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THE TWITTER PRESIDENCY

Donald J. Trump and the Politics of
White Rage

Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson



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The Twitter Presidency

The Twitter Presidency explores the rhetorical style of President Donald J. Trump, attending to both his general manner of speaking as well as to his preferred modality. Trump's manner, the authors argue, reflects an aesthetics of white rage, and it is rooted in authoritarianism, narcissism, and demagoguery. His preferred modality of speaking, namely through Twitter, effectively channels and transmits the affective dimensions of white rage by taking advantage of the platform's defining characteristics, which include simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. There is, then, a structural homology between Trump's general communication practices and the specific platform (Twitter) he uses to communicate with his base. This commonality between communication practices and communication platform (manner and modality) strikes a powerful emotive chord with his followers, who feel aggrieved at the decentering of white masculinity. In addition to charting the defining characteristics of Trump's discourse, *The Twitter Presidency* exposes how Trump's rhetorical style threatens democratic norms, principles, and institutions.

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Preface

This book is about President Donald J. Trump and, more specifically, about President Trump's rhetoric, which includes both his general manner of speaking (what Carol Anderson (2016), in a different context, has called, "white rage") and his preferred modality of speaking (i.e., through Twitter). It is, in short, a book about his *rhetorical style*. Our central aim throughout this book is to identify the defining traits of that rhetorical style, to explain how it functions, and to reflect on its consequentiality. As we do so, however, it is crucial to understand that this style is not, in fact, *his*. In other words, it is not unique to President Trump. He did not invent the politics of white rage or even popularize its open expression on the platform of Twitter. So, no matter how obviously he may embody this style (and embody it he does!), it would be misguided to suggest that the president created it.

A rhetorical style is, after all, a pattern, a culturally "stylized" way (i.e., a manner and modality) of speaking. Rather than merely being a single person's way of speaking, a rhetorical style reflects a much broader confluence of cultural, political, and technological factors. While such factors contributed to Trump's political success, they existed prior to and independent of him. Therefore, Trump's rhetoric is best understood as an extension (not source) of three social forces: (1) fear and anxiety over the perceived decentering of white masculinity; (2) the formal properties of social media platforms; and (3) the deleterious state of the news media (represented most obviously by Fox News). Trump did *not* create these contexts; he simply became a key inflection point for their collective expression, for he offered a particularly clear, consistent, and compelling performance of their underlying affects.

To acknowledge that the politics of white rage, the structural logics of Twitter and other social media platforms, and the de-evolution of

news into entertainment (24-hour cable news) did not originate with Donald Trump is in no way to excuse the president from the very real dangers created by his reliable performance of a rhetorical style rooted in these forces. Simply stated, Trump's rhetoric makes him the most dangerous person ever elected president of the United States. He is dangerous for a multitude of reasons, but most notably because—like other authoritarians and demagogues—Trump continuously seeks to consolidate power, which he does through divisive scapegoating, disregard for democratic norms, and ubiquitous and unashamed lying. Far from becoming “more presidential,” as Trump promised he would be if elected, his rhetoric has become uglier, less egalitarian, and more deceptive since taking office.

The frequency of his lying, for instance, is on the rise. As the *Washington Post* reported, President Trump averaged 4.9 false and misleading claims per day during his first 100 days in office, but that number has grown steadily (Kessler et al., 2017). As of August 1, 2018, his average number of false statements per day had risen to 7.6, and during the months of June and July, Trump averaged 16 false and misleading statements per day (Kessler et al., 2018). Trump's propensity for lying is so prolific that one of the most reliable predictors of truth in the contemporary political landscape is that the president has asserted its opposite. How, then, does one seriously analyze Trump's rhetoric when much of what he says is blatantly untrue? This is, in part, why it is critical to focus on style. It emphasizes not so much *what* he says, but the *way* (i.e., the manner and modality) he says it, and the way Trump says things is, at once, dangerous and consequential. As such, in addition to highlighting the defining elements of this style, another aim of this book is to identify the real, material harms associated with its enactment.

The harms associated with Trump's rhetoric cannot, however, be blamed exclusively on his hyper-masculine bullying and insult-laden tweeting. A long list of persons and groups are complicit in his dangerous rhetoric, including his sycophantic staff (Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Mike Pence, Kellyanne Conway, Stephen Miller, John Kelly, Ivanka Trump, etc.), the cowardly Republicans in Congress who endorse his destructive and divisive politics (Paul Ryan, Mitch McConnell, Devin Nunes, etc.), the talking heads who repeat his idiotic ideas endlessly on political entertainment shows like *Hannity* and *Fox & Friends* (Rudy Giuliani, Sebastian Gorka, etc.), the pseudo-news personalities who feed his conspiratorial fantasies (Sean Hannity, Jeanine Pirro, Laura Ingram, etc.), the alt-right and neo-Nazi movements, the Russian government, and, of course, Trump followers.

To be clear, there is a significant difference between “Trump voters” (i.e., those persons who unwittingly acted as agents of the Russian government by casting their vote for Trump in 2016, but who have no particular allegiance to or even affinity for him) and “Trump followers” (i.e., those persons who blindly support Trump, parroting his racist remarks, ridiculous lies, and absurd conspiracy theories). We have designated them “followers” rather than “supporters” due to their mindless, cult-like response to Trump, as well as the use of the moniker in social media contexts such as Twitter. Trump’s followers are “true believers” in Eric Hoffer’s sense of that term (Pies 2017); they feel their lives are “irredeemably spoiled” and, thus, have sacrificed their sense of autonomy (and their capacity for independent, critical thought) to a larger movement. “A rising mass movement attracts and holds a following not by its doctrines and promises,” Hoffer (1951) notes, “but by the refuge it offers from the anxieties, barrenness and meaninglessness of an individual existence” (39). The first group, Trump voters, exercised poor judgment, and we invite them to see and confront that error in judgment. The second group, Trump followers, are driven not so much by poor judgment as they are by poor self-worth, which they collectively express in the denigration of (racial) others.

To some, the preceding paragraph may seem harsh. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Donald Trump could not have undermined our national character or eroded the principles, norms, and institutions of American democracy to the degree that he is without considerable aid from others. The evangelical right is especially deserving of admonishment for their hypocritical support of a president and an administration that demonstrate such contempt for truth, justice, ethics, and basic human decency.¹ All of that is by way of saying that we refuse to hide our disgust and outrage regarding Trump’s toxic rhetoric and its material dangers behind the polite, pseudo-objective tone of academic prose. While we are committed to a rigorous analysis of his rhetoric, we will not pretend that there is a reasonable response to such discourse that does not forcefully condemn its underlying racism, sexism, homophobia, and nationalist xenophobia. We, along with every US citizen, have an ethical obligation to hold the president accountable for his demeaning, detestable, and deceitful discourse.

