change. Specifically, those who use radicalist discourse focus on (real or mythical) rights they claim were taken away by existing powers. Trump couples this radicalism with a strong vein of populism, one amplified by a personality heavy on extraversion and low on emotional stability and agreeableness unique among contemporary populist politicians (Nai, Martínez i Coma, & Maier, 2019). Trump’s brand

of radicalist populism demands there always be a scapegoat to blame for the continuation of the threat, and, as it relies on a mythic, shifting threat that only he can address (Hodges, 2019), simultaneously reinforces confidence in him as the only leader capable of addressing the mythic threat and fuels disdain for those who failed to address said threats in the past. This connects well with Epstein and Reich’s (2010) evidence that, without traditional media filters on discourse, what emerges online at times is a very extreme, even violent discourse among users that breeds both attention and confrontation. When such a framework is applied to Trump’s language on Twitter, a complex picture emerges that better reveals the impact of his efforts to paint such a negative picture of people, events, and ideas he considers counter to his own personal and political goals as a critical element in building a strong support base willing to act on his behalf.

One example of Trump’s use of radicalist discourse on Twitter can be seen through his rhetoric on immigration. His connection between immigration and crime proved one of the most visible aspects of his Twitter, as 67% of his tweets on the subject linked “illegal” with immigration or immigrants, and typically those connections included the message that such immigrants were violent as well. Right after announcing his candidacy, Trump noted that “Druggies, drug dealers, rapists and killers are coming across the southern border. When will the U.S. get smart and stop this travesty” (Trump, 2015a)? His August (2015b) tweet made his message even more transparent: “We must stop the crime and killing machine that is illegal immigration. Rampant problems will only get worse. Take back our country!” Trump leaves no ambiguity as to the consequences of illegal immigration, that it has caused the United States to be stolen, presumably by those immigrants. Perhaps the most radicalist position here is not the claim to take America back, or who took it, but that those who do not take his position are, if not criminals themselves, at least accepting of violence and criminality. Doubling-down on this thinking, Trump later blamed President Obama for making the US “a divided crime scene” and the election “a choice between law, order & safety-or chaos, crime and violence” (Trump, 2016b, Trump 2016c). The threat then is not just illegal immigrants, but those who choose his opponent (the scapegoat in this case), if not Democrats in general. By taking the specific example (illegal immigrants committing a crime), Trump offers the myth that crime is because of illegal

immigrants, and their absence would end it. While the “Trump Hypothesis” has not held to scholarly review, its utility as a means to separate his candidacy from others appears rather certain (Green, 2016).

To reinforce these links between crime and immigration, Trump consistently painted border security in alarmist terms, such as warning his followers that “Drugs are pouring into this country. If we have no border, we have no country” (Trump, 2016a). This continued into his presidency, where at the start of 2018 he reinforced such rhetoric in a tweet, arguing “We must have Security at our VERY DANGEROUS SOUTHERN BORDER, and we must have a great WALL to help protect us, and to help stop the massive inflow of drugs pouring into our country” (Trump, 2018a). The repetition underscores the myth tying drugs (and by proxy crime) to the southern border alone, and Trump’s implication that, not only is there no border (or security) presently, but that absence leaves the United States’ future in peril. Here Trump deftly uses radicalist discourse to link America’s problems to one very specific source, and the price of inaction, in Trump’s vision, is ominous.

His penchant to connect illegal immigrants and crime continued as President, reappearing in his defense of a targeted travel ban that focused on largely Muslim countries. Between January 30 and February 1, Trump claimed the policy kept the “bad ‘dudes’” out the US (Trump, 2017c; Trump, 2017d). Curiously, the ban largely disappeared from Trump’s feed until June, when a “watered down” version—a term he used twice on the 5th—was blocked by a federal court (Trump, 2017e; Trump, 2017f). If the stakes were not clear enough, Trump emphasized them the next week, calling the present “such a dangerous time in the history of our country” (Trump, 2017g) because of the lack of a strict ban.

