

**From Trump Tower to the White House, in 140 Characters:  
The Hyper-Mediated Election of a Paranoid Populist President**

by

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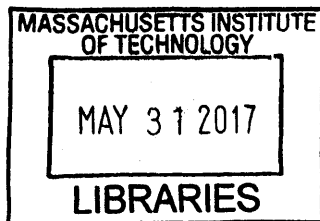
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**Abstract**

The improbable election of Donald Trump relied on myriad factors. Among the most important of these, I argue here, was Trump's deft use of the social media site Twitter, which Trump used as a means to both communicate with his supporters directly, and to reach a far wider audience in the mainstream media.

In adopting this hybrid communications strategy, Trump's political communications reached a wider audience, on a sturdier basis, than earlier figures who had similarly adopted what I dub a "paranoid populist" philosophy. I present case studies of two of these historical figures, Charles Coughlin, whose radio "sermons" reached millions in the 1930s, and Pat Robertson, whose cable television network inspired a devout following from afar. The grander political ambitions of both Coughlin and Robertson were stymied by a combination of technological, legal and economic factors, which did not serve to constrain Trump's candidacy in the same way. Instead, Trump's hybrid use of Twitter blended the breadth of Coughlin's audience with the depth of Robertson's following, providing him both an unfiltered line of communication to his supporters and a means of reaching a far wider audience through the provocative nature of his pronouncements.

Through a combination of theoretical and empirical analysis, I illustrate the extent of Trump's paranoid populism on Twitter, and explain how Trump secured an avalanche of mainstream media coverage through the eternally controversial nature of his candidacy. I conclude with some reflections on Trump's early presidency, and his evolving use of Twitter as a platform for decrying the very news organizations without whose coverage his election would have proved impossible.

## Acknowledgements

Although what follows represents my own work, as much as my references at the end betray my debt to academic forebears, I am indebted even more to the family and friends, colleagues and cohort, and everyone else who made solitary study sustainable.

I am, first and foremost, grateful to my thesis committee, comprised of Professors Heather Hendershot, my supervisor, and Ed Schiappa, my reader. Both their deep knowledge of my subject area and their unending commitment to the cause proved invaluable at every step. I also received valuable advice and guidance from further afield, not least from my former colleague Ralph Schroeder, and Ethan Zuckerman of the Center for Civic Media here at MIT. Shannon Larkin of CMS was a truly indispensable source of support throughout.

Beyond the academy, I'm also incredibly indebted to a phenomenal social network. My parents, who would be forgiven for thinking of a third thesis as overkill, were never more than a Skype call away, and many other friends and family members back home were also very supportive. My adoptive family in New Hampshire were also ceaselessly accommodating, not least on the day I first arrived, and on many occasions since.

Finally, it's important to acknowledge the support of those who I saw just about every day during this process, not least my classmates, like Katie, my housemates, like Ben, my labmates, like Andy—and Evan, who somehow managed to be all three things at once. 2016 will be remembered for many things, but I'm grateful that one of them was meeting Asha.

When I started this study in September 2015, the political landscape looked very different from today. Trump's candidacy at that time was a source of morbid curiosity, but this soon gave way to apprehension and alarm. My thesis is dedicated to those around the world who work tirelessly to combat the intolerance and division brought to the fore in 2016. My research seeks to explain how we got here; I am grateful to those working to get us out.

“Now, tweeting happens to be a modern day form of communication. You can like it or not. Between Facebook and Twitter, I have 25 million people. It's a very effective way of communication. So you can put it down, but it's an effective form of communication. I'm not unproud of it, to be honest with you.”

— *Excerpt from Donald Trump's remarks during the second televised presidential debate against Hillary Clinton, October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016.*<sup>1</sup>

**Tucker Carlson:** Do you talk to anyone before you tweet? And is there anyone in the White House who can say to you, Mr President, please don't tweet that, who would you listen to?

**President Trump:** Well, let me tell you about Twitter, I think that maybe I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Twitter, because I get such a fake press, such a dishonest press. I mean, if you look at—and I'm not including Fox, because I think Fox has been fair to me—but if you look at CNN and if you look at these other networks ... I call it the fake press, the fake media.

— *Excerpt from an interview between Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson and President Donald Trump, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2017.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/2016-presidential-debate-transcript-229519>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/03/16/donald-trump-explained-twitter-the-universe-and-everything-to-tucker-carlson/>

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## **Introduction: The Unprecedented President**

At the risk of stating the obvious, someone awaking from a coma after two years on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017, to see Donald Trump's inauguration as President of the United States, might reasonably wonder if they had woken up in an alternate reality. The elevation of Trump, the celebrity businessman, to the highest office in the land does indeed seem in retrospect like the stuff of fiction or fantasy.

Yet the improbability of an event occurring is no justification for inadequacy in explaining it. Though Trump's victory no doubt represented a stunning upset, it is possible—even with only the few months of hindsight I enjoy at the time of writing—to begin to offer compelling explanations as to how and why it transpired.

This is the task I undertake in the present study. This thesis represents the culmination of eighteen months of observing and cataloging the 2016 presidential election—admittedly, with steadily increasing incredulity. Through a kaleidoscopic combination of historical, theoretical and empirical lenses, and with the inclusion of insights from the fields of political science and communication studies, I provide here a comprehensive overview of Trump's victory—and offer a multi-faceted explanation as to how it was possible.

No doubt it will take many decades of research and dialog to develop a truly decisive explanation of why Trump won—and in this sense, if journalism is the first draft of history, then the present study represents only the first round of edits. Nonetheless, I hope this study makes a substantive contribution to the myriad debates that will inevitably follow.

Specifically, in this study I emphasize the centrality of Donald Trump's use of Twitter to his success, hoping to establish it as a necessary though by no means sufficient factor in his victory. This thesis will argue that Twitter as a medium provided Donald Trump a unique set of affordances, enabling an unfiltered line communication to his growing base of supporters, which was both distinct from, and in complex interaction with, mainstream media coverage

of his campaign, especially on cable news. Meanwhile, Trump’s distinctly paranoid, populist ideology, as manifested in his campaign communications, was an important component of his success.

I begin my argument in Chapter 1 with an introduction to paranoid populism, which I develop as a synthesis of populist ideology and a (politically) paranoid strain of thinking. I sketch an overview of these concepts and relevant debates around their significance in the context of American politics. I introduce two figures—Charles Coughlin and Pat Robertson—who embodied a paranoid-populist ideology and explore how this ideology was manifested on their respective choice of communication platform. As we will see, both Coughlin and Robertson initially found large, receptive audiences for their paranoid-populist programming—but their grander political aspirations were felled by a combination of technological, legal and economic constraints.

With this historical and theoretical background in mind, in Chapter 2 I begin my analysis of the 2016 presidential election. I start by exploring Donald Trump’s use of Twitter, illustrating the paranoid-populist nature of his tweets, as well as his apparent attempts to secure wider media attention for his campaign beyond his army of followers. I also introduce the concepts of agenda setting and framing as lenses through which to interpret Trump’s tweeted attempts to manipulate media coverage of his campaign.

In Chapter 3, I turn to examine how the mainstream media responded to Trump’s tweeting, exploring the extent to which his tweets were included in coverage. I introduce the concept of media spheres, first proposed by Daniel Hallin, as a basis for understanding how Trump’s “deviance”—especially as displayed on his Twitter account—might have warranted disproportionate coverage in the mainstream media.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I adopt a wider lens, analyzing the complex relationship between Trump's campaign and two leading cable news networks: CNN and Fox News. In different ways, both these networks radically modified their coverage of Trump over the course of the campaign, putting a drive for ratings at the center of their strategy. Though this chapter relates predominantly to coverage of Trump in general, rather than his Twitter account in particular, I conclude by explaining Twitter's significance to Trump as an unfiltered outlet: both by providing an *a priori* basis for his apparently newsworthy deviance, and as an independent platform when feuds with these networks arose.

Trump's victory stunned onlookers, and marked the first time that a figure without any experience of holding either public office or military leadership had ascended to the presidency. But Trump was a one-of-a-kind candidate in more ways than one, and his conduct in office to date has been unconventional even by the standards of the cavalcade of often curious characters who preceded him. Of particular significance for the purposes of this work is that Trump has continued to use Twitter as president, and his tweets continue to command enormous attention, discussion and influence.

This study is neither a biography of Trump nor a history of the American presidency, but nonetheless represents an attempt to understand how the two ultimately came to collide. To this end, what I provide here is an analytical account of the intersection between paranoid-populist political thought and mediated communication. In my view, this is the best context in which to explain Trump's rise—though the reader will, as is traditional, be the judge.

## **Chapter 1: The History of Paranoid Populism in America**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I lay the historical groundwork for my explanation of the success of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. Trump's campaign drew heavily on populist and paranoid themes, which found ample amplification both through his deft use of social media and in more traditional media spaces. This chapter serves to provide both the theoretical basis and the historical precedence for Trump's success. I begin by introducing and developing paranoid populism, a hybrid concept which serves to contextualize Trump's core messaging. I follow this with two historical case studies, which explain how two figures—Charles Coughlin and Pat Robertson—utilized both the emerging media technologies of their day and favorable economic, legal and political circumstances to draw huge audiences. Both the early success and ultimate failure of these two figures provide important context for the story of Trump's shocking rise, which I explore in later chapters.

### **The Allure of Paranoid Populism in America**

In this section, I offer an outline of “paranoid populism”, the core theoretical concept on which the argument of my thesis is centered. Paranoid populism, as I render it here, is a hybrid of two complementary concepts, both of which have played a significant role in the American political experience. The concept serves to contextualize my later discussion of Donald Trump's candidacy, in both descriptive and explanatory terms. In a descriptive sense, paranoid populism offers a useful lens through which to view the Trump candidacy; in particular, those for whom Trump's rhetoric or strategy seemed unorthodox, unprecedented or even un-American would be surprised to find that, in many ways, the campaign was only the latest manifestation of the long-lasting (if ever-evolving) strain of paranoid populism in

American politics. Moreover, in an explanatory sense, paranoid populism offers a way to understand Trump's ultimate electoral success. As I will later show, paranoid populism—not only in how it is characterized, but in how it is mechanized as a means of securing power—serves to illuminate Trump's initially quixotic yet ultimately successful candidacy. In what follows, I explore the related concepts of populism and political paranoia separately, before explaining their usefulness as a hybrid concept to analysis of the 2016 race.

Populism, in the American political context, has long eluded a precise, agreed-upon definition. As Michael Kazin notes in his authoritative work, *The Populist Persuasion*, not only is the definition of populism subject to contestation amongst academics, but the term is also used unsparingly and somewhat indiscriminately by journalists and advertisers (1998, p. 5). Even within academia, there are a wide array of definitions. One element does, however, recur across definitions in the literature. As Kazin suggests, “the most basic and telling definition of populism [is] a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter” (p. 1).

This “us against them” characteristic is also central to other attempts that have been made to define populism. Writing in 2004, Cas Mudde notes that most definitions of populism have two points of reference in common—“the elite” and “the people”—and that populism says something about the relationship between these two groups. Populism, then, is grounded in the idea of a “general will of the people” standing in opposition to a venal, corrupt, selfish elite.

Yet if this antagonistic relationship between “the people” and “the elite” is the motivating force behind populism, this begs the question, *which people*, and *which elite*? Paul Taggart, in *Populism* (2000), replaces “the people” in this formula with the more specific idea of “the heartland”, a place “in which, in the populist imagination, a virtuous and

unified population resides” (p. 95). Taggart’s substitution is useful insofar as it points to the particular quality of purity, or ordinariness, or virtuousness, of the people whose interests populism purports to promote (Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016; Mudde, 2004). As will be seen, this is an important modification, since it facilitates the rhetorical “othering” of groups far larger and more diverse than a narrow conception of “the elites”. Appealing to the *purity* of the *heartland*, constituted by *ordinary folk*—almost invariably lays the ground for racial, cultural and/or economic resentment and antipathy. In the American case, Kazin argues, “white working men never exclusively composed this [idea of ordinary] ‘people’ [but] it was usually shaped in their image” (1998, p. 1).

Another point of disagreement around attempts to define populism concerns its form. American Populism enjoyed its most formal, concrete manifestation in the “People’s Party”, colloquially known as the “Populists”, a political party which emerged at the end of the nineteenth century. Formed in opposition to capitalist forces and with the support of both farmers and the labor movement, the People’s Party only competed in earnest in one presidential election, in 1892, in which nominee James B. Weaver carried four frontier states. Following this success, the populist platform and powerful oratory of the Democratic Party’s candidate for the 1896 election, William Jennings Bryan, eventually won the formal endorsement of the People’s Party (though they did nominate their own vice presidential candidate.) With or without populist support, Bryan lost the 1896 election, as well as two more in the following twelve years. As will be seen, Bryan’s experience began a more-than-century-long trend for populist candidates of all stripes to struggle at the ballot box.

The brief *fin de siècle* formalization notwithstanding, populism in America is more often labeled an ideology. Several writers have in turn suggested that it is “more an *impulse* than an ideology, [since it] is too elastic and promiscuous” to even be considered an ideology (Kazin, 1998, p. 3; emphasis mine). Another alternative term is “mentality”, as suggested by

Tarchi (2016). Even those who do dub populism an ideology concede that it is “thin” as opposed to “thick” (Kreisi, 2014; Mudde, 2004). As with debates over who exactly constitutes “the people” in populism, debates over populism’s status as an ideology, and of which sort, are not merely, as it were, academic. Indeed, the slipperiness (or “promiscuity” in Kazin’s parlance) of populism is not only what has made it, since the end of the nineteenth century, hard to define—but is also what allows it to be appropriated by a wide array of ideologues. Mudde (2004) as such argues that “as a thin-centred ideology, populism can be easily combined with very different (thin and full) other ideologies, including communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism” (p. 544).

History vindicates Mudde’s contention. The history of populism—as an ideology or impulse purporting to prioritize the interests of “ordinary people” over self-serving “elites”—is indeed impossible to pin firmly to any position on the political spectrum. Political actors of almost every stripe have at stage or another sought to use populist themes and tropes to advance their specific agenda. That said, more specific patterns are visible over the *long durée* of populist politics. In the American context specifically, the most important historical transition seems to have occurred in the middle of the last century, at which point “populism began a migration from Left to Right” (Kazin, 1998, p. 4). Populist rhetoric, which had once been primarily the preserve of “radicals and reformers”, led by Bryan, was “creatively altered by conservative groups and politicians” (p. 4). A fuller exploration of this shift is beyond the scope of this section, but it is nonetheless worth noting here for two reasons. First, it demonstrates the historical contingency of populist appeals, which do not occur in a vacuum but rather in response to prevailing political circumstances, and in conjunction with demographic, cultural and economic changes. Second, it helps explain my choice of Father Coughlin as a case study, as a figure who—through the pronounced shift in his attitude towards then-President Franklin Delano Roosevelt—was at the vanguard of populism’s

rightward migration across the political spectrum. Finally, it serves to contextualize the discussion of mid-century paranoia which follows below.

Despite the definitional disagreements that surround populism, and the diverse directions in which it has arisen, several key features can be discerned. First, populism seems especially well-suited to political outsiders. Empirical analysis by Bonikowski and Gidron (2016) of 44 years of American presidential campaign speeches finds that “the probability of a candidate’s reliance on populist claims is directly proportional to his [sic] distance from the center of power” (p. 1593). Populism therefore, is “primarily a strategic tool of political challengers, and particularly those who have legitimate claims to outsider status”. This finding certainly chimes with an understanding of populism as the pitching of ordinary people’s interests against those of powerful elites: channeling this popular energy presumably requires at least some claim of differentiation from those elites that a populist candidate purports to want to usurp. Related, then, is the idea that “populism has a strong anti-institutional impulse” (Kreisi, 2014, p. 363)—because elites are painted as coterminous with institutions, and because these institutions work against popular interests. For the same reasons, anti-party sentiments may also constitute part of a populist outsider appeal (Mudde, 2004), in the interest of “a more direct linkage of masses to elites” (Kreisi, 2014, p. 363).

Another arguably core component of populism, as derived from the literature, is a charismatic leader. The centrality of a leader might seem odd in light of the mass membership of ordinary people from which populism claims its legitimacy. Yet the importance of a strong central figure is typically seen as necessary to overcome the bloated web of institutions failing to represent the common citizen. Mudde argues that a charismatic leader is a necessary pre-condition for a populist uprising, suggesting that “the populist heartland only becomes active only [in] the presence of an attractive popular leader ... they generally have to be mobilized by a populist actor, rather than taking the initiative

themselves” (2004, p. 546). Likewise, for Kreise, the introduction of a charismatic leader is the characteristic way for the populist vision to proceed. Moreover, besides being charismatic, the populist leader needs to “tell it like it is”—the spokesperson of the vox populi will articulate the “deepest feelings” of the (chosen) people. Finally, the presence of a charismatic leader negates the necessity of the usual trappings of liberal democracy, such as due process—and the respect of minority rights in particular—instead offering a short-cut bypassing philosophical disputes and institutional niceties (Canovan, 2002).

Yet the idea that a populist movement necessarily relies on a charismatic leader is not universally embraced, either in theory or practice. Schroeder (2017) explores populism in a cross-national perspective, finding that though many modern populists do indeed rest on a strong, well-known leader, others—such as Sweden’s Democratic party—rely instead on a firm, networked organizing structure in lieu of a single figurehead.

One final disagreement over the nature of populism is pertinent to the argument which follows. This relates to the centrality of communication strategies to what defines or constitutes populism. As has already been seen, the idea of a direct link between people and leader is often central to populism’s appeal. Some scholars, such as Mudde, explicitly *do not* define populism as necessitating “a special style of communication, i.e. without intermediaries” (2004, p. 545). Others take a different view: for Kreisi, “populist ideology *manifests itself* in the political communication strategies of populist leaders” (2014, p. 364; emphasis mine). For Kazin (1998), meanwhile, only in the 1980s did populism indeed become a *deliberate rhetorical project*. Though this appears as another rather obscure distinction, it has significant bearing on the framing of the argument that follows. Significantly, the stance I adopt is something of a hybrid of that of Kreise and Kazin, and in opposition to Mudde: I will argue that Donald Trump’s use of Twitter as a direct means of communication was the *essence*, not merely the useful *adjunct*, of his populist appeal.

Yet before turning to Trump specifically—and before casting light on some of the most pertinent populist figures who came before—it is necessary to elucidate a second theoretical concept, paranoia, and to explain why these two concepts are combined for the purposes of this thesis.

Paranoia, as a concept of relevance to political thought, can be quite directly traced to historian Richard Hofstadter’s 1964 influential essay, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Hofstadter followed up the essay—written in the midst of Barry Goldwater’s maverick, radical campaign for president—with a longer book released the same year, which served to flesh his concept out further.<sup>3</sup> Hofstadter explains in the original essay why he chose the term “paranoid” to characterize the concept: “simply because no other word adequately evokes the sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind.” These three qualities—exaggeration, suspicion, and conspiracism—can thus be considered the key elements of the paranoid style. As with populism, however, different historical accounts emphasize different aspects of paranoia, changing how it is understood as a political phenomenon.

One point of disagreement is over whether the paranoid style might be considered a cross-ideological phenomenon, or one more specifically contained within the fringes of the extremist right wing. The historical context in which Hofstadter was writing would seem to mark paranoia as a preserve of the right—and, though Hofstadter himself notes that paranoia “is not necessarily right wing,” nonetheless Daniel Pipes, writing in his 1997 book *Conspiracy*, claims that Hofstadter “offered a sketch of conspiracist thinking that located this

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<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Goldwater’s 1964 campaign was a watershed moment for the involvement of mental health professionals in “diagnosing” political figures from afar. Over a thousand psychiatrists responding to an inquiry from a magazine described Goldwater as mentally unfit to serve as president, dubbing him, amongst other things, a “paranoid schizophrenic.” After Goldwater sued for libel, the “Goldwater rule” adopted by the American Psychiatric Association prevents clinicians from diagnosing subjects from a distance and limits their ability to publicly disseminate the results of in-person examinations (Osnos, 2017).

pathology uniquely on the conservative side” (p. 158). (Pipes justifies his assertion on the basis that all the examples Hofstadter offers are right wing in nature.) Notwithstanding the extent to which he misrepresents Hofstadter’s stance, Pipes contends instead that in the history of paranoia, “Right and Left have absorbed ideas from each other” (p. 172). As with the similar discussion over populism above, my point here is not to cast judgment on the ideological fixity or flexibility of paranoia, but I follow Pipes at least in regard to his implication that paranoia is historically contingent on circumstances, and has no *intrinsic* attachment to any particular ideological ilk.