Having outlined the basic contours of our project, we wish to say a few words about how it arose. This book started with the publication of an essay titled “The Age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the Politics of Debasement,” which appeared in vol. 34, no. 1 of *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (2017). Based on the essay’s success,

Brian was contacted by the Publications Board of the National Communication Association to see if he had any interest in expanding the essay into a book-length study. Since he was already working on a separate piece with Greg about Trump and white rage, a book-length project seemed like a perfect opportunity to examine Trump's rhetoric through a broader lens, one that combined an analysis of Trump's affective appeal with an analysis of the medium through which that affect was largely mobilized. The rest is, as they say, history. Here is how we plan to proceed.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1, "Situating Trump," seeks to locate the study of Trump's discursive and communicative practices in the appropriate academic literatures. It begins by examining the scholarship on style, highlighting the fundamentally rhetorical, political, and collective character of style. It then examines the history of political campaign communication and presidential rhetoric, paying special attention to the role social media plays in contemporary politics. As it synthesizes the literature in these areas, it reviews the rapidly growing body of literature on Trump's campaign and presidency. It concludes by arguing for the importance of attending both to the uniquely affective appeal of his rhetorical style, which is rooted in an aesthetic of white rage, and to his preferred modality of communication, Twitter, which the president expertly mobilized to achieve maximum affective effect (reach and influence).

Chapter 2, "The Politics of White Rage," explores how Trump's brand of politics appeals to voters not because of its ideology or policy positions but because of its affective resonances. Specifically, it argues that Trump utilizes an aesthetic of white rage, a rhetorical style animated largely by fears and anxieties about the decentering of White masculinity. This style, we further argue, is evident across his managerial, physical, and linguistic performances. While Twitter offered the president a new modality for communicating white rage, it is crucial to recognize that the aesthetics of white rage are old and deep, rooted in the slave trade, and woven into the nation's fabric. Understanding the ways that Trump's rhetoric expresses, particularly on an affective level, this already available racist aesthetic begins to explain why counter-appeals to logic and reason constantly fail to combat it. Engaging this rhetoric at the aesthetic and affective registers will be the only way to undermine its power.

Chapter 3, "Trump Tweets," explores how Trump's rhetorical style was well suited to the defining characteristics of Twitter as a social

media platform. It is based upon, or more accurately “inspired by,” a previously published essay on Trump’s use of Twitter during the campaign. It significantly revises that essay, however, by expanding its historical scope to include Trump’s use of Twitter as a citizen, as a candidate, and as president. While we argue there is a certain consistency in Trump’s Twitter habits over time, mostly notable in his tonality and temperament, there are also key differences. Early on, Trump employed Twitter principally for self-branding, self-promotion, and airing personal grievances. As he transitioned into the role of candidate, Trump’s tweeting became tactical, focusing on message repetition, unconventional use of the platform to disrupt political norms, and aggressive and demeaning attacks on his Republican challengers and Hilary Clinton. Finally, following the election, Trump’s Twitter habits shifted again, reflecting a strategic set of practices designed to promote his distorted, self-involved view of reality, to distract from potentially harmful news stories and investigations, and to discredit the mainstream news media as well as other perceived threats through persistent and perfunctory attacks.

Chapter 4, “In Defense of Democracy,” outlines how Trump’s rhetorical style—in both manner and modality—gravely threatens American democracy, attending to the ways in which it undermines civility and degrades the level of political discourse in the U.S., erodes democratic norms and institutions, weakens the rule of law, fuels racial hatred and fosters discrimination, favors anti-intellectualism and undermines critical thought, and promotes mistrust of the mainstream news media and facilitates a post-truth politics. To combat the material harms of Trump’s rhetoric, the chapter ends with a call for mobilizing reasonable disgust at Trump’s affective politics of white rage to realize a more progressive politics rooted in James Baldwin’s radical understanding of love.

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This, like all books, is a corporate project. Rob Brookey provided the initial impetus for the book with his invitation to Brian to write a short essay for *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. The success of that essay led to the invitation from Felisa Salvago Keyes at Routledge to expand that essay into a short book and we want to thank Felisa for her direction at the early stages of this project. We want to thank in particular the work of Jordin Clark a doctoral student at Colorado State University. Jordin played a number of roles in building this book including conducting a careful search of all Trump’s Twitter

posts as well as gathering many of the videoed Trump speeches starting with his candidacy announcement. She also provided invaluable help in transforming our various citations into Harvard style. The book simply would not have been published without her help.

Note

1. “[M]ore than 80% of white evangelicals voted for the Trump–Pence ticket” (Burke 2018).

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1 Situating Trump

In his 1935 novel *It Can't Happen Here*, Nobel Prize-winning author Sinclair Lewis stories the unlikely political rise of Berzelius “Buzz” Windrip, whose angry rhetoric, populist platform, and anti-foreigner sentiment win him the US presidency. A number of commentators have, of course, drawn parallels between the story of Windrip, a cautionary tale about fascism, and the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump (Harris 2015; Beale 2016; Stewart 2017). Frankly, it is hard not to, especially given Lewis’s (1935) uncanny depiction of Windrip as “vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his ‘ideas’ almost idiotic” (p. 86). But perhaps most presciently of all, Lewis (1935) observes that, in addition to being a master entertainer, Windrip possesses an “uncommon natural ability to be authentically excited by and with his audience, and they by and with him” (p. 87). It is no exaggeration to say that Trump genuinely *excited*—a term that signals his distinctively affective appeal—a significant segment of the American electorate, or to note that he did so and continues to do so in spite of an overwhelming array of obstacles. Consider what we know.

Despite having no prior political experience, despite being temperamentally unfit (LeTourneau 2017), psychologically unstable (Bulman 2017; Gartner 2017; Morris 2017), a sexist (Cohen 2017; Robbins 2017), a racist (Milbank 2015; Coates 2017; Marcotte 2017a; O’Connor 2017), a xenophobe (Milbank 2016), a conspiracy theorist (Cillizza 2017a; Marcotte 2017), and a serial liar (Cillizza 2017b; Kessler et. al 2017; *Los Angeles Times* 2017; Moye 2017), and despite having committed grave missteps—missteps that would have surely ended a more conventional candidacy—during the campaign (Kirk et al. 2016; Kruse and Gee 2016), Trump eked out a narrow electoral victory to become the 45th president of the United States. At the much-hyped 100-day mark of his presidency, despite failing to accomplish or even advance many of his signature campaign promises (i.e., to

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repeal Obamacare and to build a wall on the southern border) and reversing himself on others (i.e., NATO and labeling China a currency manipulator) (Garrett 2017), 96 percent of those who voted for him still supported him (Langer 2017). And perhaps most remarkably that support continued largely unabated even after President Trump began to be investigated for obstructing justice in the FBI's investigation into his campaign's potential collusion with a foreign power to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election (Tsfamichael 2017).