This link between immigrants and domestic conflict must be read in the context of another of Trump’s pre-election Twitter myths, that a loss could only happen because “the media, in a coordinated effort with the Clinton campaign” put “stories that never happened into news!” (Trump, 2016d). Trump tweeted similar claims of a rigged election 52 times between the time he announced his candidacy and his victory. Making such grandiose claims that posited a link between media, Democrats, and the potential for defeat, coupled with his pointed claims of disaster ahead for the US if

Democrats were elected offered the public a clear scapegoat, and the radical notion that American democracy itself was failing because of them.

While the presence of a radicalist discourse will reemerge in examining many of the other themes in this paper, this by no means explains why such language held appeal for certain Americans, those of which Trump famously said he “could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters” (Trump, quoted in Diamond, 2016, para. 2). Though undoubtedly an overstatement, Trump’s use of Twitter does help explain why his support base tends to stay above a certain threshold, no matter what he says, because he, by amplifying existing fears and stereotypes already accepted by segments of the voting public Trump both exacerbates their fears and offers a remedy for them. In Trump’s narrative of America, its values are threatened, its future is uncertain, and long-held values are under constant attack. These are hallmarks of the radicalist basis of Trump’s tweets—and the more he mentions the horrors of the present, the more Trump presents himself as the only person who can fill that need, arguably the most noteworthy myth of all.

The Interactive Trump

There are two significant methods Trump employs when connecting with his audience, both of which fit in well with Twitter’s strengths as a social media and the power of radicalist discourse over his support base. Several studies point to the growing desire and importance for those on Twitter to engage in two-way communication with those they follow (Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Graham, Jackson, & Broesma, 2016; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Trump embraced this desire during the 2016 election, as he was far more willing than his challenger to use retweets to let the public speak through him (Enli, 2017). In doing so, Trump not only fed into the public desire for a stronger connection with candidates, he leveraged it into word-of-mouth advertising. Social media’s power to amplify traditional word-of-mouth messaging is well-established, and Twitter was quickly seen as a key source for this power given its relatively high degree of influence over users, and its proven utility as a means to spread propaganda nationally and internationally (Sago, 2012; Seo, 2014). Parmelee and Bichard’s (2012) work further reinforces the tendency of Twitter users to be more likely to act on or pass on information if they identified with the source, and the message was easily understood—

here reflecting the importance of Trump's ability to connect with his followers through a repetitious discourse that demands action, and the value of his leveraging of the power of myth as an advertising tool noted earlier to demand the attention and action of followers. Trump's tendency to compose his own tweets also increased perceptions of his authenticity and outsider status, two things craved by Twitter users (Enli, 2017). Combined with these other factors, the composition of his tweets fuels the likelihood that users will retweet or echo the ideas of the original author (Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). The importance of having that rapport between user and follower should not be trivialized: it can even make the opinions of the Twitter account being followed more influential than the reader's own family (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012).

Trump replied to or retweeted his followers in almost 25% of his total tweets, giving the public an enormous sense of power and recognition through his feed which significantly helps spread one's message (Verbeke et al., 2017). Among those retweets were plenty of familiar names including politicians, news networks, and celebrities, but there were also many unknowns, giving a strong impression Trump was in fact interacting with an amplifying the voices of average Americans. At the same time then @blackvelvet was retweeted saying "@realDonaldTrump We need to show Americans that Hillary will KILL our Country!! Vote for Trump!! " he could draw on media personalities to reinforce his message, such as this retweet from @IngrahamAngle: "Far right'? You mean 'right so' far,' as in @realDonaldTrump has been right so far abt how to kick the economy into high gear" (Trump, 2016e; Trump 2017b). Mixing together political elites and everyday citizens not only levels their status, it also increases the perception of a broad base of support for Trump's ideas. Twice in 2016, for example, Trump retweeted @WhiteGenocideTM, a white supremacist account (Hensch, 2016). While such actions often caused indignity in the mainstream press, Trump's Twitter followers were insulated from this outcry on his feed. As a result, the impact of such behavior was inevitably muted as long as they trust Trump's messaging over that of the press.

