The Transformation of Political Communication: Twitter, Public Sphere, and Right-wing populism

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Assignment 2: A case-study

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Topic: How is politics transposed into the digital domain? Discuss in relation to ONE of the following themes: utopia, ideology, or crisis.

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Introduction

Social media has emerged as a crucial component of communication, profoundly influencing various aspects of contemporary society. As its influence extends increasingly into the political realm, the "Web 2.0" era that fueled social media's rise has also ushered in the concept of "Politics 2.0" (Bruns, 2003). This notion captures the transformations brought about by new communication technologies, which have reshaped the modes of interaction and, consequently, altered the political and social landscape. By analyzing the case of Trump's tweets, this essay seeks to dissect how ambitious politicians have strategically utilized social media to disseminate populist discourse, radically transforming the dynamics of political communication.
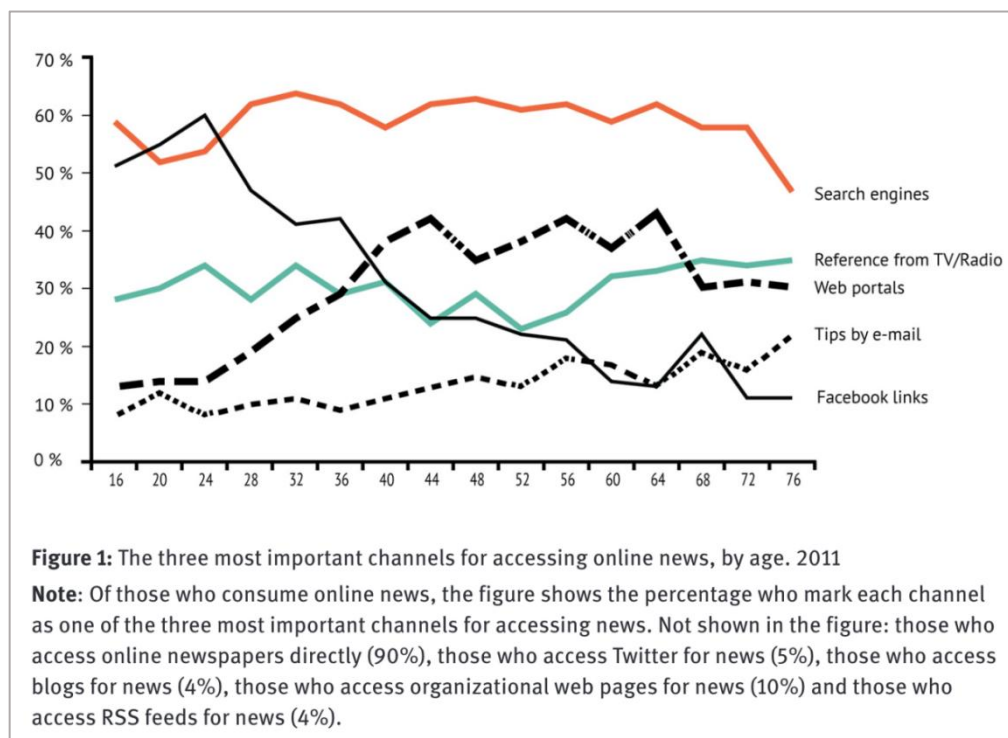
The Transition from Public Sphere to Digital Public Sphere

Habermas (1991) defined the public sphere as an arena that enables participants to engage in dialogue on shared interests in a deliberative manner. It bridges political power and private life within social structures by providing citizens a space for the free and rational exchange of information and ideas on everyday issues, thereby