Given the unwavering loyalty of his base, one cannot help but wonder what makes Trump so appealing to his followers. Understanding this appeal is the province of rhetoric and, thus, rhetorical scholars are uniquely well positioned and equipped to assess Trump's improbable political success. But doing so effectively requires an approach as unconventional as President Trump himself, for his appeal cannot be accounted for through reference to traditional categories or modes of analysis. In fact, as a preliminary critical step, it is useful to eliminate a few well-known rhetorical appeals. Trump's success lies not in well-reasoned arguments, as he is clearly neither articulate nor cogent.¹ His appeal lies not in his moral character or trustworthiness, as he is ethically bereft and behaves with utter disregard for the truth.² Finally, his appeal lies not in his beliefs or policy positions, as he demonstrates no allegiance to either (Shapiro 2016). Indeed, post-election surveys of Trump's supporters confirm these suppositions.³ But if conventional factors such as rational discourse, personal ethos, and ideological disposition offer little basis for understanding Trump's rhetorical appeal, then what explains it?

We maintain throughout this book that it is primarily Trump's style. In fact, style may be the only aspect of Trump's rhetoric consistent enough to account for his appeal. Reflecting on the first five months of the Trump presidency, Rich Lowry (2017) observed for *Politico*, "the only . . . unquestioned constant is Trump's demeanor. Or to put it another way, Trump's content may be subject to change, but never his style." Consequently, our chief aim in this book is to explicate and assess Trump's material embodiment and enactment of an emergent populist style, which drawing inspiration from Carol Anderson (2016), we refer to as "white rage." For us, style combines Trump's general manner of speaking with his preferred modality of speaking. To ensure that each of these elements receives adequate attention, we analyze Trump's rhetorical style across both registers. In Chapter 2, we focus on the affective appeal of white rage, and in Chapter 3, we focus on the president's unprecedented use of Twitter to widely transmit this affective appeal. But before turning to our specific analysis of Trump's

rhetoric, it is crucial to ground our analysis in the extant literature on style, campaign communication, and presidential discourse, as well as to highlight the stakes of the president's rhetorical style.

On Style

Style is a complex and challenging concept to define. Part of the difficulty arises from the fact that everything from clothing and cars to writing and speech is infused with style, which in the broadest sense refers to the observable aesthetic qualities or patterns of discourses, objects, events, and practices. Style, in other words, describes the “social appearance” of things or, in the words of media scholar Stuart Ewen (1996), “[the manner in which] human values, structures, and assumptions in a given society are aesthetically expressed and received” (p. 3). Ewen's definition is a helpful one, as it implicitly highlights that style is expressly rhetorical, overtly political, and manifestly collective. In this section, we explore each of these features in greater depth as a way of situating the analysis of Donald Trump and his discourse that follows in Chapters 2 and 3.

Rhetorical Character

Style has long been regarded as one of the traditional canons of rhetoric along with invention, organization, memory, and delivery, and Aristotle treated it extensively in both his *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*. In the classical context, style largely “meant strategic language choice and embellishment of discourse” (Brummett 2016). But over time, the concept has evolved to describe “the aesthetic dimension of communication” more generally (Brummett 2009, p. 249). This includes not only linguistic traits, but also embodied movement, gestures, and nonverbal expression, as well as fashion and appearance. To this list, we would add managerial and leadership behaviors, which in the case of Trump are exceedingly autocratic and authoritarian, and overall deportment or manner, which for Trump we would characterize as obnoxious, overbearing, and oblivious.

While scholars typically do not talk about style as involving a substantive message, it is rhetorical because it conveys a general sensibility about, disposition toward, or way of being-in-the-world. As such, in contrast to more traditional understandings of discourse, the rhetorical dimensions of style are rooted in aesthetic expression and direct sensory experience rather than symbolism and representational systems of thought. Style, in the words of Bradford Vivian (2002), “is

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an aesthetic (rather than conceptual) rhetoric; an affective (not rational) communication” (p. 238). Therefore, style is best approached not in terms of meaning and message, but in terms of meaningfulness and mood, i.e., its capacity for transmitting intensive forces and atmospheric-like qualities between and among bodies.

Style, in short, functions affectively. The scholarship on affect is dominated by two major paradigms. The first, which has its roots in psychology and neuroscience, regards affect as an elemental state, i.e., a manifest emotion such as fear or joy, elicited in a human subject by an external stimulus. The second, which draws upon philosophy and more humanistic disciplines, views affect as a prepersonal intensity, i.e., a productive force, that all bodies—whether human or not—exert upon one another as they move and interact. It is this second conception of affect, as productive force, that informs our understanding of style. In this view, affect works to excite, prime, and sway “bodies at a material, presubjective, asignifying level” (Ott 2017, p. 10) by either augmenting or diminishing their state of capacitation.⁴ Extending this point, Brian Massumi (2015) observes that the body’s capacitation “is completely bound up with the lived past of the body” (p. 49), meaning that how the body responds to an affective invitation depends upon that body’s memories and tendencies, a fact that has tremendous heuristic potential for explaining the dramatically polarized responses to Trump and his performance of white rage.

Affect, in this view, is a dynamic, inter-relational force produced between and among bodies, all of which bear traces of past lived experience. In treating society as a process rather than a structure, this conception of affect honors Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s radical idea that “*There is no ideology, and never was*” (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, cited in Massumi 2015, p. 84). Understood as asignifying, presubjective, and non-ideological, affect is a “more fundamental concept than rationality,” a concept that “*pertains more fundamentally to events than to persons*” (Massumi 2015, p. 91). Such a view is particularly well suited to aid in understanding and assessing an emergent political style, especially as embodied and enacted by someone who has been described as a non-ideological pragmatist and “ideology-free populist” (Schneider 2017; see also Scalia 2016; Schmitt 2016). To claim that affect is nonideological is not to suggest that it is not concerned with power. On the contrary, explains Massumi (2015), “Power comes up into us from the field of potential. . . . It’s the calculable part of affect, the most probable next steps and eventual outcomes” (p. 19). We will expand upon this understanding of affect in the following chapter.