Despite this ideological flexibility, for Pipes there are two specific groups said to be particularly susceptible to—and responsible for—the emergence of conspiracy theories: the “politically disaffected”—in which he includes the black community and the extreme right—and the “culturally suspicious”—within which he includes, notably, “plenty of centrist, rich and educated people ... including presidential candidates”—including Pat Robertson, to whom we will shortly turn. Pipes’ conflation of disaffected groups and powerful individuals here is noteworthy. In his 2008 book *Enemies Within*, Robert Allen Goldberg criticizes both Pipes and Hofstadter for the seemingly dismissive approach they take to those who adopt the paranoid style. Hofstadter, in Goldberg’s reading, “donned the white coat of the clinician,” disparaging the paranoid as: “men and women whose personality disorders cause them to project their problems, status grievances and wounds into public affairs” (2008, p. xi).

Again, Hofstadter is perhaps unfairly misrepresented here, since in his original essay he makes clear that “I am not speaking in a clinical sense, but borrowing a clinical term for other purposes.” Yet even if they represent something of a straw man, Goldberg’s critiques are nonetheless significant, allowing him to expand the range of analysis to include “the activities of authorities, perceptions fostered by the media, and political and technological change” which have hitherto “factor[ed] little into an equation that spotlights the mental

health of the counterconspiracy entrepreneur” (2008, p. xi). The role of the media and technology in facilitating paranoia, especially “new means of communication which offered the [paranoid] message unmediated” as highlighted by Goldberg, is an element I emphasize strongly in the historical and contemporary cases which I present below.

Perhaps due to these differing perspectives on the paranoid style, Pipes and Goldberg—writing less than a decade apart—come to strikingly different conclusions about the recent history and future direction of paranoia as a political force. Pipes suggests, with something of the hubris of the “end of history” thesis which was also circulating at this time, that “in the West, it appears that the marginalization [of paranoia] in recent decades is permanent, so that conspiracy theories will not again acquire operational significance” (1999, p. 182). Earlier experiences with “dictators seems to have inoculated the west from again handing over power to leaders enthralled by conspiracy theories (1999, p. 184). In defence of this stance, Pipes articulates “the optimistic view [that] sees the paranoid style [as] having become just another form of diversion in the United States, a country where information overflows anyone’s capacity of attention span.” Pipes goes on to cite conservative writer Charles Krauthammer’s argument that in a media-saturated culture, “a politics so trivialized is conducive to neither great decision making nor decisive leadership. But it is also nicely immunized from the worst of political pathologies” (1999, p. 183).

For Goldberg, on the contrary, the fact that “we live in an age [saturated with] conspiracism” is more a cause for concern than for complacency. Indeed, the existence of paranoid people “are necessary but not sufficient to explain the power of conspiracy thinking. A culture of conspiracy exists because their charges resonate with the words and deeds of those who shape opinion in modern America. The national media confirm their pleas”, and in so doing, serve to mainstream conspiracy theories (2008, p. 243). As my focus on Donald Trump will show, the optimistic view espoused two decades ago by Pipes, proclaiming

paranoia's death in the west, was premature. Yet more interesting is the fact that Pipes and Goldberg noted similar phenomena—the saturation of the information landscape, our short attention spans, and the “mainstreaming” role played by national media, and came to opposite conclusions.

Paranoia shares with populism several characteristics that, while the two concepts remain historically distinct, suggests that they may be complementary. First, the conspiracy theories which power paranoia have clear analogy to the “us versus them”, anti-elitist mentality which I have already explored in reference to populism. Just as Pipes cited the politically disaffected as a hotbed of paranoid thought, so Hofstadter emphasizes the sense of dispossession already being felt by “ordinary American folk” by the mid 1960s. Hofstadter writes:

The old American virtues have already been eaten away by cosmopolitans and intellectuals; the old competitive capitalism has been gradually undermined by socialist and communist schemers; the old national security and independence have been destroyed by treasonous plots, having as their most powerful agents not merely outsiders and foreigners but major statesmen seated at the very centers of American power. Their predecessors discovered foreign conspiracies; the modern radical right finds that conspiracy also embraces betrayal at home (1964, p. 23).

This, of course, speaks directly to the anti-elitism which is also central to populism, and which, in contrast to earlier eras, is in a defensive posture, fending off new threats from the cosmopolitan and the coastal. As Pipes notes, paranoia “encourages a vortex of illusion and suspicion. It shifts blame for all its ills to outsiders. This sympathy for the “heartland” is also noted by Goldberg, who writes that “in the midst of diversity, conspiracy thinking nurtures a sense of personhood while discovering the enemies of the American dream” (1999, p. 20).

So to whom does the embattled, paranoid thinker turn in such circumstances? As with populism, the paranoid style “implies totalitarianism, for it fosters a sense of emergency that can be confronted only through strong rule” (Pipes, 1999, p. 179). This strong ruler is likely to be amplified by the media system of the day. Writing in 1964, Hofstadter contends that “important changes may be traced to the effects of the mass media. The villains ... are much more vivid than those of their paranoid predecessors, much better known to the public” (1964, p. 24). Yet ironically, in spite of their own enhanced public profile, it is the cosmopolitan opponent of the paranoid leader who is “held to possess some especially effective source of power: he controls the press; he directs the public mind through ‘managed news’” (p. 32).

In this as in many other areas, then, the paranoid style and the populist impulse have much in common. Certainly, the two concepts are historically distinct, and a number of important figures in American history disabuse the notion that the terms can be used interchangeably. Hofstadter’s *Paranoid Style*, for example, emerged in the midst of Barry Goldwater’s presidential campaign, which leaned heavily on rigid anti-communist messaging, which veered towards the paranoid. A decade earlier, Joseph McCarthy had similarly gained notoriety for his anti-communist investigations in Congress. Yet neither Goldwater nor McCarthy were well-known for populist policies. In his 1964 campaign, Goldwater called for cuts in social programs, and argued that Social Security become an optional program. McCarthy, meanwhile, was far from the consummately charismatic populist paragon: in fact, the exposure of his methods during the gavel-to-gavel televised coverage of the Army-McCarthy hearings saw his approval rating drop precipitously.

Yet even as populism and paranoia are, as such, historically distinct, the two concepts nonetheless have abundant overlap: both have long held appeal to the politically disaffected; both tend to elude precise or fixed placement on the political spectrum; both rely on antipathy

towards cosmopolitan elites (an antipathy which typically extends to encompass anyone, elite or otherwise, who does not “look like” the “ordinary folk” of the “heartland”); and both tend towards a strong, charismatic, well-known leader who will “cut through” centralized institutions and elite networks to give the “real” people what they want and need. These wants and needs usually relate to regaining power: typically, these people “want their country back”. Finally, both concepts have much to do with tools of communication: the shaping of the populist and paranoid appeal has much to do with the media landscape of the moment.

This section has sought to demonstrate how populism and the paranoid style complement each other. As such, I hereafter refer to this confluence of concepts in the hybrid form “paranoid populism”. I now turn to my two historical case studies, both of which, as will be seen, draw copiously from the paranoid-populist playbook.

### **Two Progenitors of Paranoid Populism**

In this section, I build on the definition of paranoid populism developed above by introducing two historical figures who, I argue, epitomize the concept. Father Coughlin and Pat Robertson both employed paranoid, populist tropes and tactics in their quest to build a dedicated audience on nascent media platforms. Both men initially enjoyed substantial success in their efforts to build a large, loyal following—but were ultimately undone by ill-fated forays into more explicitly political terrain. For each figure, I explore aspects of both their paranoid-populist message, the media environment in which they operated, and their fall from seemingly divine grace.

#### *Father Coughlin, radio priest*

“It is possible”, writes Hilmes (2013, p. 141), “that no single individual had more of an impact on thinking about the radio audience than Charles Coughlin”. Rising to

prominence at a time when radio was still in its infancy—in legal, cultural and commercial terms—Coughlin’s strident religious broadcasts seized the attention of a nation in the midst of a severe economic depression. At his height of popularity in 1938, it is estimated that Coughlin drew an audience of between 16 and 30 million listeners on a monthly basis (Hilmes, 2013, p. 143; Perlstein, 2017). Clearly, Coughlin was uniquely able to tap into the potential of a nascent medium to develop a captive audience with his “radio sermons”. Of course, Coughlin was not the only figure experimenting with the medium at this time: what made Coughlin’s sermons particularly captivating was their content and delivery. Coughlin took advantage not only of a nascent medium, but also of a nation in the grips of the Great Depression and on the road to war. The increasingly pointed politics of his broadcasts thus explains much of their appeal. As I will show, Coughlin’s provocative agenda also does much to explain his eventual demise, with consequences stretching far beyond the political circumstances of the time.

Charles Coughlin seemed destined, from the very start, for priesthood. After attending a school designed to train future priests, he was eventually ordained in 1916 in Toronto. Theological disagreements led to his move from Ontario across the border to Royal Oak, Michigan. Stoked originally by cross-burnings on his parish grounds by the local Ku Klux Klan, Coughlin began a regular radio broadcast in October 1926. As Brinkley notes, it was not long after starting these broadcasts that Coughlin, and his first broadcast sponsor Leo Fitzpatrick, “realized they had hit upon something extraordinary” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 91). Notably, at the same time, his radio sermons—which began as primarily religious and uncontroversial—“became after 1930 almost exclusively political in content” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 93).

Coughlin’s broadcasts encompassed many of the tropes characterizing paranoid populism, as outlined in the previous section. Coughlin’s constant point of reference was *the*

*heartland*, to which he spoke directly. Employing a “folksy mode of address” (Loviglio, 2005, p. 6), his vocal qualities were held to be remarkable. Brinkley notes the “warm and inviting sound of his voice, a sound that could make even the tritest statements sound richer and more meaningful than they actually were” and the “wide variety of rhetorical techniques” at his disposal (Brinkley, 1983, p. 97). Yet Coughlin’s vocal talents were not merely God-given but also the result of consistent practice and modification. Coughlin himself described the process by which he produced his sermons, with stark honesty:

I write the discourse first in the language of a cleric. Then I rewrite it, using metaphors the public can grasp, toning the phrases down to the language of the man-in-the-street. (Quoted in Brinkley, 1983, p. 97).

This explicit focus on the “man-in-the-street” is directly equivalent to the lauding of the “ordinary” and “virtuous” population towards whom populists typically target their appeal and derive their appeal. “Addressing a nation struggling with economic problems and the social disruption they brought”, Hilmes writes, Coughlin offered “messages of sympathy and solace that seemed to speak directly to each listener. He knew how to take advantage of radio’s capacity for intimacy” (2013, p. 141).

Of course, this populist focus on the interests of the heartland also implies an antipathy to elites of various stripes, and on this, Coughlin’s rhetoric was also emblematic of both populist and paranoid tropes. Though he launched his radio career just before the Depression hit in 1929, Coughlin’s sermons swiftly shifted in both focus and tone to address the growing crisis. Coughlin’s first target for Depression-era invective was the threat of Communism, particularly in the context of the rise of the “godless” Soviet Union, which by extension threatened the basic tenets of family and faith in America. Yet Coughlin initially singled out for his most grievous verbal assault not the communist system overseas but the capitalistic system at home which, he alleged, had brought about the greed and corruption

behind the economic crisis, and which threatened to bolster the socialist sympathies of the American worker.

As the political environment shifted, with the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt ushering in an era of more activist governance in response to the Depression, Coughlin's listenership continued to grow, even as his stated allegiances evolved. Initially supporting Roosevelt in the 1932 election, he quickly turned against what he saw as an administration too cozy with the financial and industrial elite. As well as Roosevelt, Coughlin's targets also shifted to encompass, in all but name, Jewish people. In his broadcasts, Coughlin tied the Russian Revolution and Bolshevism more generally to Jews, emphasized the role of international financiers in the economic crisis, reprinted the fraudulent and anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in his weekly magazine, and helped to inspire the violent insurrectionist Christian Front movement (Warren, 1996, p. 1). Coughlin's ideological flexibility—targeting communists and capitalists with equal virulence at various times—is another core feature of populism more generally as outlined above. Coughlin, as noted, stood at the vanguard of the migration of populism from left to right (Kazin, 1998).

Moreover, Coughlin's opposition to elites in general and his anti-Semitic insinuations in particular would almost seem ripped from the pages of Hofstadter's *Paranoid Style*, had they not pre-dated that book by three decades. Exaggeration, suspicion and conspiracism undergirded Coughlin's style, as did his "vague, uninformed, contradictory and insincere" program (Haddin & Swann, p. 192). Yet there is no denying the popularity of Coughlin's appeal. Raw audience figures do not paint as compelling a picture of the sheer breadth of Coughlin's sway as Brinkley's (1983) account of the "experience of walking down streets ... and hearing out of every window the voice of Father Coughlin blaring from the radio. You could walk for blocks and never miss a word" (p. 83).

Of course, Coughlin's dominance was to some extent the result of the relative lack of other options. For Coughlin was embarking on a campaign of dominance not hitherto seen on this then-nascent technology. As Warren puts it, Coughlin "invented a new kind of preaching, one that *depended* (italics added) on modern technology: the microphone and the transmitter" (Warren, 1996, p. 2). For Brinkley (1983), "Coughlin was exploiting a system of communication whose potential conventional politicians had not yet begun to appreciate. And he was exploiting it at a time when the radio was becoming central to the lives of American families" (p. 93). Indeed, the sudden takeoff in radio ownership was an important factor in Coughlin's success. Coughlin's homespun, religiously-inflected style of broadcasting was well-suited to the family home—a space suddenly shaped by the presence of the radio set. In countries like Germany and Italy, however, the more limited uptake of privately owned devices meant that it was public not private spaces which were suddenly overtaken by nationalistic sentiments.

Initially, Coughlin's success served to give him tremendous clout in his dealings with the stations who gave him airtime. Coughlin enjoyed "freedom of medium access through his creation of an independent system of radio stations to broadcast his sermons" (Sayer, 1987, p. 17), allowing him to fearlessly throw the weight of his success around. Brinkley describes how, in the early period of his success, "occasional conflicts with individual stations erupted, but Coughlin could simply threaten to take his business to a competitor. In the end, few owners were willing to risk losing so popular a program" (Brinkley, 1983, p. 100).

Yet Coughlin's success did not prove eternal. Accounts to some extent differ as to the ultimate cause of Coughlin's fall from grace: a recent article suggests that it was "the hierarchical nature of the church [which] proved strong enough to put the lid on Coughlin" as "Coughlin's conspiratorialism and anti-Semitism were met with strong pushback from within the [American] Catholic Church and from political liberals" (Heer, 2015). (The *global center*

of the Catholic Church hierarchy, the Vatican, was notably more acquiescent to emerging fascists.) Yet clearly both commercial and regulatory factors had an influence as well: as Coughlin's rhetoric turned more toxic, many stations turned against him, such as the New York City stations WINS and WMCA, which cancelled his show in 1938. This was eventually backed up with firmer regulatory action, around the time that war broke out. New rules placed limits on radio broadcasters dealing in "controversial public issues" in October 1939, effectively barring Coughlin from the air—rules that, incidentally, laid the ground for the Fairness Doctrine in 1949, which would emerge after the repeal of the Mayflower Doctrine, first implemented in 1941. (The publication of Coughlin's magazine was also eventually brought to a halt.) As Hilmes notes, "the rule dealt a considerable blow to Coughlin's ability to buy time. It effectively gave squeamish stations a reason to deny him, [and] would be used primarily to restrict other populists like him" (2013, p. 144).

Despite his decline and fall, as the tide of public opinion turned away from isolationism as America entered the Second World War, Coughlin is widely recognized as prefiguring a shift in political speech broadcasting. As Warren argues, Coughlin's career proved "a critical turning point in American public life and popular culture. He was the first public figure to obliterate the distinction between politics, religion and mass media entertainment" (Warren, 1996, p. 6). In so doing, he clearly struck a nerve among the political and media elites that he excoriated. As Hilmes notes, "the repercussions of [Coughlin's] radio career remain. Coughlin illustrates the fear of the power of the great unwashed that radio stirred up in the minds of those in charge" (2013, p. 144).

In ascertaining the cause for his success, it is difficult to fully disentangle the effects of the bellicose rhetoric Coughlin used from the platform Coughlin used to deliver it. On the one hand, clearly Coughlin's populist tropes had a unifying effect, allowing him to develop a large, loyal following. Yet as radio developed as a medium more generally, it was

characterized “in terms that linked its technological properties with the space of the nation” (Russo, 2010, p. 21). Put another way, while it is true that Coughlin delivered a message designed to appeal to the heartland in an *ideological* sense (and defined in opposition to all manner of coastal and global elites), he was also delivering this message on a medium which, it is argued, was in itself *technologically* inclined towards the development of a cohesive, unified audience.

In the end, the virulence of Coughlin’s views, set against the backdrop of impending war, led the National Association of Broadcasters, in concert with the Catholic Church and the Federal Radio Commission (which was not empowered to restrict Coughlin, but could punish stations who carried him), to intervene, effectively taking Coughlin off the air. Yet in much the same way as Coughlin was, for a time, able to build a large and cohesive audience, so to was President Franklin Roosevelt, whose Fireside Chats were an effective adaptation of the presidential “bully pulpit” for the emerging radio age. Roosevelt’s chats featured a pulpit without a priest—but it was an ordained minister, Father Coughlin, who was first to show the new unifying power of radio as a broadcast medium.

*Pat Robertson, televangelist*

Much as Father Coughlin’s emergence served to shape early understanding of the societal effects of radio, so the life and times of televangelist Pat Robertson contain several lessons for how cable television was received by American audiences. Robertson, the son of Virginia Senator Absalom Willis Robertson, emerged from a failure to pass the New York bar exam to become an “evangelical preacher of the first rank, a faith healer, a speaker in tongues, and a hearer of direct revelations ... from God” (Hadden & Swann, 1981, p. 35). Robertson is the chairman of the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN), which he set up in 1961 following

the purchase of a defunct television station in Virginia Beach. From 1961, Robertson grew CBN into one of the largest religious broadcast networks, taking advantage of emerging cable and satellite technologies to win new audiences. Like Coughlin, Robertson appears to have launched his media career at just the right time: the average number of Americans viewing a religious TV program soared from approximately 5 million in the late 1960s to almost 25 million by the mid-1980s, something for which Robertson can claim plenty—though not all—of the credit. (Rival religious networks which also sprung up at this time included Paul and Jan Crouch’s Trinity Broadcasting Network; and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker helped Robertson’s own CBN greatly expand its scope.) Robertson’s ambitious efforts to reach a wider audience even took his religious broadcasting into space, when he “leased a satellite transponder to beam religious programming into households all over the nation ... via the rapidly emerging cable delivery system” (Hadden, 1993, p. 116). Through his independent network, Robertson was able to offer, by bypassing national and established networks, “an unmediated Christian perspective on current events” (Goldberg, 2008, p. 86).

Like Coughlin, Robertson comfortably fits the mold of a paranoid populist. The wider televangelist movement of which he is part set itself against the perceived liberal and secular excesses of the 1960s. In so doing, the movement borrowed copiously from populist tropes, albeit with a religious inflection, with virulent criticism of deteriorating morals around divorce, drug addiction and crime, and the secular coastal elites who enabled them. Indeed, though Robertson’s quiet charisma paled in comparison to Coughlin’s sheer force of personality, Robertson’s fondness for paranoid thinking perhaps exceeded even that of his conspiratorial predecessor. Goldberg (2008) has argued that in “making evangelical conspiracism even more explicit and persuasive ... Robertson was instrumental in both hastening commitment to and fostering public indulgence of countersubversion”, making him “the most influential” conspiracist of the era (p. 84). Robertson’s choice of medium likely

supported his rhetorical flourishes. As Hadden and Swann note, “most religious television deals largely in simple solutions to human problems. Television can’t handle complicated material very well” (1981, p. 12).

Robertson’s sentiments built on the emerging tradition of prophesy theology, epitomized by Hal Lindsey’s 1969 book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which predicted the imminent second coming following a host of disasters such as famines, wars and earthquakes. Crucially, prophesy theology had a strong political component. Prophecies were typically associated with geopolitical events, such as the founding of the modern state of Israel, the Six-Day War, and even the creation of the EU. Political support for Israel, viewed in this light, was essential for securing Christ’s return. This perceived necessity of political action sowed the seeds for Robertson’s future electoral ambitions.

Robertson’s apocalyptic appeals fell on faithful eyes and ears. The popularity of his network exploded over the course of the 1970s, and by 1980 CBN was available on three thousand cable systems. For Robertson as for Coughlin, increasing popularity bred bolder ambition, and Robertson’s sights became set on transforming his loyal cable following into the base for a more explicitly political agenda. As Hadden notes, “there was evidence from as early as the mid-1970s that several television preachers were moving toward political agendas” (1993, p. 125), but the breakthrough moment arrived with two dramatic developments in 1980. The first, in April, saw Robertson cosponsor a mass rally on the capital, dubbed “Washington for Jesus”, which attracted up to half a million attendees. The rally served ostensibly as simply an opportunity for mass prayer, but “the rally and promotional activities leading up to it teemed with political tactics and messages.” (As Hadden and Swann [1983, p. 37] state, “everyone knows that no one brings a crowd to Washington ... without a political purpose.”) The second development, in November, saw the right-wing, evangelically inclined Republican Ronald Reagan elected to the presidency.