helping shape public opinion. Traditionally, social institutions such as media organizations, universities, and political parties have played a crucial role in constituting and maintaining the public sphere, because they provide not simply avenues for the expression of political opinion, but for its critical scrutiny (Graham, 2013, p. 33). The "siege" of Trump by mainstream media outlets (rigorous fact-checking and criticism of his populist rhetoric) during the 2016 U.S. presidential election exemplifies this role. With the progression of communication technologies, particularly social networking sites (SNSs), the public sphere has begun to undergo a digital transformation (Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2017). According to Levine et al. (2005), the increasing usage and popularity of SNSs encourage individuals to access and share information in a decentralized and low-cost way, which opens up new forms of democratic participation and engagement. Therefore, Çela (2015) claims that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter serve as a virtual space for politically oriented conversations, constituting a new form of the public sphere. Nevertheless, the capacity of social media to function effectively as a public sphere for public discourse is still under debate. As analyzed by Papacharissi (2002), the Internet and its associated technologies possess the potential to revitalize the public sphere; nonetheless, certain aspects of these new technologies simultaneously augment and curtail that potential. On the one hand, digital media have considerably expanded the public space, offering citizens more opportunities to engage in political discourse. For instance, data from Norway (see Table 1) illustrates the early dominance of Facebook among younger generations as a primary source of news as

early as 2011. Although the media landscape has evolved significantly since then, the

trend has only continued to intensify, with social media further cementing its position

as a critical news source (Lacatus, 2021). Moreover, as audiences become more

mobile and autonomous, they not only select and customize their media consumption,

but also actively produce and modify content (Napoli, 2011). This collaborative,

democratic transition promotes pluralistic participation in the public sphere. On the

other hand, Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) also point out that some scholars have

overlooked the possible effects of algorithms, echo chambers, and filter bubbles on

the discourse around marginal topics, which, in effect, place marginal topics and

discussions in a counter-public space. These opposing elements undermine the

potential of the Internet as a platform for democratic dialogue.

Table 1

Figure 1: The three most important channels for accessing online news, by age. 2011
Note: Of those who consume online news, the figure shows the percentage who mark each channel as one of the three most important channels for accessing news. Not shown in the figure: those who access online newspapers directly (90%), those who access Twitter for news (5%), those who access blogs for news (4%), those who access organizational web pages for news (10%) and those who access RSS feeds for news (4%).

Right-wing populism and Social Media

Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) define populism as a thin-centered ideology that highlights the dichotomy of society—the "pure people" versus the "corrupt elite" (prioritizing popular sovereignty above all else). Populism is not merely a simple political label; it represents a range of political stances that are frequently associated with anti-establishment, anti-elitist, and anti-politics sentiments (Wodak & Krzyżanowski, 2017, p. 54). While populism is inherently a component of democracy, populist movements present an escalating challenge to democratic governance. For example, the January 6 United States Capitol attack was seen as an attempted self-coup, vividly demonstrating the potential threat populism poses to democratic procedures (Lacatus, 2021). Additionally, populism is an extremely heterogeneous political phenomenon, and as such, populists can be positioned at different locations along the left-right political spectrum. According to KHOSRAVINIK (2017), while the discourses of populists are characterized by a series of similar and recurring discursive strategies, their combination with other ideologies (left or right, conservative or progressive, religious or secular) still leads to significant variations in terms of intensity, scale, and expression. Right-wing populism, which has sparked widespread alarm and concerns in recent years, is a political ideology that merges right-wing politics with populist rhetoric and themes (Berman, 2021). In general, immigration is often a focal issue shared by right-wing populist movements around the world, especially in Western countries. A prominent explanation from economists and political economists is that over the past few decades, the dramatic inequality of

income and wealth, driven by global capitalist movement, neoliberalism, and technological change, alongside shifts in social and cultural trends—notably rising immigration, the decline of traditional values, and the empowerment of women and marginalized groups—has generated severe discontent and divisions among citizens (Harsin, 2018). Milanovic (2019) contends that certain economic "losers" in developed countries thus attribute both their individual and national difficulties to developing nations (specifically China and India) and to the "winners" (particularly immigrants) within their own societies. Populist leaders skillfully exploit these economic grievances, transforming them into compelling political narratives that resonate with disaffected citizens. This tactic of framing immigrants as scapegoats not only reinforced populists' support base, but also diverts attention from the root causes of economic dilemmas (Berman, 2021). This process is significantly amplified by the social media platforms' fragmented audience and their nourishment for populism discourse. Furthermore, as Mudde & Kaltwasser (2017) note, while scholars predominantly recognize anti-immigration as the central focus of right-wing populist rhetoric, some other cultural issues like religion, gender norms, and sexuality, which enhance its breadth, are also essential elements to consider.