Political Character

In asserting that style mobilizes “affective responses to change or stabilize the existing distribution of power,” James Aune (2008, p. 483) highlights that style is political as well as rhetorical in character. One of the earliest attempts to grapple with style as political is Richard Hofstadter’s (1965) essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” which he delivered as the Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford in 1963. Hofstadter opens his essay noting that American political life has “served again and again as an arena for uncommonly angry minds” (p. 3). Citing the Goldwater movement at the time as an example of this fact, he argues that behind such movements is a “style of mind.” Dubbing it the “paranoid style,” he claims it reflects “the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” (p. 3). Hofstadter is careful not to associate the paranoid style with a single political party or ideology, and he finds elements of this style in prairie populism, McCarthyism, Illuminism, and Masonry. Among Hofstadter’s many insights is that the paranoid style entails a widely shared political sentiment or sensibility, though it may be affiliated with a particular spokesperson in a given context.

Style, however, is not only helpful in engaging modes of political address that we can judge as deleterious. For Robert Hariman (1995), “style is a significant dimension of every human experience” (p. 4), including civic and political life. Arguing that the analysis of politics must take account of “the role of sensibility, taste, manners, . . . and similarly compositional and performative qualities,” Hariman (1995, p. 4) defines political style as “*a coherent repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic responses for political effect*” (p. 4). Utilizing this definition, Hariman unpacks four political styles, which he labels realist, courtly, republican, and bureaucratic. Based on a careful analysis of these styles across archetypical texts, Hariman concludes that we must rethink understandings of power that reduce it to the exercise of individual agency and coercive force in favor of socially negotiated relations constituted through aesthetic expressions and their interpretation (p. 189).

Drawing upon the work of Hofstadter, Hariman, and others, Benjamin Moffitt (2016) examines the matter of populism. Rejecting previous attempts to theorize populism in terms of ideology, strategy, discourse, and logic, Moffitt argues that populism is best conceptualized as a distinctive political style. Studying 28 populist leaders from around the globe, Moffitt distills the political style of populism into three key features: an appeal to “the people” versus “the elite,” “bad manners”

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in language, embodied movement, and clothing, and the performance of crisis, breakdown, or threat (pp. 41–45). In each instance, Moffitt maintains that a populist political style can be counter-posed with a technocratic political style. So, for instance, while populists appeal to the wisdom and common sense of the people, technocrats defer to experts and specialists; while populists exercise bad manners, technocrats present themselves in a more formal fashion; while populists invoke the specter of crisis, technocrats appeal to stability or measured progress (Moffitt 2016, pp. 46–47). In light of this dichotomy, which refers not “to modes of governance or ideological dispositions, but to *distinct embodied, performative political styles*” (Moffitt 2016, p. 47), it is not hard to see why Trump ran against and continues, nearly two years later, to juxtapose himself with Barack Obama.

Collective Character

A third crucial feature of style is its collective character, its capacity to not only to function as a marker of “social and cultural allegiance” (Brummett 2016, p. 7), but also as the productive force behind shared sentiments and sensibilities. In fact, scholars have been critical of accounts such as Hariman’s delineation of political styles for associating style too strongly with “the reasoned . . . decisions of a humanist agent,” thereby reducing it to “rational, purposeful communication” (Vivian 2002, p. 225). Drawing upon Michel Maffesoli’s reconception of style, Vivian (2002) emphasizes that “style ‘allows and enables liaison among all the members of a society’ according to the dissemination of certain cultural aesthetics, which have become, in many social situations, a more serviceable cultural ‘language’ than democratic deliberation” (p. 235).

In keeping with this view, it should be remembered that the populist political style embodied by Trump neither originated with nor was, in any sense, “authored” by him; rather “Trump’s style” is simply his performance or aesthetic expression of a more widely shared “language” or sensibility.

This clarification is significant because it helps account for the manner in which a style may connect and bond individuals who hold otherwise discordant political views. “Collective sentiments and aesthetic rituals,” elaborates Vivian (2002), “influence novel social alliances, affinities between markedly different groups, by virtue of the ways in which they are publicly expressed, performed, or symbolized” (p. 237). This seems especially relevant in the case of Trump who managed to appeal to voters with disparate views on many political issues.

What mobilized Trump voters was a shared sensibility, not about the economy, as popular perception has it (on the contrary, “financially troubled voters in the white working class were more likely to prefer Clinton”), but about “feeling like a stranger in America” (Green 2017). In short, racial anxiety trumped economic anxiety as a predictor of support for Trump in the 2016 US presidential election (McElwee and McDaniel 2017). This, of course, cut both ways; even as Trump’s populist performance of “white rage” appealed to some voters, it strongly alienated and even mobilized others in opposition (Barabak 2017). We explore this phenomenon in much greater detail in Chapter 2, but, first, it is important to situate Trump’s rhetoric in the context of political campaign communication and presidential discourse.

On Political Communication

In the second edition of *Uncivil Wars*, Thomas A. Hollihan (2009), Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California, writes, “Politics is fundamentally a communicative activity” (p. 9). As such, the study of politics is, at its core, the study of communication: (1) of how political elites—elected and appointed officials, party leaders, lobbyists, etc.—rally public support for their positions and policies through persuasive efforts; (2) of how media professionals report on politicians and political issues; and (3) of how citizens express their support or dissent for candidates, officeholders, the media, and other relevant stakeholders. While the scholarship on political communication employs a diverse array of approaches and perspectives to examine all three of these dimensions, our focus in this study is on two specific types of political discourse: campaign communication and presidential rhetoric. In this section, we review some of the key research in these two areas as a way of situating the analysis of Trump that follows.

Campaign Communication

Research on political campaign communication is rooted in the premise that important differences mark the rhetoric of campaigning and the rhetoric of governing. First, as Hugh Hecla (2000) explains, whereas campaigning seeks to influence a single decision, i.e., which candidate to vote for at an “unambiguous decision point in time,” governing aims at influencing a “line of decision” over time (p. 11). Second, given the “fixed time horizon” of an election, “campaigning is necessarily adversarial [while . . .] governing is primarily collaborative”

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(Hecló 2000, p. 12). In light of these key features, which have “winning an election” as their principal goal, “Political campaign discourse is therefore unquestionably instrumental, or functional, in nature” (Benoit, 2007, p. 32). Adopting a functional perspective, which assumes (1) that voting is a comparative act, (2) that candidates must distinguish themselves from their opponents, and (3) that campaign communication allows candidates to distinguish themselves, William Benoit (2007) argues political campaign discourse is typically characterized by three functions (acclaiming, attacking, and defending) and two topics (policy and character).