The other facet in this two-way communication relates to how Trump's tweets were retweeted, amplifying their impact. Retweets, while certainly important for spreading a candidate's viewpoint also play an important role for Twitter users as well. Muñoz and García-Guardia (2016) show Twitter users often retweet those they agree with rather than

express their politics directly to insulate themselves from criticism, again reflecting the power of Twitter to rapidly spread political propaganda (Sago, 2014). A brief sample of some of Trump’s less-provocative tweets better indicate what an average tweet could produce as far as amplification from users. A “typical” Crooked Hillary comment got between 15,000 and 25,000 retweets, quite a number when one considers he called her crooked 279 times over the course of the study. Interestingly, a look at his tweets on illegal immigration show a huge spike over time, averaging in the hundreds to less than 2,000 early in the campaign, to over 25,000 just before his first year in office ended, where he announced to his followers that Democrats “want illegal immigration and weak borders” (Trump, 2018b). A similar trend comes through in the President’s “failing @nytimes” posts, which went from at most 5,000 retweets into the tens of thousands since his election. Comparatively, Trump’s cries of “fake news,” which only began after he won the election, vary between 15,000 and 35,000 retweets in most cases. Trump’s ability to rely on word-of-mouth advertising to spread political propaganda has, in short, grown considerably. This does not take into account the role of fake accounts in amplifying messaging and creating a misleading sense of interest in a user account, which certainly can have an impact on the perception of a candidate’s reach as well.

Through this mix of two-way communication and its power to fuel word-of-mouth, Trump built a strong base to get his message out and used these personally-invested followers not just to advertise his ideas, but to build a strong and vocal support base. Trump’s celebrity status was important as a starting point for his campaign, as having a strong base of followers ensures an already-established audience to speak with on Twitter. Having such a large following also reinforced Trump’s social status and authority, a self-fulfilling prophecy of sorts (Kellner, 2018; Marwick, 2013). As proof of their reliability in relating to the messages he offered them, Guimaraes, Wang, & Weikum (2017) found that Trump’s supporters did challenge Clinton’s Twitter posts far more than her supporters challenged Trump, indicating his overall strategy did spark followers into action. This fits Trump’s strategy, as his proclivity to attack mainstream press reinforces to his followers that they must seek truth in him, and all others are fake, dishonest, bad, etc. That Trump’s supporters are willing to attack purveyors of other truths, at least online, is certainly not something to disregard given his use of radicalist discourse, as Twitter users

have embraced similar rhetorical style to ferment revolutionary behaviors and spread political propaganda already (Chiluwa, 2015; Giroux, 2017; Nip & Sun, 2018) .

Since becoming president, Trump's retweeting of rank-and-file users during his first year as president has dwindled. Perhaps the most notable retweeting from outside the mainstream since he became President was his November 2017 retweeting of three anti-Muslim videos from, as he would later learn, Britain's ultranationalist Britain First party (Tillett, 2017). Even in such a case where Trump faced notable public outcry, Trump's message—and that of the far-right British party—found its way to an audience far beyond his followers through widespread coverage of said tweets.