Case background

The 2016 U.S. presidential election is widely regarded as one of the biggest upsets in modern political history, with Donald Trump defeating Hillary Clinton, despite her being the frontrunner in polls for much of the campaign. The importance of social media in this election has been more decisive than it has ever been before, resulting in

a diminished "dominance" of traditional media over public opinion. According to

Kreis (2017), Trump's victory can largely be attributed to his strategic employment of

digital media, especially Twitter, as a tool of power politics to disseminate his

right-wing populist discourse. This trend was already evident during the Republican

primaries, where Trump, although being a party outsider, dominated the news

headlines in the contest for the Republican Party nomination (see Table 2). Also, the

polling data in Table 3 confirms that Trump's media attention advantage

corresponded with his lead over the other Republican candidates. Throughout the

campaign period, Trump posted around 8,000 tweets, which often contained a series

of controversial positions and provocative statements on sensitive issues. The essay

will analyze several of his tweets regarding the topic of Mexican immigration.
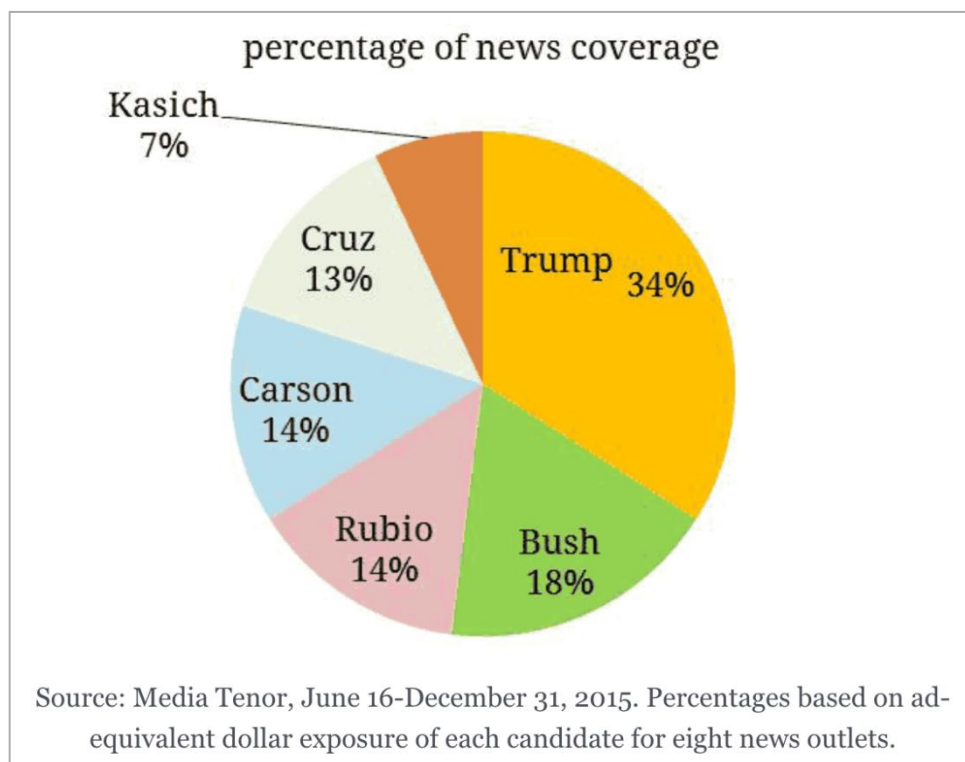
Table 2: Coverage of Top GOP Candidates