The first function of political campaign communication is *acclaiming*, which entails speech aimed at enhancing the reputation of the speaker through self-praise (Benoit 2001, p. 114). Common subjects of acclaim or “positive self-presentation” include past accomplishments, previous experience, and desirable personal traits (Benoit et al., 1997: 5). Trump, for instance, engaged in acclaiming by repeatedly touting his business background and tough negotiation skills during the 2016 campaign. The second function of campaign discourse is *attacking*, or speech that seeks to highlight an opponent’s weaknesses. As with acclaiming, the content of attacking usually focuses on either policy considerations or personal character. While attacking in political campaigns is not at all unique to Trump, what was unique was the especially nasty, personal, and demeaning nature of his attacks. As Oscar Winberg (2017) contends, Trump’s rhetoric replaced attack politics with insult politics. *Defending*, the third key function of campaign communication, refers to the manner in which candidates refute accusations and engage in image repair. Trump, like prior political candidates, frequently had to defend himself against attacks, and he employed common strategies such as denial, evasion, and minimization to do so. One strategy noticeably absent from Trump’s rhetorical toolbox, however, was apologia, as Trump obviously regards it as a sign of weakness.

In addition to a concern with the rhetorical function of campaign discourse, research has also investigated how political campaigns have changed over time. Though they vary somewhat in their terminological preferences, scholars typically divide political campaign communication into three historical stages: premodern, modern, and postmodern (Farrell 1996, p. 170). Each of these stages is characterized by a guiding paradigm, dominant medium of communication, and particular type of messaging. The premodern campaign, for instance, generally entailed a party logic; it was conducted through partisan newspapers and radio broadcasts, and conveyed a party-line message. The modern

campaign, by contrast, reflected a media logic; it was waged largely on national television and the evening news, and targeted a mass audience through images, sound bites, and impression management. Finally, the postmodern campaign is driven by a marketing logic; it operates in a digital environment that includes niche television and social media, and employs narrow-casting and micro-messaging to target specific voters (Strömbäck and Kiousus 2014, p. 117). Given broad acceptance of this typology, contemporary political campaign research often focuses on postmodern campaigns and the specific ways candidates operate in that unique media environment.

Candidates for public office utilize a wide range of modalities for conveying their values and policy objectives, including public speeches and rallies, press conferences and press releases, candidate debates, appearances on television, public mailings, radio and TV advertisements, Web pages, social media, recorded telephone messages, canvassing, yard signs, buttons, bumper stickers, and personal actions (Benoit 2007, p. 64; Hollihan 2009, p. 9). But in the postmodern era, presidential campaigns are dominated by television and social media. While this trend continued in the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump utilized television in several nontraditional ways and demonstrated a remarkable ability to create synergy between television and social media. In the remainder of this section, we review key literature on media use in political campaigns, as well as some of the rapidly emerging scholarship of Trump's unique implementation of media during the 2016 presidential campaign.

While presidential debates and national party conventions are important and certainly heavily viewed televisual events, TV's primary impact on presidential political campaigns has traditionally come in the form of 30- and 60-second advertising spots. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson wrote in 1996:

Political advertising is now the major means by which candidates for the presidency communicate their messages to voters. As a conduit of this advertising, television attracts both more candidate dollars and more audience attention than radio or print. Unsurprisingly, the spot ad is the most used and the most viewed of the available forms of advertising.

(p. 517)

Research generally shows that television spots influence voters (Benoit 2007, p. 68), and that the more candidates spend on TV spots the more influence they buy. So, on first glance, the fact that Hillary Clinton's

campaign spent more than \$1 billion on television advertising, nearly twice as much as Trump's campaign, defies conventional wisdom. But there are some crucial mitigating factors to consider. First, while Clinton spent more money than Trump on television advertising, she spent significantly less than Obama did in the previous two races. Second, Clinton did not advertise widely in key Rust Belt states such as Wisconsin and Michigan until the final week of the campaign (Stein 2017). Trump, by contrast, spent more on television advertising in Michigan in just the month of September than either 2012 presidential campaign (Obama or Romney) spent during the entire election cycle (Mauger n.d.). Third, Clinton's TV ads focused more on character than policy, which was a departure from previous election cycles (Parry-Giles et al. 2017).

Post-election analysis of Trump's campaign suggests a number of key findings. While Trump spent less total money on television ad buys, his spending was more electorally targeted and likely more effective. Perhaps more importantly, the Trump campaign utilized television in several nontraditional ways that appear to have been more effective than TV ad buys. Trump, for instance, regularly held large, raucous campaign rallies, many of which CNN aired in full during the primary season. In addition, he regularly phoned into political entertainment programs on Fox News, who put him on the air. Finally, Trump regularly tweeted "highly acerbic remarks, putdowns, and accusations" on Twitter (Johnson 2017, p. xiv) that were, in turn, widely reported on and analyzed by television "news" outlets.⁵ These three strategies significantly amplified Trump's message and media presence, earning him by some estimates \$5 billion worth campaign coverage (Broder 2017). So, while "Hillary Clinton held enormous advantages in fund-raising and television advertising expenditures . . . it was Trump who ultimately won more exposure in news coverage and social media" (Francia 2017, p. 2). Given Trump's success in generating unpaid advertising, it is worth examining more closely how he manipulated news coverage and mobilized Twitter toward this end.

Having spent years as the star of his own reality television series, Trump understood the storytelling and image-making power of television, and he leveraged the central logics of reality television—(1) sensationalism, (2) promotionalism (self-branding and reputation-seeking), and (3) "authenticity," which is figured primarily through the lens of "emotional transparency"—to influence the agenda of the news media. In routinely making outrageous statements on pseudo-news programs, during presidential debates, and at circus-like campaign

rallies, Trump seized the logic of spectacle and sensationalism to generate unprecedented free news coverage (Hearn 2016). As Francia (2017) recounts:

Trump's most sizable exposure advantage over Clinton came in the form of news stories. A full 43% of likely voters in June and another 40% in August reported that they saw more news stories of Trump than they did about Clinton. By comparison, just 12% of likely voters in June and 13% in August reported that they saw more news stories of Clinton than they did about Trump, providing Trump with a net advantage of 31 percentage points and 27 percentage points in June and August, respectively. Consistent with previous results and FMT expectations, Trump topped Clinton in unpaid media exposure.