Reagan leaned heavily on evangelical Christians, and “politically minded televangelists wasted no time in stepping forward to claim credit for this large voting bloc” (Hadden, 1993, p. 126).

What both these episodes in 1980 demonstrated was the new, enormous sway televangelists held, both to organize mass actions and to turn their followers out at the polls. Reagan’s success prompted a pause in Robertson’s explicit political ambitions: returning from his yearly retreat, he “told his closest associates that God wanted him to back away from politics” (Hadden & Swann, 1983, p. 37). Yet later in the decade, in the waning years of the term-limited Reagan administration and the Republican power vacuum that ensued, Robertson re-launched his electoral ambitions. In 1987 he announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination, pitting himself against Vice President George H. W. Bush. He claimed an early endorsement from God, having heard “that voice I know so well, [saying] *You will not want to do it, but I want you to be President of the United States*” (Goldberg, 2008, p. 88).

Robertson’s presidential campaign seemed to start with several advantages, not least a strong base of popular and financial support and evidence of his ability to mobilize voters as seen in 1980. Yet in seeking election, Robertson was forced to soften and moderate some of his more apocalyptic pronouncements, toning down his talk of the coming Rapture and framing his appeal for the restoration of American faith on more optimistic ground. In spite of these concessions to a broader base of voters, Robertson’s campaign was nonetheless an out-and-out failure, and he did not win a single state in the primary.

The reasons for Robertson’s electoral failure are manifold. First, personal critiques were leveled at his candidacy, including questions over his service in the Korean War. More broadly, and just as importantly, Robertson’s campaign coincided with the first major backlash against televangelism, with scandals around other leading figures like Jim Bakker

and Jimmy Swaggart tarnishing the televangelist brand more generally. Interestingly, not only was Robertson not able to create a broader coalition of voters, but even many of those who tuned into his network failed to fully embrace his electoral efforts. Indeed, it appears that Robertson's presidential ambitions in fact contributed to a loss of viewership, as his audience diminished by 52% from 1985 to 1988, over the course of his emerging bid. Exploring this failure, Hadden (1993) postulates that:

The more aggressive a religious broadcaster becomes in pursuing [public office], the narrower the base of support for his religious broadcasting role. The reason for this seems fairly clear. An aggressive political role almost certainly leads to a greater specificity of political doctrines. The greater the specificity, the greater the probability of articulating views at variance with those of constituents (p. 127)

Of course, media personalities also face the prospect that expressing views at odds with listeners and viewers may cause them to switch off, either mentally or literally. And moreover, the prophesy theology Robertson openly espoused is if anything notable for the specificity of its pronouncements. But electoral politics poses a distinct, and far greater challenge. In the context of a presidential primary, would-be elected officials are obliged to broaden their base of support beyond their home flock, to encompass a far wider diversity of opinions and beliefs.

As with Coughlin, Robertson's rise and fall offers broader lessons at every step. Robertson's CBN was one of the first networks to demonstrate the power of a nimble, versatile media strategy responsive to changing technology and regulation. In 1960, the FCC shifted its policy, no longer drawing a distinction between the time networks allotted to *free* public-service programming versus *paid-for* content. Before this shift, the mainline, moderate National Council of Churches had *de facto* control over what sort of religious programming the networks were obliged to broadcast, effectively precluding paid programming which was

considered fundamentalist in nature. But after 1960, as Hendershot (2011) notes, “once paid and free programs counted equally as public service ... the incentive to give away time through the NCC was gone” (p. 131). By allowing TV stations to meet their public-service obligations with paid religious broadcasts, the ruling effectively favored the freewheeling, free-market strategy taken by evangelical groups, as compared with mainline denominations leery of paying for air time. As Hendershot suggests, “we can date the roots of televangelism to this degulatory moment” (p. 131). As Martin (1990) argues, “this improved climate not only fostered the dramatic growth of evangelical programming on secular stations, but led to the birth of television stations *majoring in* religion. With advances in cable and satellite technology, national networks of Christian broadcast facilities became technically and economically feasible” (p. 67; italics mine).

As such, aspiring evangelical broadcasters—Robertson among them—were able to take advantage of an evolving legal framework, which would culminate with the revocation of the Fairness Doctrine in 1986 (by the Reagan presidency that Robertson’s organizing had helped to secure). Moreover, Robertson’s CBN also latched onto rapidly emerging technology which, coupled with its “pay-to-pray” funding model and its ideological flexibility as compared to mainline groups, ensured a platform for Robertson’s paranoid populism.

We can also draw lessons from Robertson’s political failure. Many of the factors which had propelled CBN to prominence also contributed to its—and Robertson’s—relative decline. CBN had successfully carved a niche out of new technology, new regulatory rules, and a new market of the faithful—but the success of its business model and the popularity of its content ensured that other groups soon followed, diluting CBN’s market share. Just as CBN’s ratings began to decline relative to other religious broadcasters, so too did Robertson’s political appeal diminish. For more than two decades, Robertson had taken

advantage of favorable circumstances to establish a firm following. Yet even as he sought to broaden his message, moving away from the most apocalyptic aspects of his rhetoric in the pursuit of a wider constituency in the Republican primary, his political pursuit served to fragment rather than coalesce even his own followers. In short, Robertson failed in his highest ambition, to turn religious faith into political fealty.

## **Conclusion**

As I have shown, there is much to be learned from the successes and failures of two paranoid-populist figures. Coughlin and Robertson were both opportunistic, nimble, and likely lucky in their establishment of a loyal audience, during periods of rapid innovation around media and technology. The cause of their respective downfalls, however, differ. Coughlin was, in some senses, too successful in his establishment of a large, cohesive audience. Radio, in its nascent stage, seemed like the perfect platform for an eloquent speaker to create a mass audience. Such was the scale of Coughlin's success that it triggered backlash in the form of regulatory suppression from the elites he had so besmirched. Ultimately, it was no longer in the economic or legal interests of media channels to give Coughlin untrammelled access to so many millions of radio sets. For Robertson, on the contrary, the inherently fragmentary nature of his chosen medium—satellite television—was a poor fit for his political ambitions in a majoritarian electoral system. First in relative and then in absolute terms, Robertson's viewership diminished just when he needed it the most—partially as a knock-on effect of his own pioneering success innovating with changing regulations and emerging technology.

In comparing the stories of these two paranoid-populist figures, then, we might even say that each had what the other lacked: Coughlin's platform was broad, but shaky—ripped

from under his feet by regulations and nervous networks. Robertson's audience was deep but narrow, and he was unable to broaden it to encompass a wider swathe of voters when he ran for president. It seems, therefore, that any paranoid populist seeking prominence and power needs a hybrid communications strategy: with both a direct, unfiltered and unrestricted means of communication, *and* the ability to get noticed by a much wider audience.

In the chapters which follow, I explore how a modern-day paranoid populist—Donald Trump—eluded the obstacles that eventually brought down Coughlin and Robertson, to turn a loyal but narrow base of support into a national coalition of voters broad enough to propel him into the White House. In contrast to Coughlin and Robertson before him, neither legal restrictions, economic incentives, nor sheer political will among elites was enough to constrain Trump's cunning manipulation of the modern media landscape. In this chapter I have illustrated, through two case studies, that there is nothing inherently new about a paranoid populist taking advantage of emerging media platforms to spout his message. Yet these case studies have also served to suggest that—in the absence of economic, political or legal restraints—paranoid populism and emerging media technology can combine to form a potent mix, at once toxic and intoxicating.

## Chapter 2: From Trump Tower to the White House, in 140 characters

### Introduction

In this chapter I examine the 2016 presidential election, which culminated with the unlikely inauguration of Donald J. Trump. I begin by offering a short overview of the campaign, dividing it into three phases: the “invisible primary”; the party primaries; and the general election. I then briefly discuss the use of the internet as a platform for campaigning, and introduce Twitter as a particular, and to some extent peculiar, choice of tool. After this short sketch, I turn to examine Donald Trump’s activity on Twitter. I explain how his campaign pronouncements—disproportionately delivered via Twitter—fit the definition of a paranoid populist, as outlined in the previous section. I then explain how Trump’s tweets were amplified within the network, between and beyond his own base of followers. Finally, I highlight the complex relationship between Trump and the wider media ecosystem, as evidenced in his tweets, and explain how this outreach strategy shifted over the course of the campaign.

As the preceding chapter showed, populism and paranoia have long been features of American politics—and have, on several occasions, spilled over from the ideological fringes into mainstream consciousness. As I argued, these populist moments were typically characterized by the confluence of prevailing political circumstances and the arrival onto the scene of a charismatic figurehead who took advantage of an emerging communication technology. Indeed, paranoid populism is typically manifested by the communication strategies which are employed by its proponents.

This close linkage between medium and message—or platform and program—has important bearing on the analysis which follows. By situating his communication strategy as both central to *and constitutive of* Donald Trump’s paranoid-populist project, analysis of this

strategy becomes indispensable to any understanding of how and why Trump won. The analysis I present in this chapter leads me to the conclusion that Donald Trump’s campaign communications—and thus, by this logic, his campaign—amounted to a direct and often explicit appeal to a strain of American paranoid populism that has a distinct heritage in American history. The bellicose rhetoric in Trump’s tweets often took the form of a dog whistle, directed to and designed for the country’s “heartland,” with all the complicated historical implications contained therein.

Defying all the odds and expectations, Donald Trump won the election and is, at the time of writing, the President of the United States. It is not uncommon for communications research in the wake of a presidential election to focus, as I do here, on the tools deployed and the tactics used. The successful technological innovations that this strand of research pinpoint are then typically incorporated into the toolkits of the campaigns of the next cycle—a pattern made possible by the predictability of America’s quadrennial presidential election calendar and the steady development of communications technology. Yet the centrality of Trump’s communication to his campaign—the ontological proximity of his medium to his message—suggests that the implications of the analysis I present here may be far wider than traditional research into campaign communications. The first phase of his presidency suggests that Trump—in stark contrast to the bulk of his predecessors—has brought much of his campaign communications strategy with him into office, with his Twitter account still commanding vast attention and interpretation by the press and public. Understanding the origins of this strategy, forged while Trump was a long-shot outsider candidate, is a necessary starting point for coming to grips with the era of paranoid-populist presidential politics within which we now—incredulously—reside.

## **The year of the insurgent: the story of the 2016 presidential election**

When Donald Trump descended the gilded escalator of his eponymous tower in New York City on June 16, 2015, to announce his bid for the Presidency of the United States, few thought his prospects strong. Betting a dollar on Trump to win the presidency on the day he announced would have eventually netted \$150. It wasn't only bookmakers who offered long odds on a Trump victory. Media outlets were quick to dismiss Trump's campaign as a distraction. Election prediction website *fivethirtyeight.com*—whose Editor-in-Chief Nate Silver had earned a reputation as a soothsayer for successfully predicting past presidential elections—ran a piece entitled “Why Donald Trump Isn't a Real Candidate” on the day he announced (Enten, 2015), while editors of the *Huffington Post* announced in July that they would cover Trump's campaign in the Entertainment section of their website, dubbing it “a side-show. We won't take the bait” (Grim and Shea, 2015).

The first phase of contemporary presidential elections is typically characterized by what is known as the “invisible primary”—the phase of a campaign before any votes are cast, during which candidates look to demonstrate viability, measured in terms of endorsements, donations, and media exposure. Predictions in the 2016 campaign leaned heavily on the thesis espoused in a 2008 book, *The Party Decides: Presidential Nominations Before and After Reform* (Cohen et al., 2009), which emphasized the role that party elites play behind the scenes in choosing a nominee. Following the Supreme Court's 2010 ruling in *Citizens United* that allowed almost unlimited campaign spending, the 2012 race had been the most expensive in history, coming in at over \$2bn (Vogel et al., 2012)—so the ability to fundraise was seen as another indispensable part of any serious contender's campaign.

Measured by the yardsticks of endorsements and fundraising capacity, Donald Trump's prospects seemed bleak at the outset of the invisible primary. Not long a member of the Republican Party, nor with any history of public or military service, Trump was not

considered well-liked or -regarded amongst the party establishment. In terms of campaign financing, meanwhile, Trump's frequently suggested that his Republican rivals were in the pocket of business interests and other big donors, while "promising" not to accept similar contributions, theoretically limiting his ability to fundraise for his own campaign. Though the size of his business empire allowed him to brag that he was funding his own campaign, it meant that by conventional measures, Trump was at a comparative disadvantage when it came to campaign fundraising. By the end of January 2016, on the eve of the first primaries, Trump had been out-raised and out-spent by four of his Republican rivals: Jeb Bush, Ben Carson, Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio (Caputo & Palmer, 2016). On the assumption that Trump's campaign would eventually fly too close to the sun, these rivals seemed more concerned with trimming each other's wings. Tempers flared in particular between Bush and Rubio—former allies from Florida—who clashed angrily in an October debate, when Bush accused Rubio of neglecting his senatorial duties.

Viewed through the lens of media exposure, however, Trump proved much more competitive. As I will show, from the outset of the campaign Trump enjoyed a considerable advantage over his rivals in terms of coverage gained in both social and mainstream media venues. In retrospect, it appears that this media coverage proved far more significant than the more standard metrics of endorsements gained or funds raised. After entering the race in mid-June, from mid-July onward Trump enjoyed a lead in the polls that was almost never surpassed, according to RealClearPolitics' polling average.<sup>4</sup> As the figure 2.1 below from RealClearPolitics shows, the only time Trump (sky blue) fell behind was when fellow outsider candidate Dr Ben Carson (red) eclipsed him for a single day in November.

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016\\_republican\\_presidential\\_nomination-3823.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/2016_republican_presidential_nomination-3823.html)

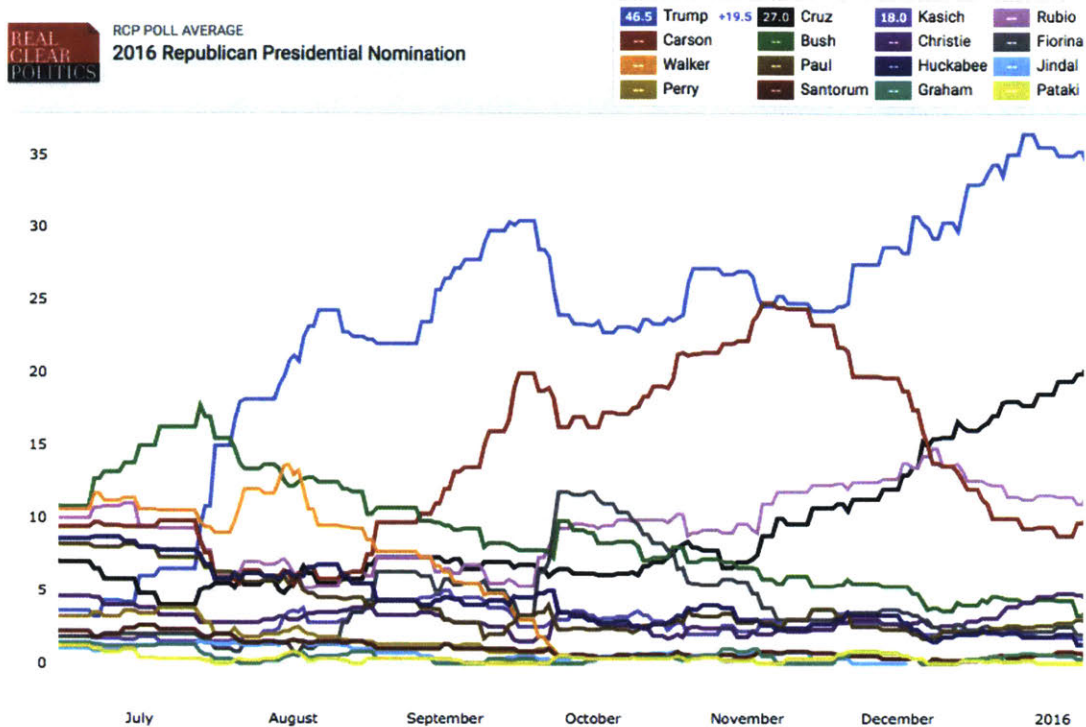


Figure 2.1: RealClearPolitics polling average for the 2016 Republican primary, June 2015 to January 2016

Despite Trump’s dominance in the polls, media sources continued to downplay his chances in the actual voting. In a November column entitled “Dear media, stop freaking out about Donald Trump’s polls”, FiveThirtyEight’s Nate Silver (2015) argued that the polls showing Trump consistently ahead did not accurately reflect the people who would ultimately decide the primary, since most people were yet to make up their mind. Silver had already inadvertently acknowledged, however—in an earlier piece, published in August—that the volume of media coverage a candidate receives correlated nearly perfectly with their share of the vote in opinion polls. Silver’s not-unreasonable expectation in the latter half of 2015 was that Trump’s support would inevitably fade as the media spotlight turned to other candidates—but this conclusion, of course, was contingent on the spotlight ever actually turning. In fact, Trump’s campaign strategy was perfectly crafted (or his personality was at least perfectly suited) to ensure that the spotlight never left him. This effect was achieved,

moreover, despite Trump spending less money than his rivals, by virtue of the “free media” attention which his controversial pronouncements earned (Harris, 2016).

The primary elections began in earnest as the first votes were cast in the Iowa caucuses, on February 1. The pool of candidates had been winnowed slightly by this point to 12 candidates, from the record-breaking peak of 17 in the summer. Yet by historical standards, the field was still congested. In the plains of Iowa, the Trump juggernaut seemed to stall. Ted Cruz, who held much stronger appeal to Iowa’s evangelical Republicans while also having legitimate outsider claims, won the caucuses with 28% of the vote to Trump’s 24%, benefiting from strong grassroots organizing bolstered by a sophisticated data effort. As a *Washington Post* article put it after the victory, “in a state that has long rewarded conservatives who put religion at the fore, and in a political era dictated by data analytics, Cruz won on the strength of both” (Costa & Rucker, 2016).

Yet Trump’s campaign soon found its feet, defying predictions of its demise with a comprehensive win in New Hampshire, gaining 35% of the vote over nearest rival John Kasich’s 16%, for the largest winning margin in the state since 2000. Trump followed this up with wins in South Carolina and Nevada to round out February, picking up support from less-educated voters as the establishment and evangelical wins of the party remained divided between Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, John Kasich, and Ted Cruz (Smith & Doherty, 2016). Moving into March’s delegate-rich contests, Trump gradually ground down his rivals, losing some states but gaining an ultimately unassailable delegate lead. When Trump secured Indiana’s delegates following a decisive victory in early May, both of his remaining rivals, Cruz and Kasich, dropped out of the race, allowing Trump to claim an absolute majority of delegates and secure the nomination by the month’s end. He proceeded uncontested to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland in July, shortly after naming Indiana Governor Mike Pence his running mate.

Just as with the primary campaign, Trump entered the general election as an unfavored underdog. His opponent, Democrat Hillary Clinton, was considered a capable, qualified candidate, albeit one facing backlash against the controversial private email server she used as Secretary of State. Coming off the back of President Barack Obama's two strong election victories, Clinton's chief task was to reassemble the coalition of voters who had twice propelled him into office. Trump proved an unconventional opponent, both in terms of his style—most notably his bombastic invective, unmatched in recent political history—and his political program, which was noticeably more populist and nationalist than earlier Republican contenders.

In contrast to polling during the primary, which suggested that Trump had taken the lead almost immediately following his entry to the race in July 2015, general election polls fluctuated quite dramatically during the summer and fall. Both candidates received a bounce in support following their respective conventions—Trump briefly surpassed Clinton for the first time following his—and the polls remained volatile throughout the late summer and fall, as a number of scandals affected perceptions of both candidates. Clinton was deemed to have won all three of the televised presidential debates held in September and October (Saad, 2016), and her position at that time was bolstered further by the release of a tape in which Trump was heard bragging about sexually assaulting women.

Yet Clinton also proved vulnerable to what appears in retrospect to have been a targeted effort to discredit her campaign, including hacks aimed at the Democratic National Committee and the email account of her campaign chairman, John Podesta. Clinton's path to the nomination had been bumpier than anticipated, with Bernie Sanders posing a graver-than-expected threat. The revelation from the hack of DNC communications that Clinton's team had secretly received questions in advance of primary debates only reinforced the perception of Clinton as an establishment favorite, against the insurgent Sanders campaign. Yet Clinton

ultimately prevailed, benefiting from the lopsided support of superdelegates—elected Democratic officials and other party elders—despite a close race with Sanders amongst pledged delegates. (The Republican Party’s lack of any *de facto* superdelegates meant the party had a far harder time repelling the advances of Donald Trump.) Clinton’s private email server, meanwhile, would recur in dramatic fashion in the final stretch of the campaign, when FBI Director James Comey announced that his agency was reopening its investigation into the server—months after the Department of Justice had decided not to prosecute Clinton for her carelessness.

