

@realDonaldTrump: political celebrity, authenticity, and para-social engagement on Twitter

Andrea McDonnell and Mark Wheeler

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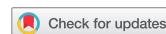
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FORUM



@realDonaldTrump: political celebrity, authenticity, and para-social engagement on Twitter

Andrea McDonnell^a and Mark Wheeler^b

^aEmmanuel College, Boston, USA; ^bLondon Metropolitan University, London, UK

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Introduction

The celebrity politician is no longer an exceptional type of political actor, but a vital and identifiable figure in modern culture, one who has a profound impact on political practice and participation in the twenty-first century (Street 2003, 2004, 2010). With the rapid development and adoption of digital technologies, namely web-based and social media platforms, celebrity candidates have deployed new strategies for attracting and communicating with constituents and enhancing their political capital. These platforms also allow politicians to present a version of themselves that appears unmediated, personal, and authentic (Wheeler 2014). Throughout his 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, Donald Trump used social media, most notably Twitter, to communicate with voters; by Election Day, he had 13 million followers on the site.¹ Trump's proclivity for posting seemingly off-the-cuff remarks transformed his 140-character-or-less comments into major news stories, often shaping media coverage of the candidate and his campaign.

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As Goffman writes in his seminal (1959) study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in order for an actor's behaviour to become meaningful to others, 'he must mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey' (1959, p. 30); it is this mobilization that Goffman calls *dramatic realization*. Thanks to an increasingly diverse and fragmented media landscape, the opportunities, and challenges, of dramatic realization are ever expanding. Public figures now perpetually perform, both within and outside of the cable news cycle. It has become *de rigueur* for celebrities and political actors to dramatically realize the version of self whom they wish the public to know via social media platforms. Thus, the private self that Goffman describes as existing *backstage* has been supplanted by a constant performativity in which the 'real' self is publically enacted. Meyrowitz (1986) calls this activity *side stage* behaviour, and it represents yet another layer of performative showmanship. In our twenty-first century, media-saturated political landscape, it may well be, then, that a candidate's ability to dramatically realize a political persona has become more important than his or her experience or ability to govern.

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Social media platforms help politicians to establish and maintain their political brand and to attract supporters. Throughout his campaign, and into his presidency, Donald Trump's Twitter use has effectively enhanced his charismatic authority. As defined by the sociologist Max Weber, charismatic authority is a kind of power and influence that rests on the

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individual's ability to continuously 'prove' his legitimacy, determination, and strength in ways that compel followers to 'faithfully surrender' to him (Weber 1946 p. 78). For Trump, Twitter provides a platform for the ongoing performance of charismatic authority. On social media, authority is no longer dependent on law or tradition, nor on the individual's ability to embody democratic norms and values, nor on expertise. Rather, it is one's ability to present oneself as exceptional and authentic that draws followers. 40

Online, traditional modes of political communication – the vocal, the physical, and the rhetorical – become enmeshed with the iconic, the hypertextual, and the virtual. Candidates command credibility through a conjunction of de-institutionalisation, personalisation and para-social familiarity. Para-social interaction (PSI) occurs when an individual interacts with a media figure as though that figure were a person whom the individual personally knows in everyday life (Horton and Richard Wohl 1956). Social media platforms foster para-social engagement via users' direct interaction in the form of comments, likes, retweets, and the exchange of messages, photos, and videos. These functions, combined with the fact that social media platforms do not distinguish between celebrities, politicians, and real-world associates (online, these are all simply 'friends' or 'followers') foster a sense that public figures are available and knowable. 45 50

Whether celebrities and politicians post on social media themselves or hire a team to manage these interactions is debatable. Nevertheless, the proliferation and ubiquity of digital, social modes of interaction herald significant changes in the affective capacities of public figures (Marshall 1997). These changes have shaped the ways in which the public thinks about and interacts with politicians, particularly populist figures (Marsh *et al.* 2010, Wheeler 2013). By analysing Donald Trump's use of Twitter during his U.S. Presidential campaign, we seek to better understand how political celebrities use social platforms to connect with followers and to enhance their authority and celebrity. 55 60

Method

According to the *Wall Street Journal* Twitter tracker, Trump averaged 11 tweets per day via his @realDonaldTrump handle over the course of his campaign, tweeting a total of 35,244 times between January 2015 and early November 2016.² This study considers tweets posted during the 28 days leading up to the 2016 Presidential election, including content posted between midnight October 11 and 11:29 pm 7 November 2016. During this period, Trump tweeted 440 times, with 429 original posts and 11 retweets. We examine the rhetorical, thematic, and visual strategies of these posts and inductively identify recurring motifs. 65 70

Findings

Trump's twitter handle, @realDonaldTrump, conveys a sense of legitimacy and authenticity; it seems to say, 'don't be fooled by imitations'. His profile photo, a closely cropped headshot shows Trump in natural lighting, eyes to camera, looking directly out at the viewer. Though Trump has acknowledged that aides do at times post on his behalf – at one point, he tweeted that he had turned his account over to his 'team of deplorables' – alerts such as these reinforce an assumption that all other tweets are authored by the candidate himself. Combined, these profiles features assure followers that they are privy to Trump's genuine and unfiltered thoughts. 75

In tweets, Trump's use of language fosters a sense of immediacy and connection with followers. He regularly employs **first-person** address, referring to himself as 'I' and audiences as 'you'. He often posts to thank his supporters, as in an **October 19** tweet in which he writes, 'Great poll – thank you America!' Trump also employs words such as 'together' and 'we', which suggest a shared responsibility and interaction: 'We have all got to come together and win this election' (10/17). He directly hails readers, referencing voters in different states, by sending targeted messages: 'Thank you for your support Greensboro, North Carolina' (10/14) and 'Thank you Las Vegas, Nevada – I love you!' (10/30). These posts encourage PSI with followers while reinforcing a sense that his social media posts are candid and personal.