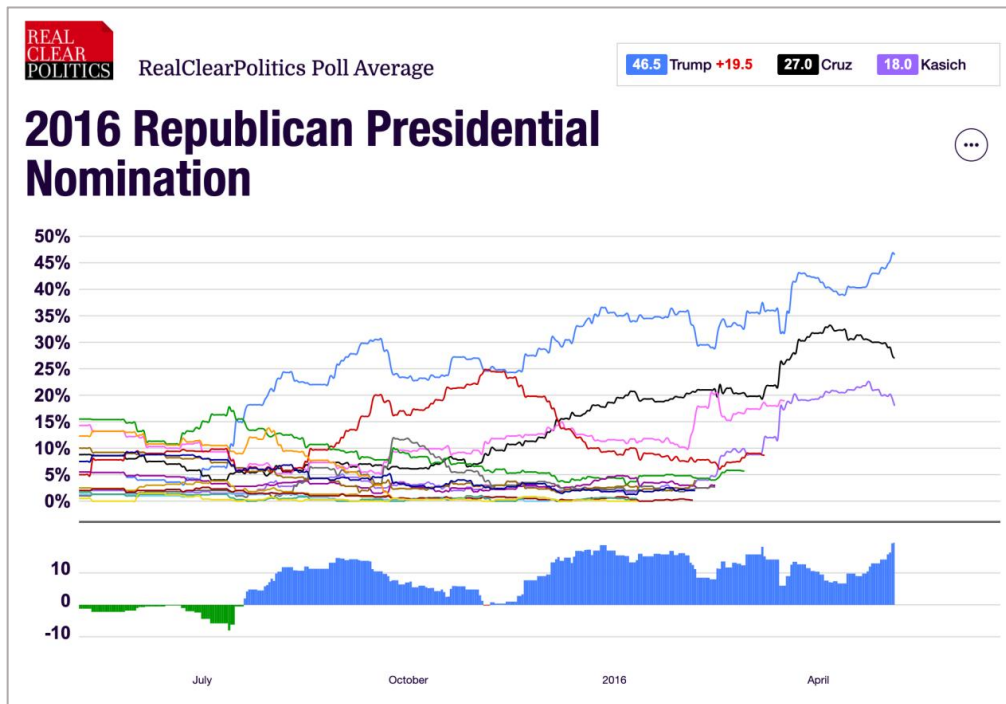
Source: Media Tenor, June 16-December 31, 2015. Percentages based on ad-equivalent dollar exposure of each candidate for eight news outlets.

Table 3

Figure 1

Note: Screenshot From Twitter

Trump's Use of Twitter: Case Study

Trump's Twitter activities during the campaign exhibited three key characteristics: it was deliberate, strategically inflammatory, and adaptable to changing public sentiments. In tweets from the early stages (Figure 1), Trump used a range of biased, hyperbolic, and offensive terms, such as "druggies," "killing machine," or "rampant," to describe the dangers he believed to be posed by Mexican immigrants. However, these claims were highly debatable. For example, the Drug Enforcement Agency reported that the majority of drugs enter the U.S. through legal ports of entry, not through migrant smuggling (Schertzer & Woods, 2020). Similarly, by frequently using collective language such as "we," "they," and imperative phrases like "Get them out," Trump established a boundary between two groups: he portrayed Mexican migrants as the dangerous "others," while emphasizing that the dominant ethnic group (white Americans) was imperiled, stoking a fear-based response among his followers. He also galvanized his supporters with calls to action like "Take back our country," a phrase meant to evoke a sense of lost dominance that needed reclaiming. This strategy not only appealed to nationalist sentiments but also underscored his campaign' s ethos of reclaiming and protecting an idealized American identity. Besides, Oliver & Rahn (2016) contends that this type of rhetoric, characterized by heightened emotions and mobilization based on anti-establishment slogans, amplifies perceived threats and fear among the followers, thereby reinforcing an "us versus them" mentality typical of populist narratives. As part of such narratives, Trump leveraged the tragic murder of

Kathryn Steinle in July 2015 to reinforce his portrayal that "illegal" migrants are

dangerous criminals, threatening "wonderful and loved" (white) women. Additionally,

in terms of rhetoric, Trump's discourse exhibits a distinctive personal tone: it is

simple, direct, and often emphasized with exclamation points. This informal,

emphatic style gave his messages a sense of immediacy and authority, connecting him

to followers in a seemingly unfiltered manner that felt authentic to many (Kreis, 2017).