Dogged by scandals and accusations, with low favorability and enthusiasm ratings, and painted as an out-of-touch elite, Clinton’s candidacy collapsed in the crucial Midwestern states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin—states that flipped to the Republicans for the first time in between 12 and 36 years. Despite winning nearly three million more votes, Clinton comfortably lost the Electoral College to Trump by 304 votes to 227, defying state-based opinion polls and prediction markets. Trump completed his unlikely journey from Trump Tower to Capitol Hill when he was inaugurated as the forty-fifth President of the United States on January 20, 2017. Pundits, politicians, and the public alike wondered the same thing: how did he do it? This simple question has an inevitably complex answer. But as I argue in the remainder of this chapter, much of Trump’s success can be explained by analyzing his tendency to communicate through short messages of no more than 140 characters.

### **Twitter in 2016**

The ancient Greek city-states from which democracy is often said to have emerged were typically small enough to allow the full citizenry to gather together simultaneously, but

democratic decision-making in the modern era has more often relied on utilizing the communication technology of the day (Anderson, 2006). The eighteen and nineteenth centuries saw impassioned newspaper columns and pamphlets, and the electronic media innovations of the twentieth century enabled new and different ways for political figures to communicate with the public at large, or segments thereof. More recently, the internet has undoubtedly opened up several new fronts for electoral experimentation.

In *Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age*, Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2014) traces a series of internet-enabled innovations, ranging from the first examples of campaigns going online in 1996 to the sophisticated operation used to re-elect Barack Obama in 2012. Stromer-Galley's work makes several important contributions, perhaps chief of which is to highlight the multifarious ways in which the internet can be used for political campaigning. There is no single way to "win online," and campaigns are constantly evolving in their use of the internet to enhance their candidates' chances. As Stromer-Galley shows, the election victories of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 were a testament to the discipline, forward-planning, and technical superiority of his campaign.

Looking ahead to 2016, observers anticipated another "data-intensive" campaign, assuming that the candidate with the most efficient digital organization would enjoy a meaningful advantage at the polls. Much of this work, it was thought, would take place behind the scenes, as complex algorithms were put to work churning through masses of data to allow campaigns to "micro-target" voters. Social networks would also, of course, prove important to build support—both gigantic platforms like Facebook and emerging apps like Instagram and Snapchat with significant youth appeal.

Few, it might reasonably be argued, expected Twitter to have an especially sizeable impact on the 2016 campaign. The "micro-blogging" social media site founded in 2006 has proved difficult to classify ever since its launch. As Nick Bilton's *Hatching Twitter* shows,

the site's creators disagreed about the text of the prompt used to encourage users to tweet: one co-founder argued that this should be "What are you doing?" akin to other social networks like Facebook, while another argued that it should read "What's happening?", implying a more journalistic focus (Bilton, 2014). This debate has spread to academia: one of the most-cited studies of Twitter is titled, "What is Twitter, a social network or a news media?" (Kwak et al., 2010). In reality of course Twitter is both, and more: it is used by a wide array of people in myriad different ways. Among the heaviest users of Twitter are journalists and other media figures—attracted, perhaps, to Twitter's asymmetric network structure, which allows (unlike Facebook) user A to "follow" user B without user B reciprocating, thus enabling users with a pre-existing audience or fan base to quickly amass followers. Twitter's simple reverse-chronological newsfeed as well as its famous 140-character limit also make it a platform especially conducive to rapid-fire reporting.

These same effects also hold for celebrities, and many of Twitter's most-followed users are pop stars like Justin Bieber and TV personalities like Ellen DeGeneres, as well as those, like Kim Kardashian, who are famous for being famous. By the innovative standards of his campaign, President Barack Obama was relatively late to Twitter, only getting the official @POTUS handle in 2015,<sup>5</sup> though at the time of writing he has become the third most followed person on the network.

### **@realDonaldTrump**

Donald Trump, long a subject of New York City tabloid fodder, saw his media profile skyrocket after landing the lead role in *The Apprentice* reality TV show in 2004. Trump was a relatively early adopter to Twitter, joining under the handle @realDonaldTrump in 2009.

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<sup>5</sup> Obama remarked on this delay in his first tweet, which read, "Hello, Twitter! It's Barack. Really! Six years in, they're finally giving me my own account."

Initially a supporter of Barack Obama, Trump gradually soured on Obama’s administration, and increasingly used Twitter to criticize the president—most notably by drawing attention to “birtherism,” the false notion that Obama was born outside the United States and was thus constitutionally ineligible to serve. Trump’s concerted efforts to propound the theory—both on Twitter and in the mainstream media—reached a fever pitch in 2011, at which point the White House released a copy of Obama’s “long-form” birth certificate, verifying that he was born in Hawaii (Drum, 2016).

At the time he launched his campaign in 2015, Trump had just less than 3 million followers, a sizeable audience given his C-list celebrity status, and more than any of his Republican rivals. In the months that followed, Trump would use this pre-existing advantage to devastating effect, tweeting prodigiously to this relatively large and growing base of followers on the way to winning the primary. Working with an archive<sup>6</sup> of Trump’s tweets from the date he announced his candidacy to May 3, 2016, the day he won the Indiana primary and effectively sealed the Republican nomination, I stripped out retweets of other users (leaving in “quoted tweets,” in which Trump had added his own comment) and ran the resulting text corpus through linguistic analysis software WriteWords.<sup>7</sup> The software looked for collocations—instances in which the same set of words appear together, in the same order—to assess Trump’s most common words and phrases.

My analysis demonstrates that during the primary campaign, Trump sought to embrace the paranoid populism of earlier anti-establishment figures like Father Coughlin and Pat Robertson on Twitter. As might be expected, Trump’s campaign motto “Make America Great Again,” the phrase which graced the baseball hats he frequently wore on the campaign trail, was also a very common feature in his tweets: it was comfortably his most common

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<sup>6</sup> <http://trumptwitterarchive.com/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.writewords.org.uk/word\\_count.asp](http://www.writewords.org.uk/word_count.asp)

four-word phrase, used word-for-word 133 times across the total of 3,429 tweets sent over the course of the primary.

Looking at Trump's most commonly used single words, it is harder to divine patterns: we can't tell much from his frequent use of "in", "and", "to" and "a", for example. We can, however, look at Trump's use of hashtags. Indicated by the # sign, hashtags are a hard-coded feature of Twitter's architecture. Using a hashtag in a tweet turns the string of text following the # sign into a hyperlink, which links to a list of all the other tweets which include the same hashtag. In the context of breaking news, this makes it much easier to see all the information associated with a particular event. Yet the hashtag has been repurposed more widely, including for political slogans.

Since hashtags only apply to single strings of characters without any spaces, multi-word phrases are usually compressed into a single string when used as a hashtag. As a result, several hashtags appear in lists of Trump's most commonly used single words, making them an interesting alternative way to analyze the corpus of tweets. Figure 2.2 shows the frequency of Trump's six most commonly used hashtags.

As the chart shows, two hashtags dominated: #Trump2016, a fairly generic campaign hashtag, with 354 instances, and #MakeAmericaGreatAgain, with 286. Since this corpus of tweets consists of just over 60,000 words (including links), overall his #MakeAmericaGreatAgain slogan accounted for almost one in every 200 words he wrote. Other common hashtags referred to specific events in the campaign: the Republican debates, New Hampshire's "first in the nation" primary, and the Iowa Caucus.

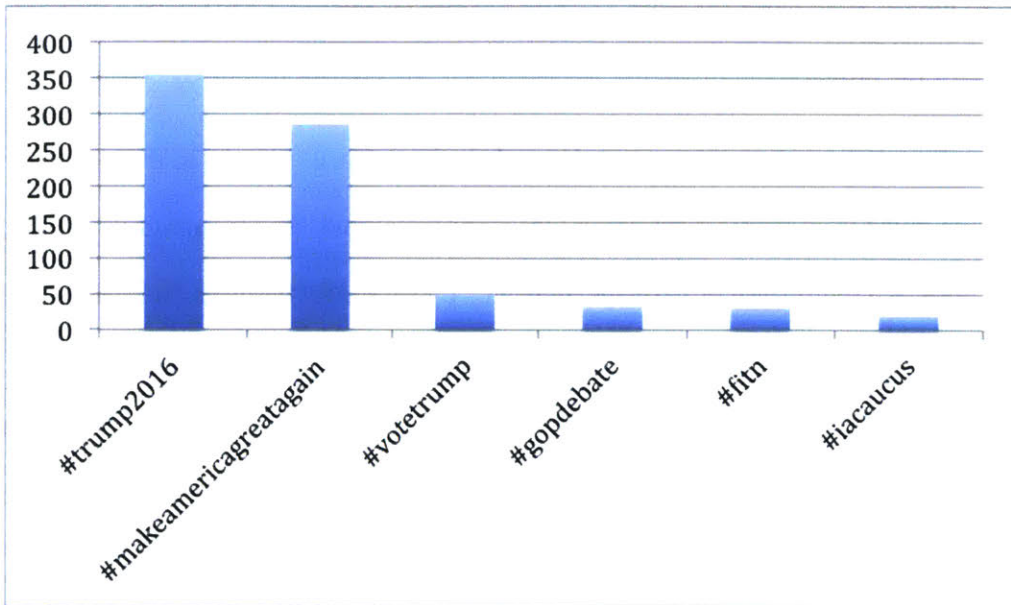


Figure 2.2: @realDonaldTrump's frequently used hashtags, June 2015 to May 2016

The ubiquity of the “Make America Great Again” slogan has frequently been cited as evidence that Trump’s campaign was deliberately targeting disaffected voters. Indeed, it perfectly encapsulates several of the hallmarks of paranoid populism as defined in the earlier chapter. On a surface level, the slogan bears similarity to the catchphrases of other recent presidential campaigns. Unsurprisingly, the word “America” is a common feature in campaign slogans, as is the notion that the country is both perfectible and thus, by implication, not yet perfect. In 1996, Republican challenger Bob Dole was pitched as “The Better Man for a Better America,” while in 2012, Mitt Romney asked voters to “Believe in America.” Other recent campaigns have even alluded to returning America to a former status: the Democratic challenger in 2004, John Kerry, settled on the clunky slogan “Let America Be America Again.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> It is not perhaps a coincidence that the three recent examples cited here are all those of candidates challenging an incumbent. When taking on a sitting president, it is in the interest of the challenger to run on a platform of change; the slogans of the defending campaigns were, by contrast, more aspirational than antagonistic.

In purely lexicographical terms, then, Trump’s slogan was hardly unprecedented. Yet the particular formation of his four-word phrase, when taken in the context of his campaign, bears specific resemblance to paranoid-populist tropes. First, the word “make” is unusually strong and action-oriented, both compared with Kerry’s more passive “let,” and “believe,” the only other verb used in twenty-first century presidential campaign slogans. As discussed above, populist candidates often channel anti-institutional energy, seeking to “shake up” the status quo, so Trump’s uncommonly active verb fits with his populist orientation. Second, though Kerry also campaigned for a “return” to an earlier version of America, the political circumstances of this appeal were very different. The first four years of George W. Bush’s presidency had seemed to violate several American values, from due process—violated by the Bush administration’s “rendition” of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay—to the civil liberties threatened by the PATRIOT Act.

Trump’s appeal, by contrast, was not to these quintessentially liberal American values, but to a more specific definition of earlier American “greatness”. This inevitably begs the follow-up question: *when*, in Trump’s estimation, was America great? Trump managed to avoid being pinned down on this question directly during the campaign, but his staunch attacks on the record of Barack Obama—his predecessor and the country’s first African-American president—are pertinent here. It does not take a very large syllogistic leap to conclude that, by simultaneously alleging that America had recently lost its greatness, and by pinpointing the country’s first black president as the chief agent in this process of perceived decline, Trump was making a very particular appeal to America’s heartland. As noted in chapter 1, by replacing “the people” per se with “the heartland,” populists are able to restrict the scope of their appeal to citizens deemed culturally, socially or racially “ordinary,” or indeed “pure.” Through his slogan and other campaign pronouncements, Trump tapped the

vein of American “normalcy” that stretched back centuries, seeking to restrict its scope to the country’s heartlands, and to a particular cultural and racial hegemony.

Another unusual characteristic of Trump’s slogan was its ubiquity, not only on Twitter but in campaign rallies. “Make America Great Again” is rivaled only by Barack Obama’s “Yes we can!” in terms of its prevalence on the campaign trail. (It also formed the spine of the RNC’s convention schedule, and of Trump’s inauguration speech.) The slogan appeared emblazoned on baseball caps frequently worn by Trump and bought in the thousands by his supporters. The medium was as important as the message here: the baseball cap—an item of clothing emblematic of ordinary Americans, and anathema to sophisticated elites—served almost as an invisibility cloak for Trump’s vast wealth and thoroughly metropolitan heritage. As a signal of ordinariness, Trump’s \$25 hat did more to burnish his image as a man of the people than the hundreds of million dollars spent on campaign adverts—though only, as we will see, as a result of the avalanche of coverage Trump’s rant-filled rallies received.

Beyond his oft-repeated slogan, there are other indications of paranoid populism in Trump’s tweets. There is strong emphasis on Trump’s own personality, charisma, and the attention accorded to him by the media: the second most common four-word phrase, after “Make America Great Again,” is “I will be interviewed”. There is also a clear focus on immigration, with the words “border” and “immigration” appearing 54 and 51 times respectively, more than the 46 references to “jobs” and the 7 references to the “economy.” Trump also developed a reputation for insulting his opponents, as is clear in the data—he used the word “lyin’”—his nickname for rival Ted Cruz—29 times. Some of Trump’s other favorite put-downs for opponents included “failing,” which was mentioned 44 times (usually in reference to the *New York Times*), “sad,” also used 44 times, “dishonest” (39), “weak” (39) and “terrible” (38).

Moving into the general election against Hillary Clinton, much of Trump’s rhetoric remained the same. “Make America Great Again” and “I will be interviewed” remained his favorite four-word phrases in this period. Though Trump had a new chief rival, Hillary Clinton, he maintained his penchant for simple, frequently repeated insults: “Crooked Hillary” was his second-most used two-word phrase, recurring 193 times, only bested by “thank you.” (He also blasted his frequent critic—Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren—as “goofy Elizabeth Warren” 21 times.)

Yet the general election campaign also saw subtle shifts in Trump’s Twitter messaging. Some of these would be expected of a candidate targeting the middle ground: Trump mentioned “jobs”—a typical centrist issue—54 times, proportionally more than twice as often as he had in the primary. But analysis of the top hashtags Trump used in this period shows him doubling down on, rather than pulling back from, his paranoid populism—as

Figure 2.3 demonstrates:

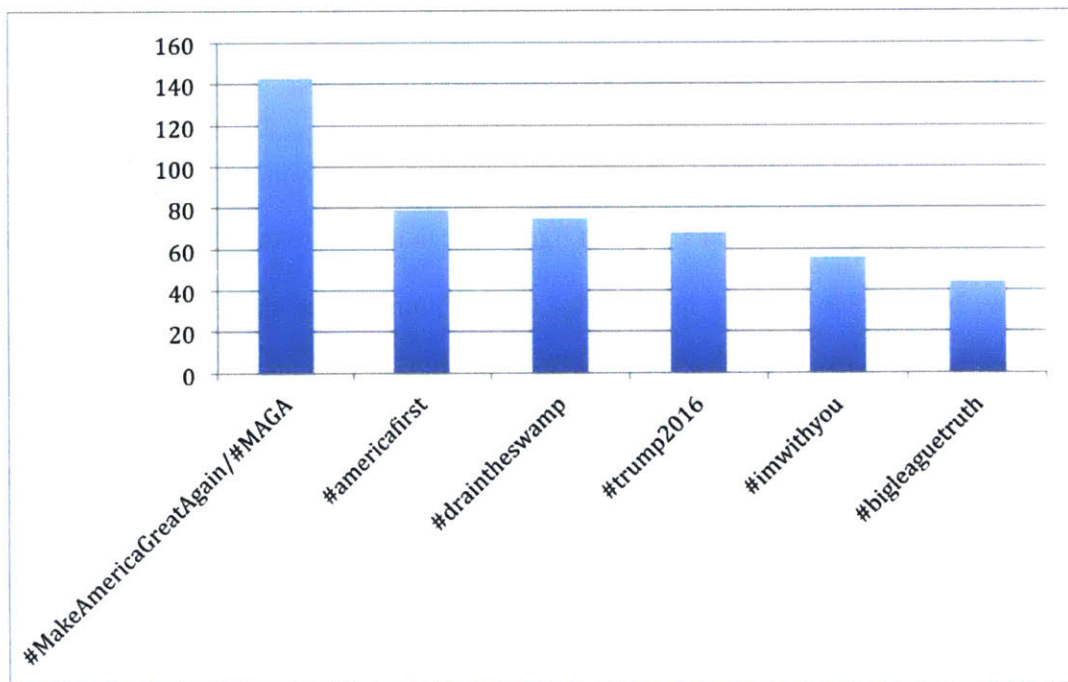


Figure 2.3: @realDonaldTrump’s frequently used hashtags, May 2016 to Election Day

The chart shows how Trump's populist #MakeAmericaGreatAgain slogan, as well as its abbreviation #MAGA, became dominant in this period, dwarfing the generic #Trump2016 alternative. But it also shows the rise of several other paranoid-populist tropes.

"#AmericaFirst" has a long history: it was the name of an isolationist movement of the 1940s which sought to prevent America entering the Second World War on the side of the Allies against Nazi Germany. The campaign, which built on the earlier isolationism of Father Coughlin, had anti-Semitic undertones made explicit in a notorious 1941 speech by spokesman Charles Lindbergh, who described in paranoid terms the "ownership and influence [of] Jewish groups ... in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government" (Calamur, 2017).

#DrainTheSwamp, meanwhile, is a reference to Trump and his movement's desire to "cleanse" several parts of the Washington establishment, including the federal government and the press. Finally, #ImWithYou is evidence of an attempt to cast Trump as having personal affinity and loyalty to voters—in contrast, it is implied, to self-serving Washington politicians.

As I noted in chapter 1, scholars of populism disagree over the significance of the communication platform that a populist figure uses in relation to the ideology itself. As I will show, the available evidence suggests that Donald Trump's candidacy was unusually centered on Twitter as a communication platform. Indeed, to paraphrase Kreisi (2014), I argue Trump's candidacy *manifested itself* in his political communication strategy, especially on Twitter. The previous section demonstrated that the messages Trump sent on Twitter were highly populist and paranoid in substantive terms (and that did Trump did not moderate this messaging in the run-up to the general election.) But in order to truly understand the manifestation of Trump's paranoid populism on and through Twitter, we must also look at how he used the medium, not just what he said.

Trump, as noted above, began the campaign with almost three million followers, and gained followers at an impressive but consistent rate through the course of the campaign. By Election Day he had reached just over thirteen million followers, as Figure 2.4 shows:

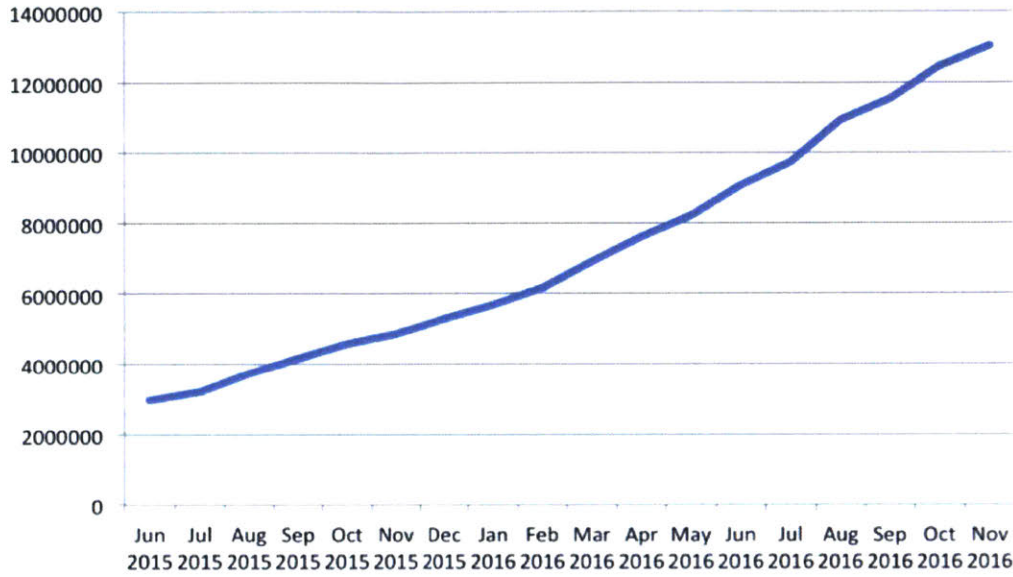


Figure 2.4: @realDonaldTrump's followers, from Trump's announcement to Election Day

Reaching an audience of thirteen million Twitter users is impressive by any measure, and explains why Trump continued to tweet prodigiously throughout the campaign. Yet Twitter is a famously messy network, riven with bots, trolls, anonymous users, institutional accounts, inactive accounts, and plenty of other kinds of internet flotsam and jetsam, so it is reasonable to assume that Trump was reaching far fewer than thirteen million *eligible voters* every time he tweeted.