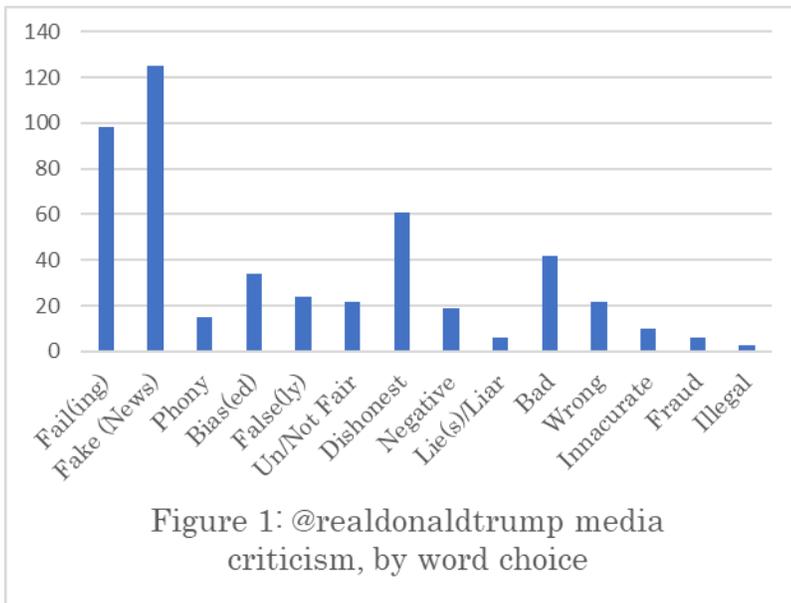
The Sentimental Trump

When Trump announced his candidacy for president on June 19, 2015, he had approximately three million followers on Twitter, less than Hillary Clinton. By October of that year his followers eclipsed hers and continued to outpace hers thereafter (Keegan, 2016). By followers alone then, Trump increasingly came to dominate Hillary Clinton, and coupled with previous evidence as to how follows can produce votes, what Trump tweeted that increased follows requires careful scrutiny, beginning with Trump's ability to craft political propaganda through the medium far better than his opponent. Building on the previous ties between myth and emotion to win support noted earlier, Trump's appeal is unsurprisingly tied to sentiment. As Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) show, expressing sentiment on Twitter—positive *or* negative—is a key factor in provoking attention and action from followers. Zappavigna (2012) reinforces this conclusion in her research, showing Twitter users seek out sentiment, particularly as it relates to politics.

Additionally, Kreiss (2014) found that during the 2014 election both the Obama and Romney campaigns saw tweets as important measure of the success of each campaign at a given moment. With politicians increasingly attuned to the power of Twitter, Trump's ability to use emotion, opinion, and repetition stands out not just in connecting with a public, but in creating a myth about the level of his support too.

Trump's embrace of sentimental language in his tweets is largely inseparable from his use of radicalist discourse, particularly as it often draws from anti-elitist tropes at the heart of populism. Negative sentiment, used to paint individuals and organization in the most threatening of terms, proved an excellent tool throughout the period studied. Media

was Trump’s most frequent target, unsurprisingly since they were competition for his message and audience. For the *Washington Post* and *CNN*, fake or “fake news” was his favorite negative sentiment. For the *New York Times* fail(ing) was overwhelming Trump’s favorite epithet, using it in 53% of his tweets referencing the news organization. General attacks on media tended to be littered with two terms in particular: fake (news) and/or dishonest. These references made up almost two-thirds of Trump’s posts on the subject. Surprisingly, *Fox News* was not immune from his wrath. Bias(ed) or un/not fair were his chosen words to attack coverage on the network. After Trump clinched the nomination however, his disdain for their coverage ended. Instead, *Fox News* became a useful source for Trump to validate his opinions by retweeting their favorable coverage.



While the nebulous concept of media was an easy target to attack because it represents a dehumanized subject, Trump was able to use the same tactics against individuals. For Hillary Clinton, that meant calling her crooked, something he did in 279 of the 740 tweets about her in the study period (67%). While far smaller in number, Trump’s

hostility toward Democratic Senator Elizabeth Warren further indicates his use of his feed to ensure supporters understood the depths of the depravity of his enemies. Of the 27 tweets that directly referenced her by name, he referred to her as goofy in 23 tweets (85%). He also referenced Warren in several other tweets only by the moniker Pocahontas, hinting at the controversy over Warren’s Native American heritage (Linksey, 2018). In keeping that negative story in his public’s mind, Trump retains a useful trope for the future.