But perhaps the strategy that Trump relies on most frequently is that of identifying instances of insincerity as he sees them. Many of his posts are accusatory and he condemns everyone from reporters and media outlets, to former employees, to his opponent as 'crooked', 'made up', 'biased', and 'corrupt'. His tweets accuse the media – and the election process itself – of being 'rigged', telling followers, 'don't let them fool you' (10/11; 10/24). A favourite hashtag, #BigLeagueTruth, supposedly alerts readers to instances in which Trump reveals or uncovers the 'real story' that he alleges is being hidden from the public. For instance, on **October 10** Trump tweets, 'Wow, @CNN got caught fixing their "focus group" in order to make Crooked Hillary look better. Really pathetic and totally dishonest!' The exclamatory tone reinforces Trump's image as a straight-talker while branding Cable News Network (CNN) and Clinton as untrustworthy 'frauds'.

Trump's favoured moniker for Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton is 'Crooked Hillary', a nickname that marks her as being inauthentic and insincere. Trump's rhetorical branding of Clinton is emphasized most notably on **October 19**, the date of the third and final presidential debate, on which he logs his highest number of posts to date: 87. In 22 posts, he directly criticizes Clinton, claiming the state department worked 'illegally' for her and that the Clinton foundation is a 'CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE!' Trump also tweets that Clinton has 'no credibility' and that 'no secretary of state has been more wrong, more often, and in more places'. At times, Trump stops short of using Clinton's name, simply referring to her as *Crooked*: 'Crooked's top aides were MIREN in massive conflicts of interest'.

Trump's tweets also include visual cues that reinforced his rhetoric. Another debate-day post, in which Trump tweets, '#CrookedHillary is no more than a Wall Street PUPPET!' is accompanied by a video of cartoon Clinton dangling from marionette strings. A similar video post includes a gif of Hillary's first name in white font, with the letters spelling 'liar' highlighted in red; the visual cue suggests *liar* is literally part of who Hillary Clinton is (10/19). In another post, Trump tweets an unflattering black and white photo of Clinton superimposed with a quote: 'Hillary is the most corrupt person to ever run for the presidency of the United States' (10/18). The words 'most corrupt person' are highlighted by a red band. The author of the quote, cited in the post, is Trump himself. Thus, while he claims to reveal truths and speak honestly, Trump's strategy for bolstering his authority and authenticity is not primarily rooted in the delivery of information, but in his unceasing undercutting of his opponents.

Discussion and conclusions

Donald Trump's use of Twitter proved to be a successful tool for political communication throughout the 2016 election campaign. His social media performativity and dramatic

realization of an outsider candidate helped Trump effectively **appeal** to a significant portion of the electorate in key battleground states who, on **November 8**, 2016, propelled him to the White House. Now, three years into his presidency, Twitter has remained Trump's favoured platform for communication. 125

Since, his inauguration Trump has continued to use Twitter to foster para-social relations with his base and cast himself as an anti-establishment foil to the establishment political class and the mainstream media. As president, Trump tweets to connect with supporters, test policy propositions, obfuscate his decision-making, damn his political opponents (both within and without the White House), and to even fire high-ranking cabinet officials. All the while, his social media presence has continued to grow; Trump has more than 25 million followers on his @realDonaldTrump handle and another 22.5 million followers on the official @POTUS account, from which he also tweets. In sum, Trump has successfully used Twitter to dramatically realize his maverick appeal, to enhance his charismatic authority, and to reinforce his claims on unfiltered authenticity (i.e. lack of 'political correctness'). He has also bolstered his fame and celebrity brand, a fact Trump himself acknowledged in a **March 6** tweet about the 2018 Academy Awards: 'Lowest rated Oscars in HISTORY. Problem is, we don't have Stars anymore-except your President (just kidding, of course)!' What has yet to be seen is whether these communication strategies will continue to be effective for Trump as he attempts to maintain his coalition during future U.S. elections or whether emerging political candidates on the international stage will be able to replicate Trump's success in attracting followers and crafting a political brand on social media. 130 135 140 145

Notes

1. <http://graphics.wsj.com/clinton-trump-twitter/>.
2. <http://graphics.wsj.com/clinton-trump-twitter/>.

Disclosure statement

Q6 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors. 150

Notes on contributors

Andrea McDonnell is associate professor of Media Studies at Emmanuel College. Her work emphasizes the intersection of media technologies, audiences, and everyday life. She is the author of *Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines* (Polity Press, 2014) and her new book, *Celebrity: A History of Fame*, co-authored with Susan Douglas (University of Michigan), is forthcoming with NYU Press. She tweets at @doctordreuh. 155

Mark Wheeler is professor of Political Communications at London Metropolitan University. He authored several books including *Celebrity Politics: Image and Identity in Contemporary Political Communications* (Polity Press, 2013) and *Public Spheres and Mediated Social Networks in the Western Context and Beyond* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, with Petros Iosifidis). He has published a range of articles in peer-reviewed journals and chapters in edited books. He is a Visiting Fellow at the Media and Communications Department at the London School of Economics. 160

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