Yet if these are some of its weaknesses, one of the strengths of Twitter as a medium is that the potential for amplification is built into its architecture, through its retweet functionality. Consider two Twitter users, Jack and Jane. Jack follows Jane, which means he receives all of Jane's tweets as part of his feed. If Jack sees a tweet from Jane which he thinks is worth sharing, he can, with one click, retweet Jane's tweet to insert it in the feeds of all of

his followers, whether or not they follow Jane. This functionality explains much of Twitter’s appeal. It means that tweets considered “valuable” by users—whether this is news of an earthquake, or a photo from the Oscars—can quickly surface and spread around the network like wildfire. Unless a user decides to make his or her tweets private (an option disabled by default), any of their tweets could in theory “go viral” if enough of their followers, (and *their* followers, and so on) deem it worthy of sharing.

Therefore, to gain a more accurate sense of the reach of Trump’s tweets during the campaign, I analyzed the amount of retweets his tweets received. For each month of the campaign, I calculated the average number of retweets of all the tweets Trump sent, thus controlling for variability in the number of tweets sent across different periods. I graphed these averages, as shown in Figure 2.5:

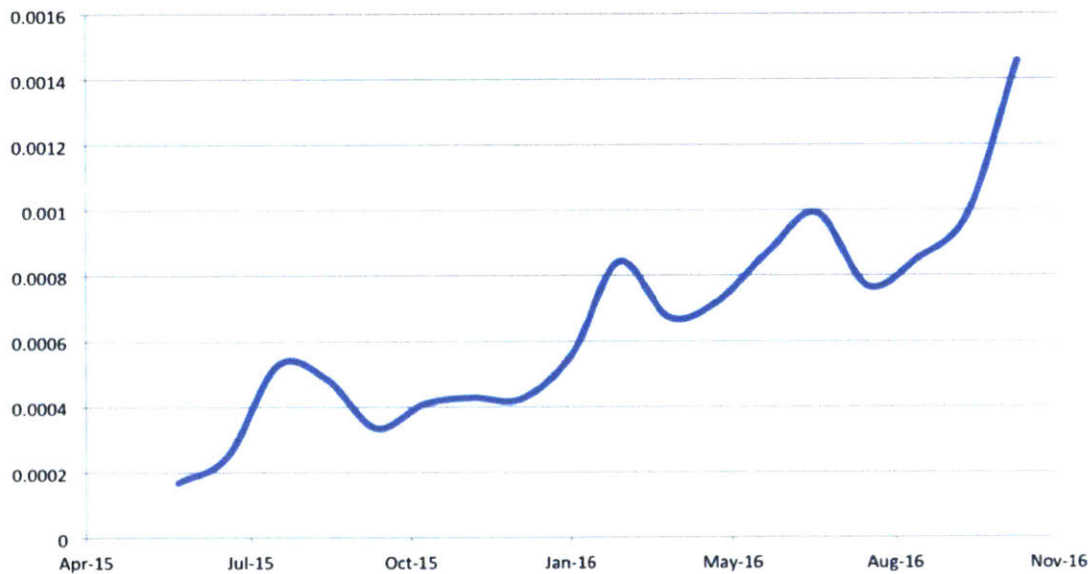


*Figure 2.5: Average number of retweets received by an @realDonaldTrump tweet, for each month, from Trump’s announcement to Election Day*

As Figure 2.5 makes clear, the amount of amplification Trump received for his tweets rose prodigiously over the course of the campaign, from a paltry average of 200 retweets in the

month he announced, to over 3,000 in the month he scored his first primary victories, to over 12,000 for the final full month of the campaign. (November's measure should be read with caution, since this only includes tweets sent between November 1 and election day, November 8, when an especially large amount of attention was being paid to the campaign.)

This engagement is impressive but also intuitive, since Trump gained much more attention and, as has been seen above, followers, over the course of the campaign. To control for this effect, I divided the average number of retweets per month as above by Trump's follower count for that month. This yielded Figure 5, below, which shows the average number of retweets a Trump tweet received for each month, as a proportion of his followers for that month:



*Figure 2.6: Average number of retweets received by an @realDonaldTrump tweet as a proportion of follower count, for each month, from Trump's announcement to Election Day*

The basic upward trend in Figure 4 also appears in Figure 5. But this is more impressive than it seems, because it means that even accounting for his increasing number of followers, Trump received increasing amplification of his messages across the course of the campaign.

In June 2015, for example, the average Trump tweet received one retweet from roughly every 5,000 of his followers. By October 2016, the average Trump tweet was receiving a retweet for roughly every 1,000, or five times as many.

This is significant, because it shows that even on Twitter, where the “cost” of following someone is negligible, Trump attracted increasing amounts of attention beyond his base of followers—even as that base of followers grew. To be clear, people retweet for a number of reasons — including, especially in Trump’s case, out of shock or outrage. It is possible, moreover, that Trump’s own followers became more passionate about his campaign over time, retweeting more of his tweets per month, which would artificially inflate the number of retweets he received in proportion to his level of followers. But whatever the purpose of retweeting, the *effect* was to amplify the message being spread.

Trump, of course, *started* the campaign with a base of followers far in excess of the average presidential candidate, let alone the average Twitter user. This should disabuse any notion that Trump led a campaign from the virtual “grassroots”: he has enjoyed celebrity status—or in more technical terms, high levels of name identification—for many years. This is not to suggest that Trump didn’t secure the legitimate—and indeed passionate—support of a distinct set of voters, including many, particularly in the industrial Midwest, who voted Republican for the first time in decades. But as will be seen, this support did not emerge organically from the internet—a claim that could be reasonably made by candidates like Howard Dean in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2008 (though, in Obama’s case, it is difficult to distinguish the impact of his campaign’s grassroots efforts from the mainstream attention paid to his historic candidacy). Yet regardless of whence it came, from his position of prior strength, both Trump’s base of Twitter followers and the amplification of his tweets beyond this base grew impressively.

This analysis of the amplifying effect of retweets has suggested that Trump sought, and successfully secured, attention beyond his natural base of followers. Yet the extent of this attention is unclear from the evidence presented thus far. It might be reasonably argued, for example, that Trump's tweets were simply retweeted *en masse* amongst his own followers, each of whom follow each other. This would mean that Trump's messages were not being amplified so much as echoed back and forth around his base of supporters like pinballs. Prior research has indeed demonstrated the existence of such "echo chamber" effects on Twitter, albeit to varying degrees (Barbera et al., 2015; Conover et al., 2011; Krasodomski-Jones, 2017).

Yet analysis of Trump's tweets reveals efforts to extend beyond this base of followers. In the previous section I presented analysis of Trump's hashtags, showing the prevalence of populist and paranoid tropes in his tweets which, if anything, increased over the course of the campaign. But Trump also drew on a second piece of Twitter's architecture, the @ feature, analysis of which suggests an awareness of the media ecosystem on the network.

Account names, or handles, are denoted on Twitter by the @ symbol. Like hashtags, using the @ symbol followed by the name of an existing account creates a link within the tweet to that account, as well as alerting the tagged user that they have been "mentioned" in this way. "Mentioning" users is a good way to both get their attention and, through the automated link, to send attention their way. The existence of the feature is so well-known and well-used that the slang term "subtweeting" has emerged, to denote a user tweeting—often negatively—about another user *without* tagging them with the @ key, typically to avoid a response.

It is straightforward to identify the accounts that Trump tweeted about the most by way of analysis of the words used most in his tweets; as with hashtags, mentioning a user

only works with an unbroken string of text following the @ sign, so mentions are by definition computed as a single word. Figure 2.7 shows the ten accounts that he tweeted about, or at, the most during the primary campaign, from the declaration of his candidacy to his decisive win in the Indiana primary.

As Figure 2.7 shows, the majority of accounts Trump tweeted are related to the media, in particular the right-wing Fox News Channel, which attracts predominantly Republican and conservative viewers: Pew analysis from 2012 found that 40% of Fox News viewers self-identified as Republican, and 60% as conservative, despite those groups making up only 24% and 35% of the population respectively (Pew Research Center, 2012). The most frequent account is @FoxNews, the channel's official account, but Trump also tweeted at accounts representing particular shows on the network, as well as prominent figures.

The analysis above found that “I will be interviewed” was a common Trump phrase, and so it is reasonable to assume that in many cases, Trump was announcing TV appearances on various Fox shows through his Twitter account. This makes a lot of sense in the context of the primary campaign, especially the invisible primary—a time when candidates are seeking to maximize their exposure to voters. Fox News, which as a strongly conservative network afforded the Republican primary a great deal of airtime, is an obvious venue for Republican nominees. The frequency of references to Fox News and associated programs, then, is evidence that Trump sought to use his Twitter account to shepherd his (unusually large) flock of followers to his TV appearances.

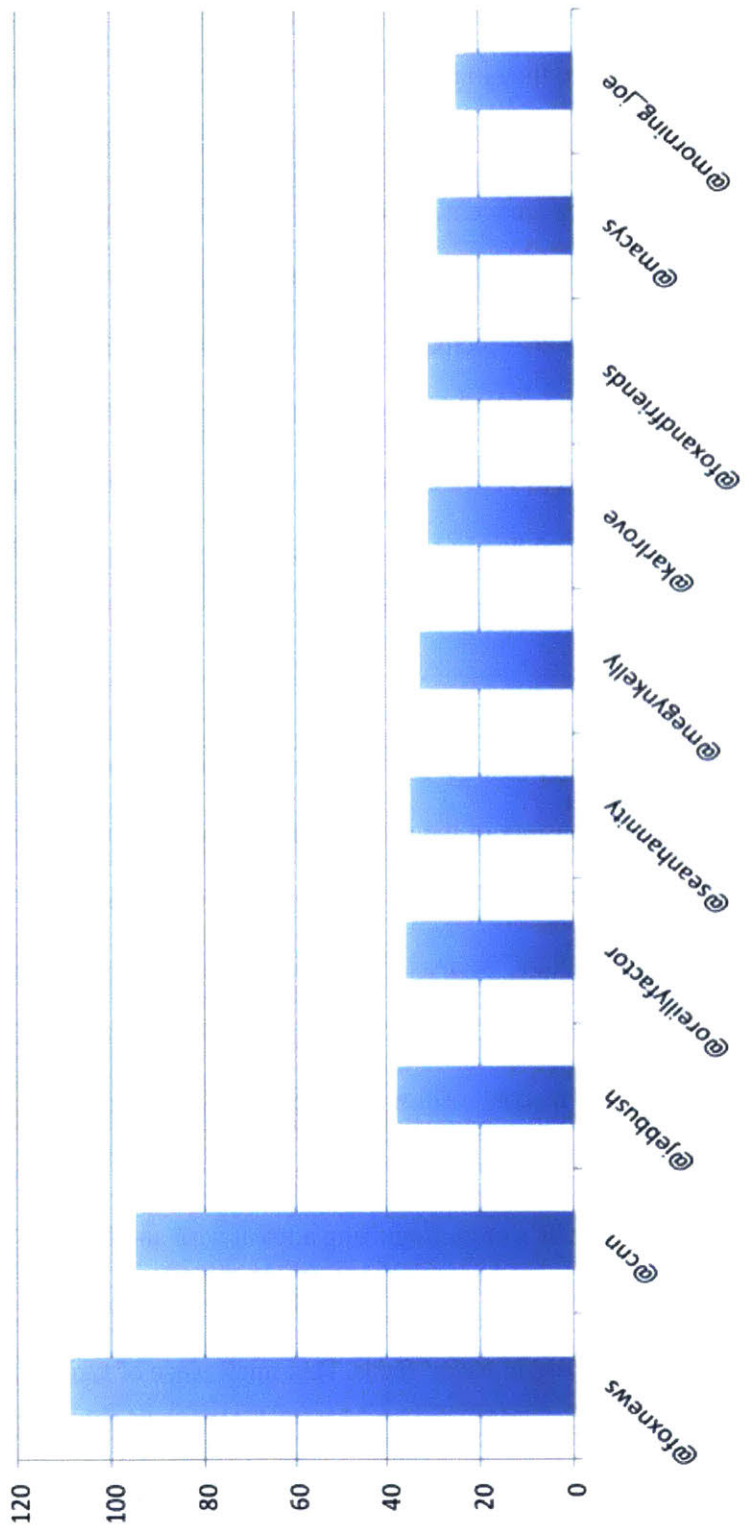


Figure 2.7: Twitter accounts most frequently tweeted at by @realDonaldTrump, June 2015 to May 2016

Yet this analysis reveals more than just a straightforward attempt to maximize media exposure across platforms, significant though that finding is. First, Trump also tweeted at mainstream, centrist and left-of-center news sources, including CNN and MSNBC's flagship Morning Joe program. Second, Trump frequently tweeted at political rivals, mentioning @JebBush nearly forty times —similar to his tweets about “lyin’ Ted Cruz.” Third, some of the right-wing figures Trump tweeted at —including Republican strategist Karl Rove and Fox News’ Megyn Kelly—were the subject of Trump’s ire. Rove was one of the first people Trump, as a candidate, targeted, when he asked in a July 2015 tweet “Why do people listen to clown @KarlRove on @FoxNews?”, adding in a later tweet, “.@FoxNews should not put @KarlRove on—he has no credibility, a bush [sic] plan [sic] who called all races wrong” (Lerner, 2015).

In these two early tweets, Trump displays here the curious mix of grammatical ineptitude, radical irreverence, and mastery of the medium that would eventually become his trademark. The uncapitalized and untitled reference to former President George W. Bush and what appears to be a misspelling of “plant” seems to betray a rather unpresidential lack of understanding of both protocol and spelling, and strongly suggests that a professional campaign staffer was not involved in its composition. But the use of a full stop before his tagging of “@FoxNews” is suggestive, in contrast, of Trump’s savvy, even technically sophisticated knowledge of how Twitter works. Beginning a tweet with another user’s handle means that tweet will only be shown to users who follow both accounts, probably to prevent one-to-one conversations clogging up other users’ feeds. This small piece of functionality is not especially well known, and even institutional Twitter accounts often neglect to consider it. Trump’s careful use of the full stop at the start of this tweet is thus evidence of his social media know-how, and represents an attempt to amplify his tweet beyond those who only follow both himself and Fox News.

Trump also demonstrated a keen interest in the news media in his tweets during the general election campaign, as Figure 2.8 shows. In the general election phase of the campaign, Trump's "media diet" appears to have evolved, to include @CNN and the *New York Times*, who he tweeted at or about more than @FoxNews. Trump also tweets to his new chief rival, @HillaryClinton, and his newly named vice presidential pick Mike Pence. Yet to a greater extent than during the primary, Trump's references to the media are about more than simply increasing his exposure. Of his 38 references to @nytimes, for example, fully 25 were to "the failing @nytimes". This suggests an evolution in Trump's strategy in relation to the media. Trump's tweets during the general election seem to have less to do with highlighting his media appearances and more to do with objecting to unfavorable coverage by seeking to delegitimize the organizations providing it.

Intentionally or otherwise, Trump's strategy finds validation in decades of communications scholarship, which has come to understand, over decades, the effects of media on audiences. Two concepts—agenda-setting, which is closely related to priming, and framing—provide a lens through which to view Trump's approach. Agenda setting, a theory first demonstrated empirically by McCombs and Shaw (1972), alleges that the volume of references to issues in the media will strongly influence the importance that the media audience ascribe to those issues. This theory can be extended to encompass political candidates as well as issues, particularly during a primary election, in which candidates from the same party—and thus, usually of a similar ideological hue—compete for attention. In 2016's historically large Republican field, the ability to be seen and heard in the media was, as discussed, a central component of success. (Not coincidentally, 2016 also marked the first time that news networks used polling data to decide candidates' position on the debate stage, as well as the time they received to answer questions—explicit acknowledgement of the importance of airtime and exposure to support.)

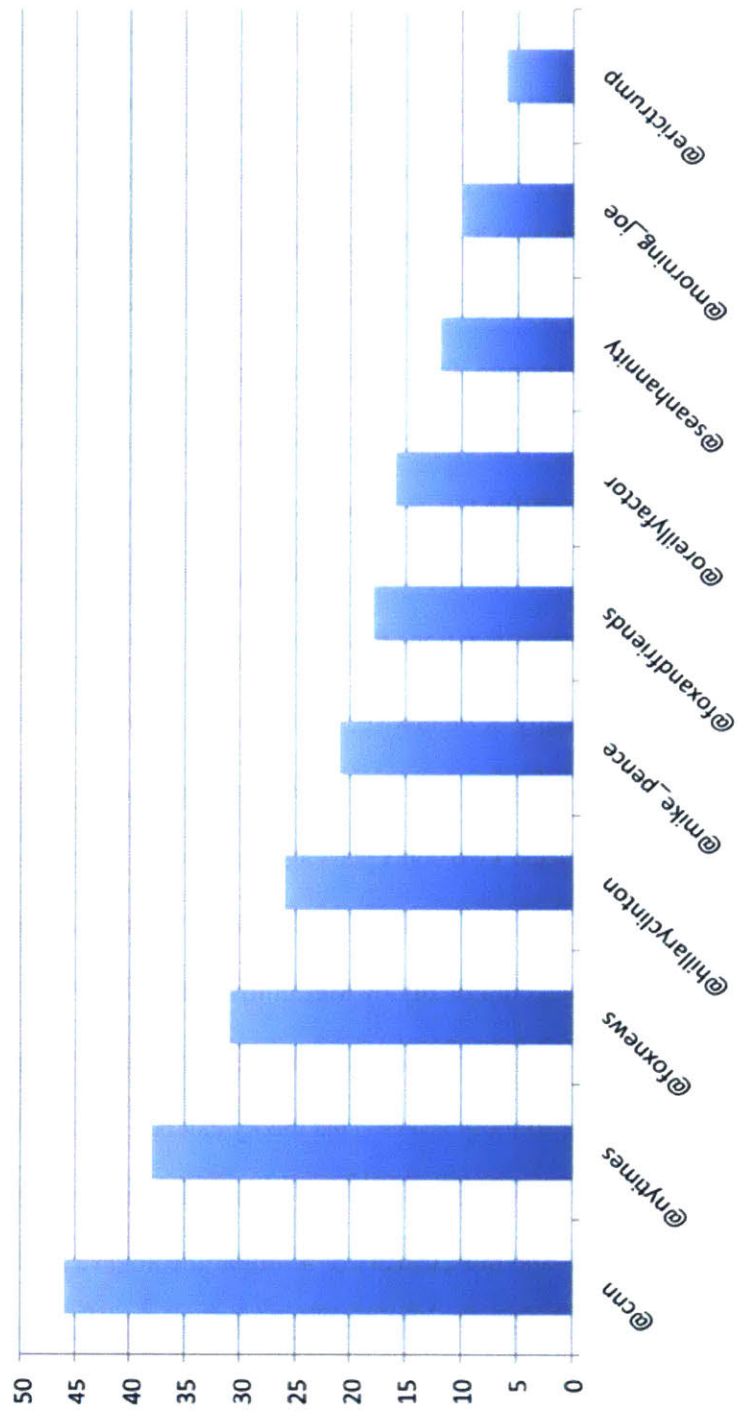


Figure 2.8: Twitter accounts most frequently tweeted at by @realDonaldTrump, May 2016 to Election Day

The concept of framing, although an outgrowth of agenda setting, instead posits that how an issue (or candidate) is presented influences how the viewing or listening public perceives them. Since very few voters have the time to independently, meticulously investigate a candidate's every policy stance, personal quality, and utterance on the campaign trail, the way in which the information they *are* exposed to via the media is framed has a disproportionate effect on how the candidates are perceived. After the parties have chosen their respective nominees, the general election campaign involves a much smaller field, and typically only the candidates of the two main parties are heavily covered. The general election, then, is less about a candidate trying to gain enough exposure just to be noticed from alongside the wide field of other candidates, and more about crafting *the kind* of coverage he or she receives (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Trump, it appears, intuited this. Though he evidently nursed grievances against particular right-wing figures, generally speaking his efforts during the primary were to highlight his appearances and heighten his exposure (while also, of course, trading barbs with rival candidates). In the general election, however, blanket coverage of both candidates was essentially a given. Therefore in addition to attacking rivals (an evergreen tactic), denouncing media organizations like the *New York Times* appears to have been a strategy geared towards minimizing negative attention and delegitimizing the unfavorable coverage that did appear.