Some of the additional use of negative sentiment regarding immigration covered earlier reinforces Trump’s radicalized rhetoric to connect with his audience. It creates an emotional connection to push users to spread this message in some form because of the

disgust and danger these enemies pose to the American public. Questioning the legality and credibility of his targets also throws all that they say, or report, into question—an effective way to validate his frequent claims to followers that negative news is “fake news” without supporting evidence. While a politician attacking news coverage is hardly new, Trump’s damning of news media as enemies of the people posits a direct challenge to the Fourth Estate’s power to offer a credible check on political excess (Kellner, 2018). The repetitious use of sentiment helps cement this narrative with his audience, particularly as people tend to forget they may be hearing the same message from only one source, making sentiment feel more widespread than it in fact happens to be (Armstrong, 2010; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Zappavigna, 2012). Thus, while the *New York Times*’ bottom line can be debated, *CNN*’s incorrect reporting scrutinized, and Hillary Clinton’s use of email investigated, Trump places himself as the final arbiter in their innocence or guilt. **“all Trump, all the time.”**

Simply by covering an individual, news media encourages their audience to accept their importance and legitimacy (Johnson-Cartee, 2005). The more they cover that individual then, the more importance and legitimacy media bestows on that person. This can clearly be seen in the 2016 presidential election. According to a study by Harvard’s Shorenstein Center, Trump received coverage disproportionate to his polling numbers early in the campaign. After he won the Republican nomination, coverage turned significantly more negative. During all this time however, Hillary Clinton also received a great deal of negative press tied to her use of email as Secretary of State, so the negativity toward Trump did not give a clear advantage to Clinton (Schorenstein Center, 2017). However, in furthering the narrative throughout the campaign that he alone was the victim of bad press, Trump framed himself as a sole victim of negative press coverage.

To understand why Twitter worked so well to challenge conventional media narratives and build a rapport with a sizable number of Americans through political mythmaking, the (old?) routines of journalism need some consideration, as these methods inevitably work against a candidate who fails to meet certainly generally-held standards of presidential demeanor. American news has its own history, and the expectation of objectivity demanded today is relatively new by historical standards—and always difficult to achieve in practice (Schudson, 1978). Under a more traditional model of news,

journalists (and editors) vetted news, picking and choosing what made it to the public, and in what form. Such a method helped the public from information overload and gave news context, including fact-checking, but it also gave media a huge gatekeeping power over public knowledge and a key role in setting the public agenda, though at its most basic level, the process hardly represents democratic behavior (Barlow, 2010; Goode, 2009; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Today however, with a public increasingly mistrustful of news, online media, including social media, has opened new distribution channels that allow politicians to speak directly to the public. Mainstream media now finds itself in competition with alternative news organizations and citizen journalists—not to mention individuals who, because of happenstance or public profile, communicate directly with the public. These sources and the organizations that present their content may be the gatekeepers of the 21st century (Bruns, 2008; Schuler, 2004; Verbeke et al., 2017). Given Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan’s (2013) research that point to the power of quick reactions to changes in sentiment to protect one’s brand or image, this gives such individuals and sources incredible power over their followers. For an individual like Trump with a specific agenda, his Twitter followers become a digital version of newspaper subscribers, and Trump a gatekeeper of news for them. He is the fact-checker, the editor-in-chief, for his own truth, and thus propaganda and truth blend into a singular message.