(p. 11)

Moreover, Trump took advantage of reality TV's neoliberal grammar of promotionalism to establish "the rogue businessman as a new kind of expert and leader extraordinaire" (Oullette 2016, p. 649). Finally, "appearing bellicose, off-the-cuff, and spontaneous," he fostered an image of emotional authenticity, one that mirrors reality television "participants who present as so comfortable on camera that they behave in ways that suggest they forget about the cameras, or who are so overcome by emotion that they cannot contain themselves despite the cameras" (Dubrofsky 2016, p. 664). As effective as Trump's reality-show campaign was at generating unpaid advertising, his use of Twitter had the added benefit of allowing him to circumvent the mainstream media altogether (Johnson 2017, p. xiv).

The use of social media platforms in political campaigning did not begin, of course, with the 2016 election cycle. To date:

The research literature on social media and election campaigns can be divided into three main strands . . . the *historical development* of digital campaigns . . . the level of *professionalisation* of campaigns . . . [and] the level of *interaction with voters* in social media campaigns.

(Enli 2017, p. 51)

Scholarship in these areas relating to the 2016 presidential campaign has stressed three points. With respect to historical development, Twitter played a more significant role in Trump's campaign than in Clinton's or in any previous presidential campaign. Specifically, as

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mentioned previously, it was central to Trump's ability to generate free media. According to Peter Francia (2017), "Twitter delivered the equivalent of \$402 million in free attention for Trump as compared to \$166 million for Clinton based on MediaQuant estimates" (p. 9). With regard to the professionalization of digital campaigns, Trump actually benefitted from a lack of professionalization. As Gunn Enli (2017) explains: "Compared to the Clinton campaign's innovative use of digital media, extensive use of staffers, and the democratic party's expertise, the Trump campaign seemed pretty amateurish . . . [which likely strengthened] the image of [the] candidate as authentic" (p. 58). On the matter of interaction with voters, research indicates that Trump's use of Twitter favored passive consumption:

American voters who used social media to actively participate in politics by posting their own thoughts and sharing or commenting on social media were actually more likely to not support Trump as a candidate. Yet, those who were more passive receivers of political information via social media were more likely (by 1.26 times) to support Trump as their preferred candidate.

(Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017, pp. 1397–1399)

Importantly, such passivity bolstered Russian attempts to influence the 2016 US presidential election. Post-election data and analysis highlight four main conclusions regarding Russia's election activities:

1. *Russia actively and aggressively sought to interfere in the election.* US and British intelligence agencies have conclusively determined that Russia, under President Vladimir Putin's leadership, engaged in an organized cyberterrorist efforts to influence the 2016 US presidential election. These efforts functioned on multiple, intersecting fronts, including the theft and strategic release of Democratic emails, attacks on voter registration lists and voting machines, and a highly coordinated campaign of disruption and disinformation on social media (McCarthy 2017). Commenting on the latter front, Narayanan et al. (2018) observed:

In its review of the recent US elections, Twitter found that more than 50,000 automated accounts were linked to Russia. Facebook has revealed that content from the Russian Internet Research Agency has reached 126 million US citizens before the 2016 presidential election.

(p. 1)

2. *Russia's cyberterrorist attack on the election was orchestrated to aid Trump and to damage Clinton.* One avenue of attack involved hacking the emails of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and slowly and strategically leaking those emails to cause maximum harm to Clinton. A second avenue of attack involved amplifying the polarized political environment in the US by “stoking disagreement and division around a plethora of controversial topics such as immigration and Islamophobia” (McCarthy 2017). This included Russian trolls posing as black activists affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement in an effort to inflame racial tensions (Parnham 2017; O’Sullivan and Byers 2017; Clifton 2018; Stewart et al., 2018). A third avenue of attack entailed posting pro-Trump propaganda online. According to Badawy et al. (2018), “There were about 4 times as many Russian Trolls posting conservative views as liberal ones, [and] the former produced almost 20 times more content.” Of these propaganda efforts, the creation and circulation of fake news was among the most effective.
3. *Russian efforts to influence the election in favor of Trump relied heavily on fake news.* Not only did fake news heavily favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), but it was also more widely shared by conservatives and more likely to be believed by them (Ehrenreich 2017). As Emily Stewart (2018) reports, “Conservatives were much more likely than liberals to retweet Russian trolls in the 2016 election,” retweeting them roughly 31 times more often. In fact, according to Badawy et al. (2018), “Although an ideologically broad swath of Twitter users were exposed to Russian trolls in the period leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, it was mainly conservatives who helped amplify their message.” The role of fake news in the election was further heightened by the fact that fake news spreads faster and more frequently than truth online. In fact, according to one study, “It took the truth about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1500 people. . . . [and] falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth” (Vosoughi et al. 2018, p. 1148).
4. *Russia's cyberterrorist efforts to swing the election in Trump's favor were successful.* Given the centrality of Twitter to Trump's campaign, the targeted efforts of Russia to use Twitter and other social media platforms to interfere in the election, the evidence that those efforts were especially effective among conservatives and Trump followers, and the exceedingly close nature of the election, there is no question that Russia influenced the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. This marks the first time in US history

that a hostile foreign government successfully altered the result of a US presidential election. While research plainly supports the conclusion that Russia swung the election in Trump's favor, it is not yet clear whether the Trump campaign actively conspired with Russia to subvert a free and fair election. What we know with certitude is that millions of Americans unwittingly participated in a Russian cyberterrorist campaign to elect Donald J. Trump president of the United States.

Presidential Rhetoric

According to Theodore Otto Windt, Jr. (1986),

A President has three general areas of power available to him [sic]. He has constitutional and statutory power granted by the Constitution or conferred by law. He has political power as head of his party. And he has the power of public opinion.

(p. 102)

For many decades, Windt further observes, presidential studies concentrated almost exclusively on the first two forms of power. That began to change, however, with the publication of Richard Neustadt's 1960 book *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership*, in which Neustadt argues that "Presidential *power* is the power to persuade" (p. 11). Since then, there has been a growing interest in presidential rhetoric and, more specifically, the president's ability to influence public opinion through what Theodore Roosevelt dubbed the "bully pulpit." For Jeffrey K. Tulis (1987), growing interest in the "rhetorical presidency" is not so much the product of historical oversight as it is a transformation of the presidency itself, one that occurred under the presidencies of Roosevelt and Wilson.