## **Conclusion**

I began this section by offering a short sketch of the 2016 presidential contest, which saw the nomination, general election victory and inauguration of Donald Trump. In seeking to explain how a rank outsider like Trump was able to cause such an unlikely upset, I briefly summarized the use of an internet as a platform for political campaigning, and introduced the

social network Twitter as a particular—and to some extent peculiar—locus of electoral efforts in the 2016 cycle. Exploring Donald Trump’s use of Twitter, I highlighted the series of paranoid and populist tropes he deployed, both in the Republican primary and, with no less vigor, in the general election, enabling me to argue that Trump’s presence on Twitter was in many ways a manifestation of his paranoid-populist campaign and its appeal.

I then explored how Donald Trump was able to build on a pre-existing electoral advantage—an unusually large Twitter following—to amplify his messages still further. Through a word- and phrase-level analysis of his tweets, including his use of platform-specific phenomena like hashtags and mentions, I illustrated his keen focus on the media. In the primary phase of the campaign, this chiefly took the form of an attempt to enhance his exposure, by sign-posting his media appearances to his legion of followers. This reflected an understanding—conscious or otherwise—that to prevail in a crowded field of Republicans required, more than anything, a great deal of attention. In the general election, however, Trump shifted his strategy, seeking to delegitimize those news organizations which were providing negative coverage of him—including some which, as will be seen, had offered disproportionate coverage of his campaign during the primary. Deliberately or otherwise, Trump embraced an approach geared towards agenda setting, or priming, in the primary campaign, and framing in his general election fight against Hillary Clinton.

Yet this analysis still leaves several questions unanswered. In particular, I have not yet discussed how media organizations responded to Trump’s candidacy, not least his prodigious use of Twitter. Even on Election Day, Trump only had 13 million Twitter followers—less than a tenth of the overall number of votes received (and, as discussed, a following likely composed at least in part of non-voters.) To prevail, Trump needed an assist from the same media he would eventually besmirch. As has been seen, Father Coughlin and Pat Robertson had both built up sizeable followings—only to see their audience (and, in

Robertson's case, electoral ambitions) crushed by a combination of regulatory, technological and ideological restrictions. Yet Donald Trump, their paranoid-populist progeny, would succeed where they failed, and win the highest office in the land. Trump's use of Twitter was a necessary part of this success. But as I show in the following chapter, it was not, by itself, sufficient.

## **Chapter 3: From Twitter to TV**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I build on the preceding analysis to explore how mainstream media organizations responded to the rise of a paranoid populist presidential candidate. In particular, I investigate how Donald Trump's use of Twitter was incorporated into mainstream coverage of the campaign. I begin by laying the groundwork for analysis of the media's response to Trump's candidacy, offering brief reviews of existing research into the media's gatekeeping role and of Daniel Hallin's theory of "spheres." I then analyze the extent to which Trump's tweets featured in the mainstream media, and offer contrasting interpretations of my findings, each with implications for understanding the media's role in Trump's rise.

### **Background**

Writer and reporter Walter Lippman began his seminal work, *Public Opinion* (1922), with a chapter entitled "The world outside and the picture in our heads." Lippmann starts the chapter by musing on the brief interlude between the actual outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and the news of it reaching the European public. That the time delay in this case was roughly six hours—rather than the six days it might have been before the invention of the radio, or the six seconds it might be in the internet age—is beside the point. The speed of transmission notwithstanding, what motivates Lippmann is the fact that an interlude between truth and its transmission exists. Put another way, in the modern world of nation states spread out over a vast geographical expanse, truth to a large extent depends on its transmission to the population at large.

The previous chapter has already introduced agenda setting and framing as two ways of conceptualizing Donald Trump's use of Twitter in the 2016 presidential campaign. His Twitter account allowed Trump a direct, unfiltered line to his several million supporters, and he used this ability to focus attention on his candidacy, as well as targeting rival candidates and the news media for its unfavorable coverage. Ironically, Trump's attacks on the news media's reporting might be read as an implicit endorsement of its significance. For although on its own Twitter for Trump represented a cheap, unfiltered means of communicating with millions of voters, his candidacy still required more conventional coverage in the mainstream media.

Of course, securing mainstream media coverage—let alone coverage of a favorable nature—poses a challenge for campaigns, for the simple reason that news organizations are independent entities with their own incentives, priorities, and norms. A thorough analysis of the political, economic and cultural influences affecting where, how, why and to whom news is spread is of course beyond the scope of this work (and most likely any other). But of particular relevance to the present study is the process by which journalists decide what—and, in the context of an election, who—to cover.

The concept of gatekeeping proves useful here. Originally attributed in the context of communications to Lewin (1947), gatekeeping offers a model within which to understand the flow of information and, crucially, the forces governing that flow. The concept was formalized in communications scholarship by David Manning White (1950), whose study of a wire editor dubbed “Mr. Gates” concluded that the process by which certain stories were chosen to appear in a local newspaper was highly subjective, and even rather arbitrary.

In their authoritative book *Gatekeeping Theory*, Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos (2009) explore the origins of gatekeeping in theory and practice and offer a useful framework for assessing how gatekeeping works. They offer four distinct “levels of analysis” of

gatekeeping, ranging from the decisions taken by individual journalists to cross-societal comparisons (on the latter, see Cows and Bright, 2017). I situate my analysis here primarily in the third of the four strata, the “social institution” level. This level concerns the forces outside journalism that contribute, indirectly but indelibly, to the gatekeeping process. As I will argue, the new and distinct challenges affecting the coverage of the 2016 presidential election were primarily posed by these extraneous forces—in particular, the logic of the media market, and the influence of outside stakeholders.

In their overview of how these outside forces potentially influence coverage, Shoemaker and Vos list various political entities, including interest groups, public relations firms and even the government. They do not, however, specifically pinpoint election campaigns. This omission might be explained by the fact that election campaigns are not themselves permanent, but rather exist solely for the purpose of propelling a particular candidate or party into power. But the impermanence of political campaigns should not detract from their firm influence over news coverage during an election. Indeed, the relationship between campaigns and the press corps who cover them has inspired a wealth of literature and cinema, from Timothy Crouse’s 1973 book *The Boys on the Bus* to gripping articles by Hunter S. Thompson (1972) and David Foster Wallace (2008).

As Jan Pons Vermeer argues in *For Immediate Release* (1982), campaigns face two basic considerations when deciding how to get their messages out: first, the *control* they are able to exercise over the content of a message, and second, the *reach* of that message. As Vermeer notes, “The[se] two criteria are interrelated. The message on the billboard may tell voters exactly what the candidates *want them to learn*, but it *may reach* fewer voters than a newscast reporting a speech by the candidate” (p. 4; italics mine). Yet Vermeer notes two examples of hybrid approaches, where candidates seek to maintain as much control as

possible over messages, even as these messages nonetheless enjoy wide reach among impressionable voters.

The first of these hybrid approaches is the “media event.” Here Vermeer cites Crouse’s (1972) description of the McGovern campaign, whose candidate “would spend a whole morning hauling the press corps to some farm in the Midwest just so that he could appear against a background of grain silos when he made a statement about the wheat scandal” (p. 150). Four years earlier, the unprecedentedly industrial effort to portray Richard M. Nixon in a positive light—led by a young PR consultant named Roger Ailes—had been profiled in Joe McGinniss’s book *The Selling of the President 1968* (1970). Nixon also was also heavily featured in Crouse’s work four years later, wherein he is described as having “learnt a lot about the press from the 1968 campaign ... He discovered that he could be an effective performer on TV, and that he could use television *to get around* the press” (1972, p. 202; italics mine). Media events typically represent a good deal for the candidate, allowing for control over both the context and the content of his or her intended message, while still gaining substantial reach—and as Crouse shows, candidates never stop looking for ways to maintain control over their message, especially by utilizing platforms with a wide reach, like television.

The second example of a hybrid approach is the press release, the focus of Vermeer’s book. To an even greater extent than media events, press releases offer campaigns control over the message, all while gaining coverage in the mainstream media. Vermeer points to a symbiotic relationship between campaigns and journalists, arguing “releases can ... help editors and reporters cover campaigns [and] help candidates get good news coverage, because reporters and editors find releases helpful” (Vermeer, 1982, p. 7). More recently, campaigns have taken to producing their own, pre-packaged video news releases, passed to local and national television stations, whereupon they are sometimes aired unedited.

This is not to suggest, however, that campaigns can assume automatic coverage of their releases in the press. As noted above, a core tension exists between the motivation of campaigns, who ultimately want to persuade readers through their releases, and news organizations, who must decide whether or not a particular “story” is in their judgment “news-worthy”, and that it complies with their set of editorial standards. Campaigns, then, must craft their releases carefully, “to sneak their campaign propaganda past the watchful eyes of the press’ gatekeepers” (p. 8). Vermeer’s particular case study—of a gubernatorial election in 1973—found that the newspapers upheld basic editorial standards in their treatment of press releases from campaigns. Yet Vermeer also notes that:

even though editors and reporters can reject press releases or change them to suit their own purposes, thereby diluting or distorting a candidate’s point, quite a few newspapers publish releases with little or no changes.” (p. 12)

This, Vermeer argues, is because “journalists have been receptive to candidate-inspired news” like press releases. This finding, as we will see, is significant in the context of the 2016 presidential election, which took place in a very different communications environment, but one in which similar journalistic impulses appeared to still hold sway.

We should also consider in the category of press releases recent attempts by campaigns to innovate beyond the formal press release. Hillary Clinton famously declared her candidacy with the words “I’m in” posted on her website (CNN, 2007), while Democratic nominee Barack Obama announced his running mate, Joe Biden, in a text message sent to supporters (and, we must assume many journalists). More recently still, candidates have taken to posting video messages on their YouTube channels, confident that videos will be picked up and shared around the social web. All these activities, though, while technically innovative, are nonetheless thoroughly stage-managed by professional campaign apparatus.

As we will see, the spontaneous, surprising quality of Donald Trump's tweets as a candidate sets them apart from these more professionalized campaign activities.

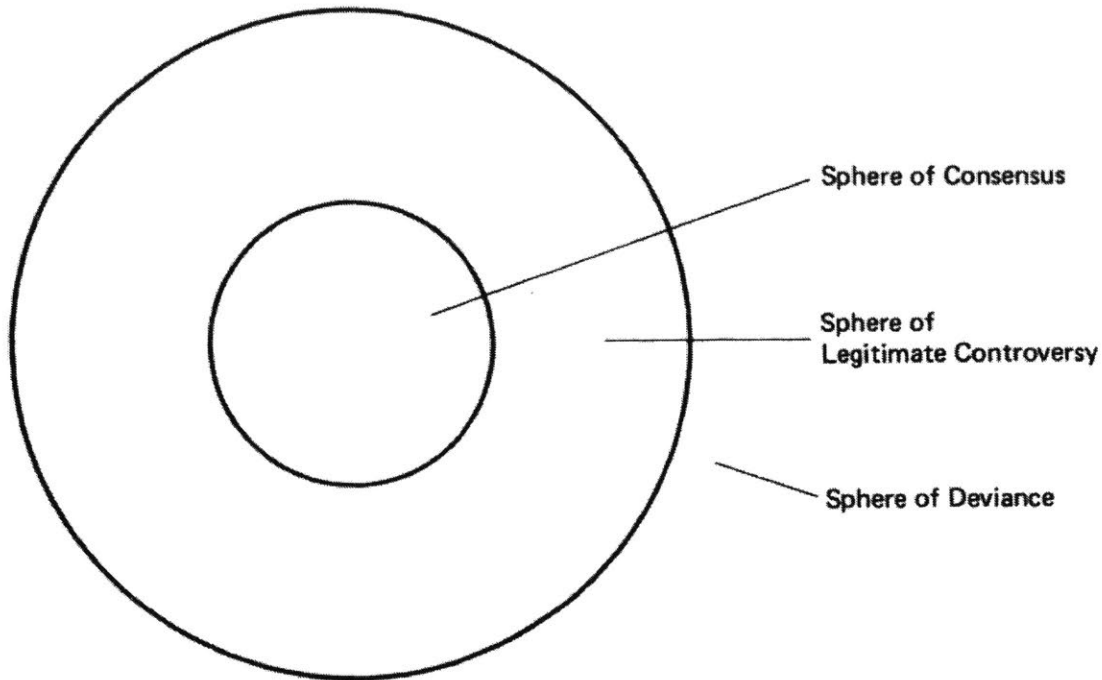
Academic research has illustrated the influential relationship between campaign communications and the news organizations that cover them. Several studies, for example, have demonstrated the influence that press releases can have on the news agenda during a campaign. Lancendorfer and Lee (2010), for example, detected correlations between campaign press releases and issues covered in Michigan newspapers during the 2002 gubernatorial race in the state, while Kiouisis et al. (2006) and Dunn (2009) respectively observed similar dynamics in the 2002 and 2005 gubernatorial elections in Florida. In several cases, however, a reciprocal relationship is found in at least some candidate-newspaper configurations, suggesting that candidates and newspapers influenced each other's agenda. This reciprocity is significant, and something that I will return to later, in the context of the present study.

Moreover, these and other studies have noted that the influence exerted on the media agenda can vary between different campaigns in the same race. Tedesco (2005), for example, found that the presidential campaigns of President George W Bush and Senator John Kerry were both correlated with the media agenda, but crucially that "cross-lag correlations show that newspapers were influencing the Kerry agenda while the Bush agenda was influencing the newspaper agenda (197)." This affirms empirically what Herbert Gans asserted in *Deciding What's News* (1979), suggesting that "the source-journalist relationship is therefore a tug of war: while sources attempt to "manage" the news, putting the best light on themselves, journalists concurrently "manage" the sources in order to extract the information they want" (p. 117).

The emergence and mass adoption of the internet has made the relationship between campaigns and the journalists who cover them more complex. An early study into the effect

of campaign websites on the media agenda observed a similar effect to that of traditional press releases: in the 2000 presidential election there was evidence of both issues covered on both campaigns' websites influencing issues on the news agenda, although again, much of this appeared to be reciprocal, with influence flowing in both directions (Ku et al., 2003). Sweeter et al.'s 2008 study, by contrast, found that during the 2004 presidential election, though the content of the official blogs of the campaigns was correlated with the news media, the influence here was more likely to flow *from* the media *to* the campaigns (though reciprocity was observed.) Finally, a study of the 2012 presidential election found a “symbiotic relationship” between agendas on official Twitter feeds of the candidates and their parties and articles in leading newspapers. The direction of influence varied on an issue-by-issue basis, as “traditional media follow candidates on certain topics, [but] on others they are able to predict the political agenda on Twitter” (Conway et al., 2015).

In addition to the related concepts of agenda setting and gatekeeping, one further idea is relevant to the analysis that follows. In his book about media coverage of the Vietnam War, historian Daniel C. Hallin (1989) introduced the idea of three concentric spheres, within which all political discourse is contained. The first is the sphere of consensus, which contains ideas upon which (almost) everyone in society agrees, such as constitutional government. The second is the sphere of legitimate controversy, which is the domain in which substantive policy debates place between people holding opposing viewpoints—over, for example, the appropriate tax rate for the rich, or the legality of drug taking. The final sphere consists of “deviance”, or ideas so dangerously different that mere discussion of them is taken as a challenge to political consensus.



*Figure 3.1: Hallin's Spheres of consensus, legitimate controversy and deviance (1989, p.117)*

Hallin's model of spheres serves as a compelling guide to the boundaries of public debate in society at large. But in particular, it offers a framework for understanding how the mainstream press covers different issues. The sphere of legitimate controversy is where standard questions over journalistic neutrality, fairness and balance are contained; given that opposing perspectives on a legitimate controversy are to be expected, they should also be respected, with equal time and/or prominence. Yet for Hallin, expectations of the role journalists play change for both the inside and the outside spheres. For the inner sphere of consensus:

“journalists do not feel compelled to present opposing views or to remain disinterested observers. On the contrary, the journalists' role is to serve as an advocate or celebrant of consensus values” (p. 116).

The outside sphere of deviance presents the mirror-image proposition, wherein journalists are presumed to play “the role of exposing, condemning or excluding from the public agenda those who violate or challenge the political consensus” (p. 117).

Of course, the lines between these different spheres are not arbitrarily drawn, but are rather the product of a rather murky process. Obviously, public opinion is at the root of what is considered consensus, legitimate or deviant, but other pressures apply. Shoemaker and Reese (2013) highlight, for example, that:

Media coverage of deviance alerts powerful social actors about people and ideas that may threaten the status quo. *According to the interests of their owners*, who are themselves powerful elites, [the] media ... label ideas, people and groups as deviant, causing them to become less legitimate in the eyes of the audience” (p. 79; italics added).

Shoemaker and Reese here highlight just one ulterior motive that journalists, or at least their employers, have when defining what is considered legitimate. It calls to mind the case of Father Coughlin, whose ability to broadcast was constrained and ultimately effectively cut off by an alliance of his opponents from the church, regulators, and the owners of radio stations who had carried his provocative programming.

Yet this example also serves to underline the more fundamental fact that the boundaries between Hallin’s spheres are permeable. Indeed, history shows that myriad ideas have moved between the spheres over time: the practice of slavery, for example, moved from something approaching consensus among the mostly slave-owning signatories to the Constitution, through legitimate controversy (controversy which resulted in the Civil War), to deviance today. With both noble and ignoble exceptions, media reporting of slavery over time reflected the evolving position of the issue within Hallin’s spheres.

Moreover, just because the media covers “deviant” news differently is not to say that it covers deviance *less*. In fact, analysis by Shoemaker and Cohen (2006) found that “at least two-thirds of the news in ten countries is composed of some type and amount of deviance” (p. 50). It is important not to overstate this finding: “deviance” is here coded to include examples as diverse as a stock-market jump (“statistical deviance”), civil demonstrations (“social change deviance”), and crime (“normative deviance”). Coverage of these sorts of issues might indeed lead one to wonder what “news” would even look like without “deviance” so broadly defined.

Even—or especially—if a news story involves “deviance”, then, it is covered, albeit in a particular way. As Schudson (1982) argues:

“In the zone of deviance, there is coverage of issues, topics or groups beyond the reach of normal reportorial obligations of balance and fairness. These can be ridiculed, marginalized or trivialized without giving a hearing to “both sides” because reporters instinctively realize they are beyond the pale” (p. 13).

As Schudson suggests, in the traditional formulation of journalism, deviance is covered—but simultaneously condemned.

In situating the mainstream media’s response to the unlikely, unusual Trump candidacy, the concepts of agenda setting, gatekeeping and spheres of coverage will all be relevant. As I explain in the following section, in deciding how to cover Trump, journalists and media organizations faced an unprecedented challenge, resulting from a confluence of technological, ideological and economic factors that looks in retrospect a lot like a perfect storm.

## Covering @realDonaldTrump

In the preceding chapter I sketched an outline of the 2016 presidential election, and conducted an extended analysis of how Donald Trump used Twitter during the period. Yet the spread of these tweets was not confined only to Trump's several million followers; nor, to state the obvious, were Trump's campaign activities restricted only to tweeting. In this section I seek to situate Trump's tweeting a) in the context of the mainstream media, and b) in the context of his other campaign activities. As I argue, Twitter served as the nexus of Trump's communications strategy during the election, and more often than not as the wellspring of the campaign's messages.

As the previous section explained, in the traditional media landscape political campaigns have typically faced a tension between maintaining control over their message and securing its wide reach. Since media companies exercise control over the airwaves, campaigns are forced to either buy airtime and column inches in the form of (expensive) advertisements or conduct their own independent (also costly) communications efforts, in the form of direct mail, canvassing, and more recently even campaign-produced video news releases. As Vermeer noted, several hybrid approaches have emerged, which allow campaigns to maintain some control over their message, while securing its reach. Of these, Vermeer highlighted two: the media event, and the press release. Crucially, these methods are less expensive than TV ads or volunteer phone calls—but, since they are “reported” in the news media alongside other stories, they are also more likely to appear legitimate to voters. The media event allows campaigns to control the optics, and to some extent the message, of an appearance by their candidate on the trail; press releases are similarly designed to “fly under the radar” of media gatekeepers and ensure that a candidate's talking points make it into print.

Prior to 2016, the most visible ways in which the internet impacted presidential elections were analogous to campaign adverts and canvassing. Social media sites allowed campaigns to both “micro-target” voters directly—building on the vast stores of personal data that social networks held on users—and using technological tools to more efficiently organize supporters and their friends. As noted in the previous chapter, most observers expected these efforts to continue in 2016, with richer datasets and more powerful algorithms targeting voters better than ever before, and emerging platforms like Snapchat opening up new channels for wooing young voters.