A good example of Trump’s ability to (re)set the agenda in favor of his truth, at least among his followers, can be seen through his use of Twitter after an *Access Hollywood* tape became public where Trump made controversial comments about women (Fahrenheit, 2016). While Trump did tweet an apology video that night, by the next day he had given his followers context for the tape. Saying “[t]he media and establishment want me out of the race so badly,” Trump implied the tape was brought up for purely political reasons (Trump, 2016g). He then retweeted messages of support from Juanita Broderick, whose accusation Bill Clinton raped her was leveraged by Trump into a powerful campaign tool (Trump 2016h, Trump2016i). Trump’s attempt to shift the conversation to the Clintons continued the next day, where he tweeted “There’s never been anyone more abusive to women in politics than Bill Clinton. My words were unfortunate—the Clintons’ actions were far worse” (Trump, 2016j). This was part of a 67-tweet volley on the 9th of October concerning a variety of subjects. Through his feed

Trump connects the fact of the tape to the claim of a rigged election, implying that the tape is nothing but political malfeasance and asserting the radical claim the media is working to elect his opponent and that he is the real victim.

A few months earlier, Trump used a similar strategy, responding to an interview with *ABC News* where he attacked the parents of a slain American soldier, Humayun Khan, who spoke at the Democratic National Convention. Trump claimed that the soldier's father gave the entire speech because the mother wasn't allowed to speak, seemingly tying their Muslim faith to the mother's silence (Haberman & Oppel Jr., 2016). On both July 31st and the next day Trump responded to the outcry on Twitter by claiming that Khizr Khan, the soldier's father had "viciously attacked" him and that it was his right to respond (Trump, 2016k, Trump 2016l). On that same day Trump sent out 23 tweets in total, focusing a great deal on CNN. Thereafter he returned to a variety of other topics, refocusing his public on other issues after again painting himself as the victim.

As President, when bad press threatened to overshadow his actions, Trump continued to use Twitter as a key ally in offering his truths to the public, showing how his actions worked to reinforce Twitter's power to act as an agenda-setter for the public (Parmelee, 2013). When his original travel ban was challenged in court at the start of 2017, Trump decried the "so-called judge" who overturned the ban, and later questioned how it could be in the US that a single judge could make such a decision. He subsequently blamed the judge for putting "our country in such peril. If something happens blame him and court system" (Trump, 2017j, Trump 2017k, Trump 2017l). The original judge-blaming tweet received over 28,000 retweets. The radicalism here is perhaps most notable because of the repetitious claim that the democratic system of checks and balances is the villain.

Another example of Trump's efforts to reset the agenda through blame-shifting happened after the violence in Charlottesville in early August 2017 and Trump's public remarks that those protesting Nazi's were partially to blame. Again he used Twitter to paint himself as the victim, arguing that the real story was the dishonest reporters, who were "truly bad people" (Trump, 2017h). Later, after former national security advisor General Flynn pled guilty to lying to the FBI, Trump focused responsibility not on Flynn, but on "Crooked Hillary Clinton," asking his followers if this proved a "Rigged

system” or just a “double-standard” (Trump, 2017i). Even regarding the Russian investigation into their impact on the 2016 election, Trump offered a possible exit strategy, as “all agree the U.S. President has the complete power to pardon” while saying the real story is not any wrongdoing on Trump’s part, but the “fake news” (Trump, 2017m). Consistently Trump shifts responsibilities to other parties and tries to mythologize events by claiming sinister motivations behind new stories that supposedly reveal dire threats to America’s future greatness and embraces a specific strain of populism that often invokes institutions commonly celebrated as democratic as a threat to the will of the people being followed. The system itself is so corrupt in his view, it provides a constant scapegoat when events threaten Trump’s brand. The radicalism in questioning democracy here is easy to miss because it is so routinized, but it exists throughout much of his tweets and, in theory at least, undermines his own authority as a democratically-elected leader if the system that elected him is so corrupt.

These attacks have made an impact on the mainstream press. Throughout the presidential campaign the focus on the candidates and their previous or present actions (and often words in Trump’s case) subsumed policy discussion (Schorenstein Center, 2017). Trump was quite aware of how coverage of his candidacy increased ratings and readership and often tweeted about it. As he noted on one occasion, “Wow, @CNN ratings are up 75% because it's ‘all Trump, all the time.’ The networks are making a fortune off of me! MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” (Trump, 2016f). The numbers bear out that claim, as the major news networks saw huge ratings increases—led by *Fox News*—in 2016, a trend that carried into 2017. However, in 2017 it was *MSNBC* and *CNN* that saw their ratings increase the most, with the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* also enjoying growth. Covering Trump is good for business, but it also amplifies rhetoric that would otherwise reach a relatively small audience (of Twitter followers), significantly increasing the reach of Trump’s messaging (Burch, 2018; Doctor, 2016; Gallagher, 2019; Otterson, 2017; Soergel, 2016).