According to Tulis (1987), the rhetorical practices of the presidency shifted dramatically from the nineteenth century to the twentieth century, a shift that caused the "dilemmas of modern governance" (p. 17). To understand those dilemmas requires an historical consideration of the Constitution and the intention of the Framers who, distrustful of popular appeals, established the separation of powers and independence of the executive branch specifically to guard against demagoguery. According to Caesar et al. (1981), "the Founders discouraged any idea that the President should serve as a leader of the people who would stir mass opinion by rhetoric" (pp. 161–162). Rather, in their view, the president was a constitutional officer who

performed tasks specific to the executive branch; these tasks emphasized communication with Congress more so than with the people. Presidents throughout the nineteenth century largely adhered to this norm. According to Tulis (1987), the Founders believed that presidential rhetoric should be “*public* (available to all) but not thereby *popular* (fashioned for all)” (46). Theodore Roosevelt began to alter this normative expectation through his speaking campaigns, such as his effort to advance national regulation of the railroads. But this shift, which Tulis argues constituted a “basic change in the understanding of the place of the presidency in the political order” (p. 13), was more fully realized by Woodrow Wilson, who regarded the separation of powers as a constitutional defect, and sought to bypass Congress by speaking directly to the American people. This reversal of the founding perspective is dangerous, according to Tulis, because it removes constitutional checks on popular leadership. The deleterious result of this shift is the heightened possibility of populist demagoguery that, in turn, threatens reasoned, deliberative processes.

Like Tulis, other scholars of presidential rhetoric have explored the changing role of presidential leadership and discourse in the modern era. Scholars such as Roderick P. Hart (1984) and Elvin T. Lim (2018), for instance, have both made key contribution to the understanding of modern presidential rhetoric. In his 1984 book *Verbal Style and the Presidency: A Computer-Based Analysis*, Hart created DICTION, a computer-aided text-analysis program that allowed him to examine five linguistic variable across many contexts: (a) *optimism*—language that is positive or supportive; (b) *activity*—language that stresses change, movement, and implementation; (c) *realism*—language that is tangible and immediate; (d) *commonality*—language that emphasizes shared values; and (e) *certainty*—language that is resolute and totalistic. Though this approach has yet to be applied to Trump’s presidential rhetoric, one might reasonably expect—in light of its aggrieved tone—a lower score in optimism, and—in light of its populist authoritarianism—a higher score in activity and certainty.

The political scientist Elvin T. Lim (2018) has also studied long-term trends in presidential rhetoric. In his 2018 book *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush*, Lim found that over time presidential rhetoric has become more anti-intellectual, more abstract, more assertive, more democratic, and more conversational. The trend toward anti-intellectualism is based on the average readability level of presidential discourse, which according to Lim declined from a college-graduate level throughout the eighteen and nineteenth centuries to an

eighth-grade level in the 1980s; it also became simpler during that same period with average sentence length dropping from 50 words per sentence to fewer than 20. In a recent study of the readability and simplicity of Trump's rhetoric, Orly Kayam (2018) found that it conforms to the trend of anti-intellectualism identified by Lim. In fact, Kayam concluded that Trump's discourse averages a fourth- to fifth-grade level, the lowest of any candidate during the 2016 campaign by an average of four to five grade levels and the lowest of any president in history (p. 86).

Another prominent and productive line of research into presidential rhetoric concerns matters of genre. Since presidents are "expected to honor certain rhetorical traditions when they address the public" (Louden 2008, p. 634), many scholars have sought to identify the various occasions or categories of presidential rhetoric (inaugural address, State of the Union speech, farewell address, war rhetoric, etc.) and the shared traits of those occasions. Commenting on the benefits of this type of scholarship in 1978, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson wrote in *Form and Genre*:

The critic who classifies a rhetorical artifact as generically akin to a class of similar artifacts has identified an undercurrent of history rather than comprehended an act isolated in time. . . . One may argue that recurrence arises out of comparable rhetorical situations, out of the influence of conventions on the response of rhetors, out of universal and cultural archetypes ingrained in human consciousness, out of fundamental human needs, or out of a finite number of rhetorical options or commonplaces. Whatever the explanation, the existence of the recurrent provides insight into the human condition.

(pp. 26–27)

Campbell and Jamieson followed this work in 1990 with *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*, in which they argued that rhetors do not simply respond to situational constraints, but that they actively construct situations and audiences. "Skillful presidents not only adapt to their audiences," they write, "they engage in transforming those who hear them into the audiences they desire" (p. 5). In keeping with this perspective, much of the scholarship in this tradition examines how presidents construct a sense of the national character while in office.

Given Trump's relatively short time in office at this point (about two years), research on Trump's rhetoric from the perspective of genre is

just emerging. What the nascent scholarship overwhelmingly stresses, however, is Trump's penchant for social and political norm breaking and an utter disregard for democratic institutions. Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Doron Taussig (2017), for instance, observe that President's Trump's "rhetorical signature"—his distinguishing mode of expression—reflects "spontaneity laced with Manichean, evidence-flouting, accountability-dodging, and institution-disdaining claims" (p. 620). Joshua Gunn (2018) concurs, suggesting that Trump's rhetoric is best classified as "political perversion," a genre of discourse that features "recurrent disavowal" (p. 163). "As a genre," he elaborates, "perversion ceaselessly forges and reinscribes an identification that disavowals established order" (p. 174). The appeal of this genre, as with all genres of discourse, is primarily affective; it repeatedly stages repudiation, but it does so in a manner that signals acknowledgement (avowal) of the very thing it repudiates. This is why we claimed in the preface "that one of the most reliable predictors of truth in the contemporary political landscape is that the president has asserted its opposite." President Trump's rhetoric repeatedly affirms the opposite of what is often painfully obvious (for instance, "I'm the least racist person you know"), a fact that forces him to defend his outrageous statements with so-called "alternative facts."

One final avenue of research into presidential rhetoric that has received considerable scholarly attention is the role of media. Presidents obviously rely on modern media, especially television, to speak to various constituencies and the American public. Moreover, the actions of presidents—no matter how trivial—are regarded as newsworthy and widely reported on in the press. Therefore, any attempt to understand presidential rhetoric must take into account both the means by which presidents communicate with the public and the nature of their relationship with the press. Based on Trump's time in office thus far, it is possible to draw four conclusions about Trump's use of media and his relationship with the press:

1. *Trump is exceedingly skilled at manipulating the news cycle, often driving the news narrative and, thus, setting the public agenda.* The political antics, e.g., building suspense for upcoming episodes, making outrageous and offensive claims, insulting and demeaning others, and tweeting at irregular times, that made candidate Trump irresistible to the press during the 2016 presidential campaign have continued and even intensified since the election. From staged dramas announcing his Supreme Court nominees to high-profile summits with Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin, Trump

powerfully influences what the press is talking about if not always how. But his most obvious strategy for impacting the news of the day has been his active Twitterfeed. As Julian Zelizer (2018) wrote, “The national conversation has been shaped through his Twitter stream, his tweets quickly making their way onto the television networks.”