In this study I do not make any claims as to the success or failure of these tactics. It does bear noting, however, that the winning candidate was reported to have an underfunded, understaffed “ground game” (Shepard, 2016) and relied far more heavily on an avalanche of what was dubbed “free media”. In contrast to airtime and column inches purchased in advance by a campaign—and paid for, dearly, by its donors—“free media” refers to media exposure gained in the “regularly scheduled programming” of news reports on air, in print, and online. Staging media events and churning out press releases were, as noted, the primary way for campaigns to seek free media in the traditional media landscape; indeed, as Vermeer notes, media events were “a good deal for the candidate. He [sic] makes his statement to a large audience, often on all three networks” (1982, p. 6).

Twitter might thus represent an evolution in and an improvement on these free media forebears. In their format, tweets seem much like press releases, allowing the author total control over the content. Yet in the modern multi-channel, multi-platform media landscape, the reach of tweets is much harder to predict. On the one hand, Twitter is particularly popular amongst journalists (Hermida, 2010; Hamby, 2013), making the network a fertile ground on

which to propound campaign communications.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the diversification of media and the sheer volume of communications to compete with mean that most tweets—even those sent by campaigns—will never reach as many people as a media event or well-crafted press release.

As I noted in the previous chapter, Donald Trump started the campaign with a disproportionately high number of Twitter followers, at least by the standards of most upstart presidential candidates. He also enjoyed pre-existing celebrity status, as a result of his hosting of the widely watched *Apprentice* program, broadcast weekly to millions on network TV. As I argued above, these “network effects” might have helped Trump’s message gain a high degree of amplification on the platform. It also appeared from my analysis that Trump specifically targeted mainstream media sources in his tweets, both to note his upcoming appearances and to criticize their sometimes unfavorable coverage.

It might be, though, that these pleas for attention fell on deaf ears. Beyond his several million followers, and their willingness to retweet him, Trump on Twitter had few avenues for getting his paranoid-populist messages to the eyes and ears of the country at large. It is worth noting here survey research carried out by Pew which found that, as of July 2016, as the general election got underway, fully 24% of the American public reported they turned to the social media posts of Clinton and/or Trump for news about the election (Pew Research Center, 2016). Yet for all the attention Trump received on Twitter, to reach a wide enough audience to win, he required mainstream media coverage—and judging by the state of his campaign finances, the more free media the better.

It is possible to test the reach of Trump’s tweets in the mainstream media. The Media Cloud project, from MIT’s Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard,

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<sup>9</sup> A *New York Times* story, published shortly before Trump’s inauguration, noted that Trump’s Twitter strategy works “because one group is as intoxicated by Twitter as Mr. Trump is: journalists.” (Hess, 2017)

has for several years been harvesting and indexing news stories from across a wide array of news organizations. The resulting database can be queried, and thus used to display the prevalence of different search terms over many years. This makes it an excellent tool for gaining a sense of overall media coverage over time.

For this study, I used Media Cloud to test for mainstream media coverage of Donald Trump's tweets over the course of the campaign. I decided to focus on the early phases of the campaign, from the outset of the "invisible primary" in the summer of 2015 through to Donald Trump's securing of the nomination in May 2016. Of course, it would be possible to simply query the name "Donald Trump" to get a sense of Trump's overall coverage in the media during this period. Yet in order to isolate instances in which Trump's Twitter account, specifically, was being discussed in the media, I searched instead for "@realDonaldTrump", Trump's Twitter handle.

Much as #hashtags and @replies facilitated my search of the archive of Trump's tweets, using the nomenclature of Twitter in this search of the mainstream media archive more broadly also enables a more granular view. Of course, a search of this magnitude is always likely to yield both false positives and false negatives. In particular, news articles which quote Trump's tweets using a screen-grab only may not be included in the results, since images are not machine-readable, so the @realDonaldTrump handle may not have been picked up in Media Cloud. Fortunately, though, Twitter allows tweets to be embedded quite easily on external web pages, and most news organizations have taken to doing this in their stories. The embedded tweets feature includes machine-readable text, including the user's handle, which can thus be read by Media Cloud's web scraping.<sup>10</sup>

In my Media Cloud search, I chose to include several of Trump's rival candidates, including those who posed a major challenge over some or all of the campaign. The candidates I chose

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<sup>10</sup> More information is available at <http://mediacloud.org>

are Ben Carson—the only candidate to surpass Trump in the RealClearPolitics polling average after Trump took the lead in July—along with Jeb Bush and Marco Rubio, frequently the subject of Trump’s ire, and Ted Cruz, who briefly dented Trump’s momentum when he won the Iowa Caucus. I queried the Media Cloud database with all five candidates’ verified Twitter handles, over the course of one year, starting on June 1, 2015, and finishing on May 31, 2016. Figure 3.2 displays my results.

As can clearly be seen from the chart, coverage of @realDonaldTrump in the mainstream media dominated his rivals over the entire period—even in the early stages of the race, when he was considered a long shot for the nomination. Though his rivals’ tweets enjoy occasional peaks in interest, they are perennially dwarfed by the coverage received by Trump’s Twitter account. After he enters the race in June, only once does a rival receive more coverage of his tweets than Trump: at the tail end of January, shortly before his victory in Iowa—not coincidentally, perhaps—references to Ted Cruz’s Twitter handle briefly exceeded that of Trump’s.

This graph is subject to several interpretations, each of which has different implications for the news media. The first and most straightforward is that though coverage of Trump’s tweets is clearly disproportionate, it does at least loosely track Trump’s ascendance in the polls in this period. Even Ted Cruz’s briefly rising fortunes in advance of the Iowa caucuses are reflected in the data. The retort to this interpretation is obvious: Trump was indeed winning, but not by nearly as much as the graph suggests. Even at times when he was well ahead of the pack, Trump’s tweets were getting much more coverage than the polls suggested he “deserved”.

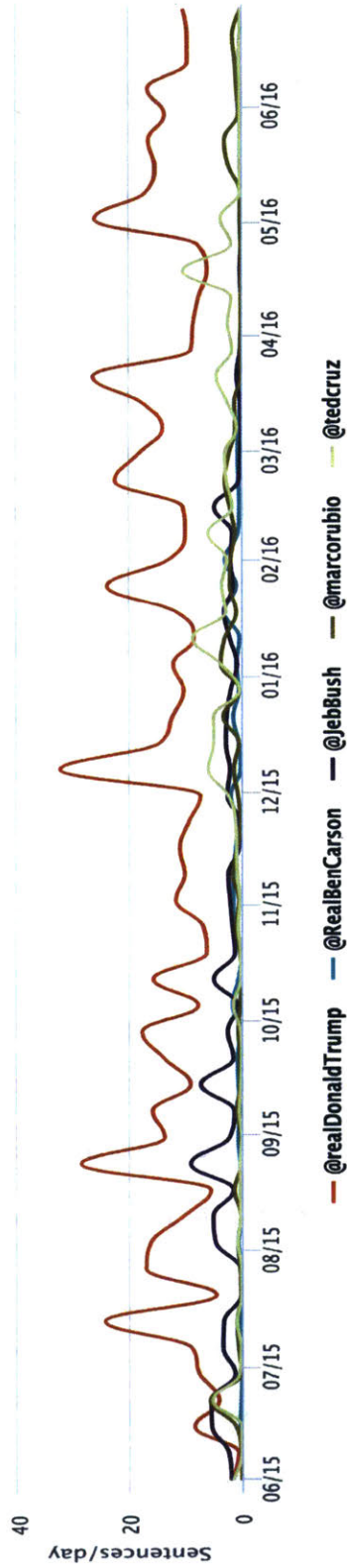


Figure 3.2: References to Republican candidates' Twitter handles in stories across 24 mainstream news sources, June 2015 to May 2016, stored in the Media Cloud database

A second interpretation is that Trump was simply more entertaining, provocative or otherwise newsworthy on his Twitter account than were rival candidates. This interpretation is more intuitive, and tracks with the way in which Trump's candidacy was received in the media in its early stages—not least the decision of the Huffington Post to cover Trump's campaign in their Entertainment section. If Trump's campaign, and his Twitter feed, were simply more entertaining, we would obviously expect more coverage in the media.

The third and final potential interpretation is that in his use of Twitter, Trump was tapping into longstanding journalistic proclivities around dealing with content which falls into Hallin's sphere of "deviance". In the previous section, I noted research demonstrating that the media, while traditionally given to condemning deviance, nonetheless also *covered it* in great depth. Trump's frequent forays into the sphere of deviance, including on his Twitter feed, provide a basis for viewing his outsized coverage through this lens.

## **Conclusion**

The data I have presented in this chapter is not sufficient to persuade us one way or another of exactly why Trump's tweets received so much more coverage. The truth, most likely, lies somewhere between these three interpretations. Much as we might expect the media in an earlier age to give more credence to and coverage of a press release from a campaign which was leading in the polls than to one flailing in sixth place, so the media *should*, in some sense, cover the leading candidate's Twitter feed in more depth than his or her rivals'. Certainly, Trump *was* much more entertaining than his rivals—he was, after all, chiefly an entertainer for many years prior to his campaign, and coined mocking, if admittedly memorable, nicknames for his rivals. Every last misspelled word or bizarre gripe also lent Trump's Twitter presence, for better or worse, *authenticity*—the inescapable sense

that this really was Trump tweeting—at a time when presidential campaigns were more professionalized than ever before.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the darker interpretation also holds a great deal of sway here. Long before he ran for president, Trump trafficked in several conspiracy theories, lending them—in large part through his Twitter account—open discussion in the media. Chief among these was the basic falsehood that President Barack Obama was not born in Hawaii, as his birth certificate showed, but outside the United States—making him constitutionally ineligible to serve. In an article for CNN after the election, Ethan Zuckerman reflected on Trump’s effort:

“[Trump] repeated an idea that was deviant—the elected president of the United States was a secret Kenyan Muslim—so loudly and relentlessly that it became part of the sphere of legitimate controversy. Mainstream news outlets (including this one) dedicated thousands of hours to debating a "controversy" that never should have been controversial” (Zuckerman, 2016).

Long before he ran for president, Trump had realized, in other words, the possibility that issues from far outside the mainstream could be raised and even *debated* in the mainstream media. Doing so pushed these issues, previously considered “deviant,” into the realm of legitimate consensus, demonstrating both the appeal of “deviant” issues in media coverage, and the permeability of Hallin’s spheres. An idea that seemed abhorrent or inappropriate at first could become a legitimate position to hold through little more than relentless repetition.

It is important not to overstate the role of Twitter in this process. Many of Trump’s most outrageous statements came not on Twitter but in other settings—on the debate stage,

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<sup>11</sup> Analysis conducted in August 2016 unearthed a curious quirk in Trump’s Twitter usage. Analyzing metadata attached to Trump’s tweets, data scientist David Robinson observed that tweets from an Android device and those sent from an iPhone “are clearly from different people, posting during different times of day and using hashtags, links, and retweets in distinct ways ... the Android tweets are angrier and more negative, while the iPhone tweets tend to be benign” (Robinson, 2016). Trump’s anger, it seems, was the most telling evidence of authenticity in his tweets.

on the campaign trail, and even, as in the case of Trump's proposed "Muslim ban," in that most old-fashioned of ways, a press release. Yet taken together, the analysis I have conducted so far has demonstrated the power of Trump's very particular presence on Twitter. As the previous chapter showed, his tweets frequently dealt in paranoid-populist motifs, and he constantly targeted both his rivals and the mainstream media. His tweets received large-scale amplification both on Twitter through retweets, and beyond it in the mainstream media. In the final chapter, I look at how this keen interest in Trump's paranoid-populist tweets translated into media coverage of his candidacy more generally.

## **Chapter 4: From the CNN Candidate to the Fox News President**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I conclude my analysis of Donald Trump's successful bid for the presidency by further examining the relationship between his candidacy and the media which reported on it. Building on my earlier analysis of how the media covered Trump's tweets, I broaden my scope to consider coverage of his campaign more generally. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data I argue that, in certain parts of the media ecosystem, economic considerations overrode traditional journalistic principles, resulting in coverage gave Trump disproportionately generous exposure.

Specifically, I focus on Trump's relationships with two cable news networks, CNN and Fox News. Though with different audiences and divergent ideological slants, both networks' approaches to covering Trump involved a clash between economic and journalistic considerations, with the former ultimately outweighing the latter in both cases. To support my argument, I draw on data illustrating the disproportionate coverage given to Trump's candidacy on these networks. In closing, I return to the topic of Twitter, and emphasize its centrality to both the wider communications strategy that the Trump campaign adopted, and its reception in mainstream media.

### **CNN: From Filter-Free to Fake News**

From the start, Donald Trump's presidential campaign was a spectacle. For all the advantages of his high-profile Twitter account, Trump's relationship with a broader slice of the American public had been established through a more traditional medium: network TV. His years hosting NBC's *The Apprentice* had, as observed above, bolstered his reputation as a

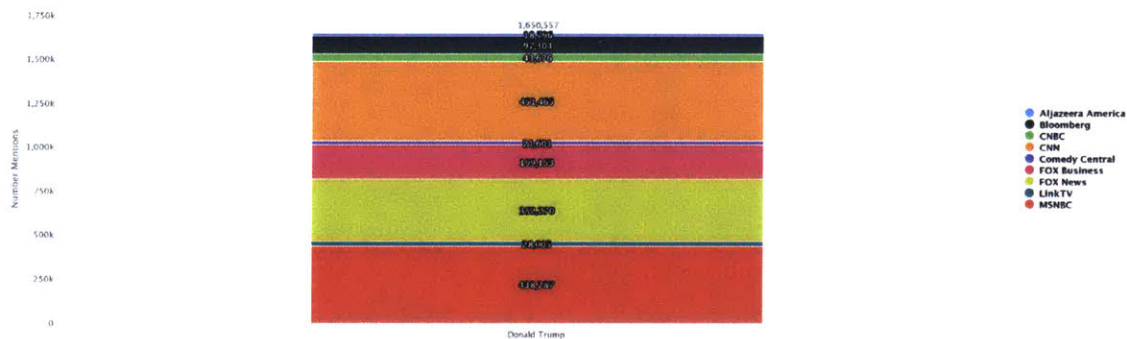
tough-talking, no-nonsense business mogul, with his catchphrase, “You’re fired”, entering the cultural lexicon. It was this mainstream media exposure—building on years at the center of tabloid coverage—which, more than anything else, thrust Trump into the stratosphere in terms of name recognition. A Gallup poll taken only a month after Trump entered the race found that fully 92% of Americans were “familiar” with Trump, more than 10 percentage points more than those who were familiar with Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, and both a brother and a son of previous presidents (Dugan, 2015).

At the outset of the election Trump had one man, above all, to thank for this pre-existing fame: Jeff Zucker. It was Zucker who, as president of NBC Entertainment, had originally signed Trump to host *The Apprentice* “at a time,” according to a recent *New York Times* profile of Zucker, “when Trump was little more than an overextended real estate promoter with a failing casino business” (Mahler, 2017). The show rehabilitated Trump’s image, “recasting a local tabloid villain as the people’s prime-time billionaire.” Yet a decade later—and two years before Trump announced—Zucker took up the role of president of CNN Worldwide, the cable news network that had been struggling in recent years to define itself in contrast to the outwardly conservative Fox News and the increasingly liberal MSNBC.

The core of Zucker’s mission was, as for any cable news network reliant on advertising revenue, to increase CNN’s ratings. Yet his initial attempts to create round-the-clock breaking news were met with disdain and occasionally derision: in his 2014 speech to the White House Correspondents’ Association, President Obama dinged CNN for its relentless, weeks-long coverage of a missing Malaysian Airlines flight, joking that “I am a little jet-lagged from my trip to Malaysia. The lengths we have to go to get CNN coverage these days. ... I think they’re still searching for their table” (Hollywood Reporter, 2014).

Yet as the title of the *New York Times* profile of Zucker argues, if CNN had a ratings problem, then “Donald Trump solved it.” The arrival of Trump’s erratic, hot-headed

campaigning style ensnared the attention of cable news networks, CNN chief among them. To demonstrate this, we can look to the 2016 Campaign Television Tracker, which is the result of work by the GDELT project, drawing on the Internet Archive’s Television News Archive.<sup>12</sup> By analyzing the closed captioning of national network broadcasts, the tracker calculates the number of mentions each candidate receives (including several misspellings to account for the inaccuracies of closed captioning.) As Figure 4.1 shows below, from the date of Trump’s announcement to the time of writing, Donald Trump has received more mentions on CNN than on any other network, including chief 24-hour rivals Fox News and MSNBC:



*Figure 4.1: Number of mentions of Donald Trump on different Cable TV networks, from Trump’s announcement to March 2017 (Internet Archive TV News Archive/GDELT project)*

This is a startling finding: one would expect that Fox News, as a conservative network, would have shown more interest in absolute terms in the Republican front-runner than CNN, which has traditionally purported to be centrist and non-partisan in its coverage.

We can also use the tracker to assess CNN’s coverage of Trump in comparison to rival candidates. Figure 4.2 below shows this, calculating references to Trump on CNN only, as a percentage of references to all Republican candidates on the network:

<sup>12</sup> [http://television.gdelproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv\\_campaign2016/iatv\\_campaign2016](http://television.gdelproject.org/cgi-bin/iatv_campaign2016/iatv_campaign2016)



This chart starts in January 2015, when few candidates had announced, and shows the mounting speculation around an array of Republican candidates, including Jeb Bush, Chris Christie and Ted Cruz. Yet in the space of barely a fortnight, between his announcement in the middle of June and the beginning of July, Trump rockets to the forefront of CNN's coverage, seldom relinquishing his dominance until the end of the primary, when we would expect coverage of Trump to soar in relation to his vanquished rivals.

Many of the same interpretations of the data presented in the previous chapter, in relation to mainstream media coverage of Trump's Twitter handle, are relevant here. To some extent, this blanket coverage reflects Trump's poll standing, and the few occasions when CNN covers other candidates more are when they rise in the polls—Ben Carson's brief lead in coverage in November coincides with his leading the polls around that time. In this sense, the chief criticism that could be leveled at CNN is that it was unduly focusing on "horse race" coverage of polls and personalities rather than presenting a more balanced view. Nor was the Trump phenomenon confined to CNN: conservative rival Fox News also gave Trump undue coverage—though as Chart 4.3 below shows, Fox News had more weeks during the primary in which other candidates received more references than Trump than on CNN:

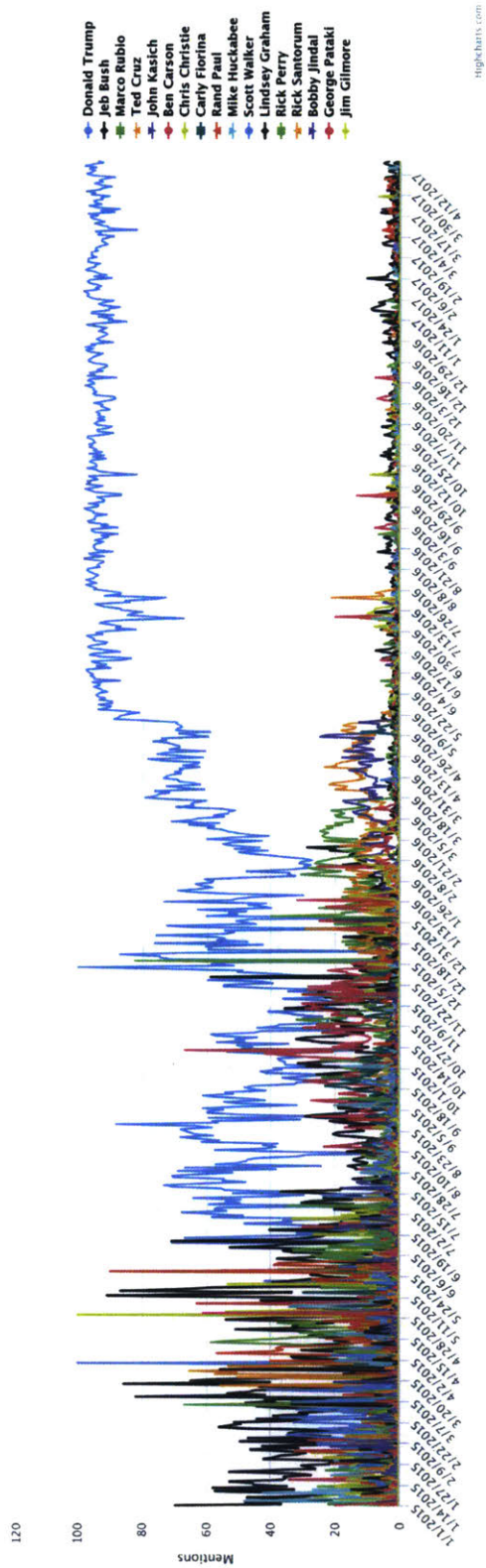


Figure 4.3: Proportion of mentions of different Republican candidates on Fox News, from June 2015 to March 2017 (Internet Archive TV News Archive/GDEL project)

Yet even accounting for Trump’s polling lead, CNN’s coverage of the Republican primary is remarkably Trump-centric. Turning to the general election which pitted Trump against Clinton, analysis similarly suggests Trump was over-covered on CNN, as Figure 4.4 shows.