Often portraying himself as the victim of an unfair press, a press that seems to always miss the real story, Trump consistently underscores his importance to American politics—the key to future greatness. His ability to style the news into a myth where fact

and propaganda become inseparable, paints a picture of Trump as a sort of American savior who alone holds the key to America's greatness, and the unvarnished truth. His supporters can go directly to his feed to see what is (and is not) news. Coupled with the sense of interactivity Trump offers through his feed, he connects followers to information on his terms. News organizations unwittingly assist in this task by presenting Trump's unvarnished tweets, dramatically amplifying his voice, but at the same time shows that media are acting more transparent as to the evidence on which their stories are based. As an example, in his first 100 days as president, 16% of news stories on Trump included a tweet from the president (Mitchell et al., 2017). While Trump may not be setting the agenda, his power to offer a counternarrative beyond Twitter is now being supported by the mainstream press.

DISCUSSION

Responding to critics of his rhetorical style and use of social media, Trump tweeted that his "use of social media is not Presidential," but, "MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL" (Trump, 2017m). Trump's tendency to mix truth and myth to support his position through social media—or change the discussion—at his leisure, has certainly, if nothing else, been a significant change from past presidencies. However, Trump is hardly the cause the increasing polarization and fragmentation of the American public, so the tendency to place blame on him for the consequences of his rhetoric are problematic at best. As an example, Trump's informal (re)tweeting style was tried occasionally by then-President Obama in his 2012 re-election campaign (Enli, 2017; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Trump is a consequence, not the origin, of much broader political changes.

Elections across the West have increasingly seen Twitter used by candidates to communicate with the public (Enli, 2017; Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Graham, Jackson, & Broesma, 2016). It has also become a means for foreign parties to influence domestic elections, as happened recently in both the United States and Britain (Guynn, 2018; Mostrous, Bridge & Gibbons, 2017). American tweeters tend to be disproportionately white and likely to vote and be interested in politics, making them prime targets a candidate like Trump, whose affinity for issues that resonate with that group was visible throughout his campaign (Bright et al, 2017; Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Guimaraes, Wang, &

Weikum, 2017; Nigam et al., 2017; Parmalee & Bichard, 2012). With the decline of journalists as gatekeepers, social media was already open to extreme voices. This leaves social media potentially threatening not only democratic thought, but at worst encouraging violence (Barlow, 2010; Chilwa, 2005; Epstein & Reich, 2010; Goode, 2009; Gutsche Jr., 2018; Papacharissi, 2004; Ott, 2017; Yan et al., 2017). It has already proven a useful tool for marginal groups to spread propaganda regionally and globally (Jones, 2019; Seo, 2014). Even if many followers, not just of Trump but other prominent persons on Twitter, are fake (Salkowitz, 2017), the perception of popularity drives attention to a feed, a behavior that can be bad both for one’s health and career (Parmelee & Bichard, 2012; Scheinbaum, 2017). What makes Trump unique is that he is the first politician to draw all these different elements together, and in that creates a model for future candidates that has already proven itself successful.