2. *Trump and Fox News have formed a dangerous and closed feedback loop.* No one other than himself has ever accused President Trump of being a “genius,” as most of his ideas are, in fact, not his. The positions and policies that Trump spouts endlessly on Twitter often originate with political commentators (not be confused with journalists) on Fox News, and, in particular, with Sean Hannity, who regularly advises the president in private (Grynbaum 2018). As has been well documented, for instance, Trump routinely tweets ideas and opinions he has just seen on Fox News entertainment programs like *Fox & Friends*. As Zelizer (2018) notes, Trump “depends on television—namely the Fox News network—as a key source for his daily script.” Subsequently, those same programs favorably discuss the president’s tweets, resulting in a closed feedback loop. “*Fox News*,” elaborates Robert Reich, “is no longer intermediating between the public and Trump. *Fox News* is Trump. Trump takes many of his lies from *Fox News*, and *Fox News* amplifies Trump’s lies” (2018). When the programming on Fox News is not feeding the president his opinions, it “often carries his speeches live and in their entirety” (Bauder 2018), giving the president billions of dollars in free advertising.
3. *Trump has attacked a free and independent press in Orwellian fashion.* Historically, fake news referred to propaganda or deliberate disinformation, but following his election Trump regularly began to describe any unfavorable press coverage of him as “fake news.” As negative coverage of his presidency increased, he escalated his attacks on mainstream news outlets like CNN, MSNBC, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, referring to them on Twitter and at rallies as the “enemy of the people.” Then, on July 24, 2018, at a speech in Kansas City to the Veterans of Foreign Wars annual convention, Trump said, “Stick with us. Don’t believe the crap you see from these people, the fake news. . . . What you’re seeing and what you’re reading is not what’s happening” (Remarks by President Trump 2018). The statement echoes a line from George Orwell’s (1949) dystopian novel *1984* in which a totalitarian state manipulates the public by policing independent thought: “The party told you to reject the evidence of your

eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command” (p. 91). Trump’s continual effort to discredit news that he does not like ranks among his most chilling rhetoric, especially in light of how successful it has been.

4. *Trump’s rhetorical attacks on the press have been effective with his base.* Recent polls suggest that Trump’s followers trust him more (by a significant margin) than they trust the news media (Kay 2017). They trust him more despite the fact that he lies more frequently and more outrageously than any US president in history, and despite the fact that he owes his election to the cyberterrorist efforts of a hostile foreign power. As an authoritarian leader whose popularity depends on a cult of personality, Trump’s followers accept his pronouncements as the “gospel truth” (Kellner, 2017, p. 44), and chief among his pronouncements is to not trust their own eyes and ears. Trump’s anti-democratic attacks on the press have benefitted from three interrelated factors. First, he partially circumvents the traditional news media by tweeting directly with his followers. Second, online networks like Twitter are especially well suited for transmitting affect (Hillis et al. 2015; Papacharissi 2015), in this case white rage, which resonated with the anger and racism of his followers. Third, Fox News, the most popular 24-hour cable news network, “immunize[s] its viewers from evidence that contradicts their reality . . . It’s steady stream of messages affirms its audience’s worldview and enables it to dismiss other media outlets that present evidence of wrongdoing by Trump and his associates” (Chang 2018).

Why Trump’s Discourse Matters

There is an old saying that “actions speak louder than words.” This saying is rooted in a naïve and mistaken view of language, one that contributes to the popular misperception that rhetoric is “empty.” Far from being empty or inconsequential, however, rhetoric is material and meaningful. Rhetoric *is* action. It actively defines situations and people, which influences not only how persons respond to those situations and people, but also limits what persons are even able to conceive of as possible responses. It actively alters persons’ ideas, values, and beliefs, contributing to and constraining what and how they think. It actively generates emotion and affect, altering how people feel and behave. It actively mobilizes people to action or inaction in all contexts all of the time. What people say does more than simply express who they are and what they are feeling and thinking, though it does those

things. It fundamentally calls on others to be certain types of people, and to feel, think, and act in certain ways.

When the source of what is being said is the president of the United States, it becomes even more significant and consequential. Given the unique position and power of that office, there is likely no person in the modern world whose rhetoric matters more. By necessity, his words influence economic markets, shape foreign affairs and relations, and set the tone for our national politics. The president cannot, as was suggested by his lawyer Rudolf Giuliani, merely express his opinion on Twitter (Davis et al. 2018). When Trump, referring to the Robert Mueller investigation, tweeted on August 1, 2018 that Attorney General Jeff Sessions “should stop this Rigged Witch Hunt right now, before it continues to stain our country any further,” he may have been expressing his opinion. But he was also, inasmuch as speech is action, giving a directive, one that, in this case, was almost certainly criminal, specifically obstruction of justice in the Russia investigation. The stakes, in other words, could not be higher.

Thus, in the two analytical chapters that follow, our aim is to identify and assess the stakes—the material consequentiality—of President’s Trump’s rhetoric. Toward that end, we undertake a detailed analysis of his rhetorical style, paying particular attention to its principal manner (i.e., white rage) and modality (i.e., Twitter) of expression. In highlighting Trump’s performative enactment of white rage, we illustrate how he invites and compels audiences to abandon their commitments to democratic norms and principles, to excuse his outrageous and offensive behavior, to embrace hate, bigotry, and intolerance, and to reject simple and obvious truths and realities. Ultimately, we argue that President Trump’s rhetoric both reflects the most insidious qualities of humanity and actively encourages them in others.

Notes

1. “Trump has never been a politician whose fundamental appeal is logical. He is a ‘heart’ politician, someone uniquely able to make people *feel* something which affects how they think about their world” (Cillizza 2017c).
2. “There is plenty of evidence that Trump is a demagogue, an ignorant bigot and a con man without an ethical bone in his body” (Lynch 2017).
3. “Trump’s most ardent followers praise him for freeing himself from ideological constraints” (Shapiro 2016).
4. See also Baruch Spinoza (1992, p. 103).
5. “Trump’s use of social media, especially his frequent postings on Twitter, generated significant news coverage. This unpaid or free media exposure allowed Trump to remain in the public eye without requiring his campaign to spend millions of its own dollars on paid media such as advertising” (Francia, 2017, p. 5).

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