As Schroeder (2018) points out, Trump was particularly adept at leveraging social

media for political communication, rivaled only by figures like Bernie Sanders and

Ben Carson, whose populist language similarly resonated with large audiences. This

stylistic choice allowed Trump to present himself as an outsider, someone "telling it

like it is," a quality that appealed strongly to his supporters. Furthermore, given the

diversity of America's electorate, Trump needed to secure support beyond white

America, despite leaning heavily on rhetoric that often alienated minority

communities. For instance, while he frequently employed derogatory descriptions of

Hispanics and Mexican immigrants, Trump occasionally made overt attempts to court

their support, though sometimes superficially. For example, in a tweet on May 6,

2016 (Figure 1), Trump posted a photo of himself eating a taco bowl with the caption

"I love Hispanics!" While this tweet ostensibly celebrated Hispanic culture, it was

widely criticized as a simplistic, performative gesture (contrasted sharply with his

hard-line immigration stance), symbolizing an attempt to appeal to minority voters

without substantial policy shifts (Enli, 2017). This juxtaposition reveals Trump's

strategic use of rhetoric to project a complex image, attempting to appeal to a broad

audience by signaling inclusiveness while simultaneously reinforcing exclusionary messages on issues like immigration. Despite frequent backlash over his inflammatory language, Lartey (2016) argues that by doing so, Trump successfully leveraged digital platforms to communicate directly with his supporters. Combined with the concept of the public sphere, the digital space created by Twitter has significantly lowered the barriers to political participation for grassroots citizens, expanding the public's ability to engage in political discussions, which thus constitutes a new type of public sphere. Steen-Johnsen (2017) highlighted that it is this digital space that enabled Trump to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, circumventing the relatively strict fact-checking and editorial filters and publishing his views directly. This direct communication would not have been possible if Trump had relied solely on traditional media channels. Thus, Graham (2013) states that the rise of social media has reshaped the power structure, highlighting the significance of direct dialogue, particularly within the context of populist movements.

Populist Tactics and Media Antagonism

A key element of Trump's populist rhetoric has been his antagonism toward mainstream media. For instance, in a tweet posted on March 25, 2016 (Figure 1), Trump stated, "How often I am right, only to be criticized by the media," reflecting the victim mentality that was commonly used by populists. As noted by Wodak & Krzyżanowski (2017), populists have consistently criticized the mainstream media to underscore their antagonism to the elite or establishment, and Trump's case follows this pattern. Throughout and after the election, Trump maintained a critical (even

conspiratorial) attitude towards the establishment-dominated media, accusing them of being "rigged" against him. Indeed, Trump was not the "preferred" candidate in the mainstream media. Rough estimates indicate that of the 288 newspapers that covered the 2016 election, more than 70% endorsed Hillary Clinton, including The Washington Post and The New York Times. The same holds true for television, with nearly all mainstream networks like CBS, NBC, and ABC, directing their criticism of the unconventional candidate (Patterson, 2016). However, as observed by Schertzer & Woods (2020), populists need the attention of mainstream media to extend their reach, despite their historical proficiency in utilizing the mass media, including direct mail and magazines or latterly email. This is why Ott (2016) explained that Trump's antagonism towards mainstream media was a calculated and necessary response to institutions representing political and cultural elites. Another reason is that the American media system is characterized by horse-race coverage and market competition for audience share, which compelled established news institutions to cover Trump's shocking and controversial statements extensively. Although most stories were critical, they ensured that Trump's messages were continuously relayed from Twitter to the mainstream media. The dynamics ultimately guaranteed that Trump himself received a disproportionate amount of exposure (KHOSRAVINIK, 2017). In fact, Trump spent far less on political advertising than his rivals, and he experienced the most lopsided contest in modern campaign finance, with campaign expenditures totaling $190 million, the lowest in recent years, and merely half of Hillary's fundraising total (Schroeder, 2018).