It is in this brave new world of digital technology and democratic politics that Trump’s Twitter feed must be understood. In such an environment, political myths are easy to sell, because as gatekeeper, reporter, and news anchor, Trump controls his messaging in a way no previous candidates has or could. With online communication already tending toward radicalist discourse, Trump embraces that trend through worst-case scenarios, using stereotypes to link general concerns over economics, crime, drugs, and so forth to elite individuals and groups he blames for not addressing in the past if not exacerbating in the present. As his most ardent supporters consider Trump truth, he has no need to justify his positions with evidence, so political propaganda and fact stand on equal footing. In that sense Trump has embraced myth’s fundamental purpose, to “empty reality” and filled it with himself (Barthes, 1973, p. 57-58). Through his repetitious use of terms, Trump reinforces his myths to such an extent that, just like a good ad, the myth becomes the reality the audience desires and Twitter an ideal means to spread partisan propaganda far beyond his immediate base.

At a time where, as Marwick (2013) contends, self-branding has become critical online to achieve success in the digital age, Trump has become the ultimate example of that practice. This harkens back to Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) argument that “the medium is the message” precisely “because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 2). Nowhere is this

more of a reality than on Twitter. As Twitter executive Leslie Berland explained in 2017, Twitter is “a platform, a product, a service, a water cooler, a time square, [and] a microphone” (Berland, quoted in Kapko, 2017). In its evolution from obscure social media platform to megaphone to the world, Twitter now offers a vehicle to spread short, simple messages and a level of interactivity voters crave, as well as unmatched speed by which messaging can diffuse from candidate to supporter, and through mainstream media, to the public at large. Trump’s radicalist, populist rhetoric resonates that much more loudly on Twitter as the traditional filter for such language is absent, making it difficult to the public to discern a clear basis from which they can make policy judgments. If anything, Twitter encourages the public to trust Trump’s word over competing perspectives because of the authority by which the message is offered and the frequent warnings not to trust others (Gallagher, 2019; Greenhouse, 2019; Parmelee & Bichard, 2012). Thanks to the synergy between the demand of contemporary voters and the medium’s nature, Twitter’s ability to create a sense of presence and connection means as much if not more than what is communicated, and this speaks to its potential to transform politics.

There is every reason to consider Trump’s Twitter strategy—not simply because he won the 2016 election—will remain a winning one as it fits longer-term trends in news and social media. While the case can be made that Trump’s strategy is difficult to copy because it is dependent on his unique personality traits (Buccoliero et al., 2018), that has not stopped Democrats from embracing negative sentiment in many 2018 campaigns, and 2020 presidential hopefuls as well from copying his approach to Twitter (Bajak & Wu, 2019; Tolan, 2019). Much like charisma can be manufactured through the manipulation of modern media (Glassman & Swatos, Jr., 1986), Democratic candidates for various offices are emulating Trump’s style, even if they lack his personality, in the hopes of gaining a similar support base. Their strategy however, typically involves attacks on the president. Thus, at the same time they attack Trump, their tweets amplify Trump’s messaging all the more (Reints, 2019; Tolan, 2019; Verbeke et al., 2017). Trump’s Twitter presence and personality have become the message in a sense, and thus shifting and contradictory narratives are meaningless as long as he maintains presence. The medium stands as the purveyor of myth and propaganda in a sense, and the message is just a placeholder to

keep eyes on the medium and, by proxy, on the President, or any candidate that could follow a similar style.

Even when the press seeks to fact-check a tweet, because Trump undermined their credibility to his followers, its ability to do so is increasingly marginal among his most devoted followers. Trump further connects their thirst for change with the sense the situation is so uniquely dire only he can make America great again. Mixed with a style fused with populism, it becomes his supporters against the world in a sense, with the promise the president will always be their champion. To maintain his power over those supporters, Trump only needs to keep tweeting to maintain his presence. However, for those who seek to curtail Trump’s power, limiting the influence and spread of his feed to the public is critical. For candidates who wish similar power, Trump’s celebrity makes his path to the presidency through Twitter somewhat harder to follow, but if a candidate can mix a significant group of followers with a certain celebrity status to lean on as a base already, and demand public attention otherwise, this strategy is one that could easily be adapted into a new model of American, if not western, electoral politics. What that would mean for democracy however, remains an open question.

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