Figure 2

Note: Screenshot from Twitter

Trump's Support Base

Trump's rise could not have occurred without the support of a substantial proportion

of the electorate. For instance, in a tweet on April 2, 2018 (Figure 2), Trump criticized,

"Mexico is doing 'nothing' to stop migrants from crossing Mexico's southern border."

The interactions in the comments section showed considerable strong agreement with

his radical views. In reality, Trump's support base primarily consisted of those who

felt marginalized by the country's media elites and their established party elites. This

included a predominantly white, male, rural, and less-educated segment of the

population (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). As mentioned by Wodak & Krzyżanowski

(2017), this situation reflects the so-called "representation gap"—a gap that Trump's

simplistic, Manichean rhetoric successfully addressed, appealing to constituencies

neglected by the Republican Party. Thus, Kreis (2017) proposes that Trump's populist

appeal is not an isolated incident, but part of a deep-rooted tradition in American

politics, stemming from the political and economic discontent of many Americans.

Mutz (2018) adds that this discontent was effectively amplified and disseminated by

Trump through social media platforms, reflecting the complex interplay in modern

political communication between traditional media (which tends to uphold the

political correctness of social elites) and emerging social media (which is more

inclined to disseminate emotional, fragmented, and polarized content). In summary,

Trump's transformation from "notorious" to "populist hero" can be attributed to a

combination of Twitter, populism, and extensive coverage by mainstream media

(Schroeder, 2018).

Discussion

The case study of Trump highlights how digital media has fundamentally challenged traditional media values—such as impartial renderings of reality and treating communication as a public service. While the Internet has the potential to connect individuals from diverse backgrounds, the reality is that many online discussion communities have become even more fragmented due to differences in interests or identities (Papacharissi, 2002). Such fragmentation results in the echo chamber effect, in which users are only exposed to content that aligns with their existing views, reinforcing their beliefs while disregarding alternative perspectives (Napoli, 2011). The "echo chambers" inherent in social media, along with the natural operation of algorithms, have fostered a new communication architecture resembling a counter-public space, which tends to promote and amplify homogeneity of thought and emotional intensity, while minimizing critical scrutiny. This may function adequately in the commercial realm; however, when the same logic is applied to the political arena, the consequences could be catastrophic. In other words, social media could actually function as a public sphere, yet the dominance of commercial rationality and corporate forces have led to the "colonization" of that public space (KHOSRAVINIK, 2017). Together, these elements have diminished and, in many cases, entirely destroyed the ideal potential of new media spaces. Trump's case is a perfect illustration of this phenomenon. The individualized nature of Twitter, combined with its central logic of equating visibility and popularity with legitimacy, and the corporate algorithmic manipulation of news feeds, have all cultivated an

environment conducive to the spread of populist discourse. Furthermore, this same dynamic has engendered an increasing threat to traditional mass media as well. Trump's electoral victory was a social media-catalyzed success, and the culture of renewal, experimentation, and dialogue it embodies is deconstructing elitism and democratizing political communication (Bossetta, 2018). The Internet is quietly restructuring a new political structure, forcing traditional elites to acknowledge its powerful impact.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper, through the analysis of Trump's tweets, has examined the profound impact of social media on political communication. The core argument it has demonstrated is that Trump's skillful utilization of social media underscores its dual capacity: to democratize information dissemination while also reinforcing echo chamber effects that intensify divisions and undermine the quality of public discourse. Future research should further explore the intricate relationship between social media and its impact on politics, aiming to seek mechanisms that ensure digital platforms enhance rather than weaken the democratic process, particularly in addressing the challenges posed by populism.

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