In the case of the general election, we cannot make the case that this coverage was in any way reflective of the polls, since Clinton maintained an apparent lead over Trump during the bulk of the campaign. (Of course, it is not surprising that from the moment that Trump won, he received the bulk of media attention in relation to his primary challengers.) But again here, CNN was not the only culprit of over-covering Trump; analysis of the national networks in general shows a similar trend. Of course, quantitative references to Trump tell us nothing about the quality of the coverage. We would expect, in fact, that much of this coverage was highly negative: indeed, the biggest pre-election spike in references to Trump relative to other candidates occurred in the aftermath of the emergence of an infamous tape in which Trump boasted of his successes in sexually assaulting women.

Yet regardless of the tone or tenor of the coverage, what this analysis does demonstrate is the cable news media’s—and especially CNN’s—propensity to cover Trump, due in large part, one assumes, to his deviance—both sexual and otherwise. Trump was remarkably distinct from presidential candidates in other elections and 2016, not least with his willingness to attack his rivals, the series of extreme policy pronouncements he made, and his capacity to drag political debate into the gutter (with his allusions to, for example, the size of his penis and Bill Clinton’s sexually sordid past). A *New York Times* story at the outset of the general election between Trump and Clinton noted the candidates’ wildly divergent media strategies, with Trump proving “irresistible” to cable news producers, even to the extent that, according to the story: “None of the three major cable news networks—CNN, Fox, or MSNBC—carried Mrs. Clinton’s speech to a workers’ union in Las Vegas, where she

debuted sharp new attack lines against Mr. Trump. Instead, each chose to broadcast a live feed of an empty podium, on a stage where. Trump was about to speak.” (Grynbaum, 2016)

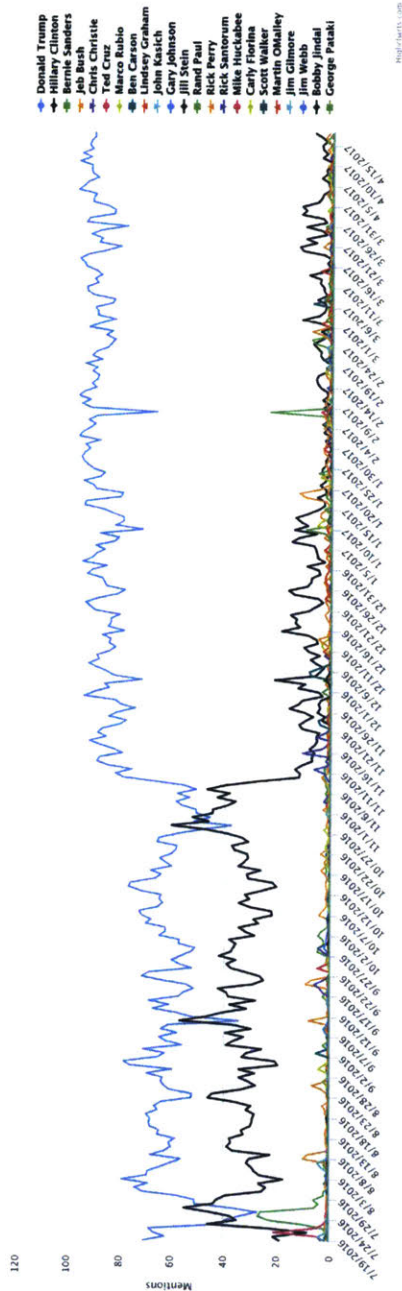


Figure 4.4: Proportion of references to all candidates on CNN, July 2016 to March 2017

This reference to Trump’s “irresistibility”—and the fact that several news producers interviewed for the *New York Times* piece “offered the defense that whatever viewers make of Mr. Trump, he is undoubtedly newsworthy”—channels the argument outlined in the earlier chapter: that the media is primed to cover deviance, even as it condemns it. Moreover, the digitization of the news industry has allowed journalists and editors to *measure*, with much greater granularity, the appeal of different candidates and stories (Karpf, 2016). It appears, however, that the second part of this formula—condemnation—was often lacking in cable news coverage of Trump. In October 2016, at a forum I attended at Harvard University shortly prior to Election Day, Jeff Zucker described his experiences leading CNN through its election coverage. Zucker was quick to bask in his network’s success in 2016, noting that it had come closer to Fox News in ratings than at any point in the previous eight years. This sentiment echoed a pointed statement made by CBS chairman Leslie Moonves, who had acknowledged in March 2016 that Trump “may not be good for America, but [he’s] damn good for CBS” (Huddleston, 2016).

Yet when asked if he had any regrets over CNN’s coverage, Zucker acknowledged one. CNN had, Zucker admitted, been too willing to show Donald Trump’s campaign rallies, live, unedited and unfiltered, particularly in the early stretches of the primary campaign. From the often blustery Zucker, this was a significant admission. These live broadcasts of his rallies had enabled Trump to, in effect, bypass the traditional media filter and speak directly to the viewing public, almost as if they were at the campaign event.

Again, it is possible to defend CNN’s decision-making here on the basis of newsworthiness. Trump—as amply demonstrated on his Twitter feed—was capable of making a controversial statement at seemingly any moment, not least when in proximity of either a microphone or smartphone. It therefore makes sense that, in their hunt for both big stories and large ratings, CNN would be inclined to broadcast Trump live as much as

possible, in order to break the news simultaneously with it being made. In an interview after the election with the *New Yorker's* David Remnick, Zucker offered just this defense, stating that, “we’re in the business of covering news. [Trump] *made a lot of news* at those rallies by saying things that were out of the norm of any political candidate.” Zucker explicitly tied this coverage, and the interest it generated, to Trump’s deviance, noting that Trump’s rallies were “entertaining, and it was hard to take your eyes off of” them (Remnick, 2017; italics mine.) Yet by systematically covering Trump’s deviance—or rather, just as tantalizing, his potential for deviance—in this way, CNN voluntarily removed itself from its vital gatekeeping role, something tacitly acknowledged by Zucker when he expressed regret specifically about the “unedited” nature of CNN’s coverage of Trump’s events.

As noted above, CNN was not alone among cable news channels in its filter-free approach to Trump, even if the stance adopted by the network seems more egregious in light of its professed non-partisan mission. As I show in the next section, Fox News, a rival network, also navigated a complicated relationship with the Trump candidacy.

### **Fox News: Fair, Balanced—and Flexible**

Fox News has long positioned itself as the nexus of political coverage with a conservative slant in the cable news landscape—an approach which has been rewarded with consistently high ratings. In January 2017, Fox marked its fifteenth straight year as the most watched news channel, according to Nielsen data (Fox News, 2017). But this data does not show the extent to which the 2016 election posed unprecedented challenges to Fox’s quest to maintain the dominance of the cable news landscape.

At the epicenter of Fox’s problems was Donald Trump’s candidacy. Prior to his announcement, Trump had been a frequent and warmly-received guest on Fox News, with his

frequent charges against the legitimacy of Barack Obama's presidency providing exactly the kind of red meat that viewers—and thus Fox and its advertisers—relished. Trump's entry into the race, however, posed new and distinct challenges for the relationship between the outsider candidate and the established network. Some of this was to be expected: in a crowded field of Republican candidates, which at times seemed to resemble a race to the far right, Trump's positions—including his controversial statements and stances prior to running for office—would be subject to more scrutiny, particularly if Fox was to be seen as living up to its trademarked “Fair & Balanced” slogan.

The first time the relationship was tested occurred—as might be expected—on live TV. The first Republican presidential debate, hosted by Fox in Cleveland, Ohio, saw Trump take the stage alongside nine other hopefuls. Trump—who overall was afforded the most time to speak during the two-hour debate—clashed angrily with other candidates, as well as the moderators. As co-moderator of the debate, Megyn Kelly, a prominent figure at Fox News since she joined as a correspondent in 2004, pushed Trump on his reported sexist comments about women, noting that:

One of the things people love about you is you speak your mind, and don't use a politician's filter. However that is not without its downsides—in particular, when it comes to women. You've called women you don't like fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals ... Your Twitter account has several disparaging comments about women's looks. ... Does that sound to you like the temperament of a man we should elect as president? (Fox News Insider, 2016).

Trump interrupted Kelly during her asking of the question, interjecting to note that he had described only his *bête noire* Rosie O'Donnell in those terms—leading to a sustained ovation in the audience, even as Kelly fought over the noise to dispute this false claim.

But in a pattern that would become familiar as the campaign wore on, Trump—while reasonably measured and composed in his on-stage response—went on a two-pronged rampage after the debate. First, he targeted Kelly on Twitter, tagging her @megynkelly account, and describing her as having “really bombed tonight. People are going wild on twitter. Funny to watch!” (Chavez et al., 2016). A day later, Trump seemed to suggest that menstruation was the cause of Kelly’s perceived hostility, telling rival network CNN that “you could see there was blood coming out of her nose, blood coming out of her wherever” (Yan, 2015). After this claim met with condemnation, including from the editor of conservative online outlet RedState.com, Erick Erickson—who also disinvited Trump from a gathering that weekend—Trump returned to Twitter to address the firestorm of criticism his remarks had received. He suggested that the unspoken body part of Kelly that he had alluded to was her “NOSE”, while slamming “so many “politically correct” fools in our country.”

The Kelly episode again demonstrates the centrality of Twitter to Trump’s messaging strategy, and its unique utility as a truly unfiltered line of communication, often used to “clarify” Trump’s remarks made in other, somewhat more mediated forums like on the debate stage or in live phone-in interviews. Trump’s propensity to use Twitter as a communication line of last resort was forged as early as 2011, during his attempts to bring “birtherism” to the mainstream. A *New Yorker* piece describes how Trump’s birtherism strategy involved

Combining mainstream media and social media in a kind of feedback loop. For six weeks, beginning in March [2011], he talked incessantly about Obama’s birth certificate. Whenever a journalist gave him a microphone, he talked into it; when they didn’t, the conversation continued online. ... In the age of social media ... the precipitating event for mainstream-media coverage could be “starting a conversation” on social media (Marantz, 2016).

According to Marantz's piece, there is a direct through line from Trump's first experimentations with the medium in the context of birtherism to his targeting of Megyn Kelly. In a September, 2015 interview on MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, Trump told the hosts that, "when a dope like [Trump critic and editor of the conservative *National Review*] Rich Lowry goes on, or people, you know, like Megyn Kelly says things that are wrong, I'm able to tweet.... In the old days, you didn't have that. What would you do, call a press conference to announce that somebody lost control of his mind on television last night?" (Marantz, 2016). Trump's allusion to press conferences here illustrates the extent to which social media served as the nexus of his communication strategy, providing both an unfiltered line to supporters *and*, simultaneously, a powerful way to gain media attention *because of* the very unfiltered nature of this communication.

But the Kelly episode was also the catalyst for a shift in the power relations between two titans of conservative media. In a recent comprehensively researched article for Politico, Eliana Johnson (2017) cites Steve Bannon, the editor of Breitbart—a far-right website which had already run a slew of stories supportive of Trump's candidacy—as suggesting that the feud between Trump and Kelly set the tone for a more antagonistic relationship between Fox and Breitbart. "The big rift between Breitbart and Fox was all over Megyn Kelly. She was all over Trump nonstop" and thus "we had a massive falling out over the first debate, over her treatment of Trump," Bannon told Johnson.

Bannon, it is worth noting, also had more favorable relationships with other Fox News personalities—particularly with another staple of the Fox News schedule, Sean Hannity, as evidenced in 2013, when Hannity's show aired "Boomtown: Washington, the Imperial City", written and produced by Bannon. Nevertheless, the Kelly flap set Breitbart's Bannon on a collision course with Roger Ailes, the ursine founder, chairman and CEO of Fox News. Johnson notes that in the early stages of the primary, Ailes "initially tried to act as a

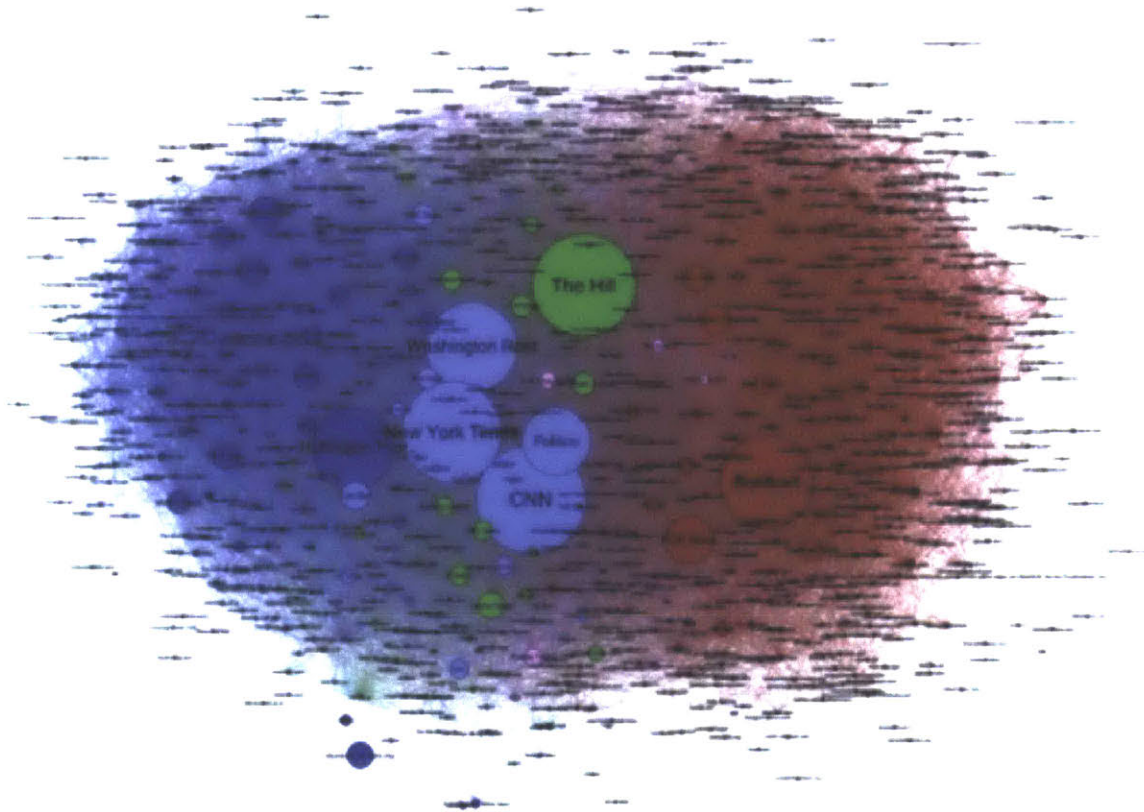
check on the impulsive GOP candidate.” This included both backing Kelly in her contretemps with Trump during the debate, and later pressing ahead with another January 28, 2016 debate hosted by Fox which Trump boycotted over his alleged mistreatment.

Yet as the primary elections began in earnest, the cold war between the Trump campaign and Fox was subsumed by Trump’s string of impressive victories, which soon made his campaign seem unstoppable. With Trump inching towards the Republican nomination, this inevitably shifted the network’s calculus towards supporting Trump—a process which may have been hastened by Breitbart’s increasingly vocal disdain for Fox’s coverage. Ailes, for his part, had already become worried that Trump would set up a rival network if he failed in his quest for the presidency; and “when Trump started winning primaries, the decision was made [by Ailes] to get behind him because he was going to be the nominee,” a source “familiar with the situation” told Johnson.

Ailes would ultimately depart from Fox News under a cloud of sexual harassment allegations on July 21, 2016—symbolically enough, the same day that Trump officially accepted the Republican nomination. Rupert Murdoch, the Executive Chairman of News Corporation who replaced Ailes on an acting basis, has since overseen the final reconciliation between Fox News and Trump. Yet this newfound understanding has come at a cost for Fox. Johnson’s article suggests that, with Trump’s victory—masterminded by former Breitbart CEO Bannon—Fox has lost much of its clout. From Trump’s nomination onward, “when it came to Trump, Fox [now] essentially follows Breitbart’s lead rather than vice versa”—a clear reversal in the direction of agenda setting between the media monolith and the upstart, far-right website.

The emerging influence of Breitbart over the broader conservative media ecosystem has recently received empirical support from a study of the election by Benkler et al. (2017). This study found that during the election a “right-wing media network anchored around

Breitbart developed as a distinct and insulated media system, using social media as a backbone to transmit a hyper-partisan perspective to the world.” The authors visualized this ecosystem, as it transpired on Twitter, in the network diagram below:



*Figure 4.5: Network analysis of news ecosystem during election (Benkler et al., 2017)<sup>13</sup>*

In this diagram, different media outlets are represented by different circles. The size of each circle relates to how many times stories from each outlet were shared on Twitter; their color reflects the proportion of the outlet’s stories which were shared by users who retweeted either @realDonaldTrump or @HillaryClinton, and their location “is determined by whether two sites were shared by the same Twitter user on the same day, representing the extent to which two sites draw similar audiences”.

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<sup>13</sup> Image used here courtesy of the authors.

As a result, Breitbart's representation in the diagram suggests that it was by far the largest source of shared news stories from Trump-amplifying Twitter users, and is rather far removed from Clinton-leaning and centrist sources. The far smaller volume of Fox News stories shared by users seems to reflect the suggestion in Johnson's reporting that the cable news network increasingly reflected Breitbart's coverage. This new ascendance of the "born-digital" Breitbart over a (by modern standards) analog entity like Fox News also serves to demonstrate the increasing centrality of the internet and social media as both purveyor of, and platform for, political coverage.

This realignment within conservative media is chiefly economic in motivation. To this day, the 89 per cent of Republicans who voted for Trump, Johnson suggests,

Remain broadly supportive of the president personally, and as a result, insiders say, the conservative media have been increasingly pulled by a tractor beam that demands positive coverage of the president regardless of how far he wanders from the ideas they once enforced. Producers and editors have been faced with a choice: provide that coverage or lose your audience (2017).

Murdoch, Fox's ever-cunning Executive Chairman, appears to have reconciled himself to accommodating the Breitbart-Bannon axis which propelled Trump into office, at least for the time being. This decision was arrived at chiefly out of the economic consideration of maintaining Fox's audience share, ensuring that Fox maintains its position at the top of the cable news rankings—at the cost, perhaps, of some of its former ideological and political clout.

At the time of writing—in the early months of the Trump administration—the previous antagonism between Fox News and then-candidate Trump has not only abated, but seems to have transformed into a truly symbiotic relationship. As President, neither Trump's

love for cable news nor his penchant for Twitter have diminished; indeed, several of the biggest stories of the nascent administration seem to have been driven by these two predilections working in tandem. Trump made headlines in March 2017 with a series of tweets suggesting that his presidential campaign headquarters had been wire-tapped by then President Obama. The tweeted allegations spread like wildfire on social media, and sympathetic Republican lawmakers promised an investigation. It does not appear that there was any truth to Trump's claims—but what is more interesting is their provenance. Trump's initial suggestion that he had been wire-tapped began when, according to a *Business Insider* story:

Radio host Mark Levin voiced without evidence the idea that Obama had wiretapped Trump Tower. That accusation was picked up the next day by Breitbart News ... an aide placed that piece in Trump's daily reading pile, said a White House official ... [and] fuelled by that report on Saturday, Trump unleashed a series of jaw-dropping tweets that accused his predecessor of spying on him (Lemire, 2017).

The story evolved several weeks later, when Trump again took to Twitter to back up his claims, this time citing a story on Fox News' flagship morning show *Fox and Friends*. This followed a claim made during a briefing by Trump's Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, that British intelligence agency GCHQ had colluded in wire-tapping Trump—itsself a claim first made by Fox News contributor Andrew Napolitano.

These early examples suggest the emergence of a closed communication loop, with favorable news stories—surfacing on both Fox News and far-right internet sites like Breitbart—finding their way to a receptive president, who continues to use his Twitter account as a megaphone, reliably assured that his tweets will receive abundant media attention in turn. As president, Trump has thus become the midwife for paranoid conspiracies

conceived in the murkiest corners of the internet, birthing them as newsworthy in the mainstream media.

## **Conclusion**

Thus in dealing with Trump's candidacy, both CNN and Fox News faced a tension between the economic imperatives of audience share on one side and political considerations on the other, albeit in different ways. These political considerations differed: in CNN's case, they related to Zucker's regrets about covering Trump's deviance without traditional journalistic filters; while for Fox, Trump represented a shift away from traditional "Reagan Republican" tent-poles of a small state, family values, and a muscular foreign policy, with his economic populism, moral iniquity and isolationism. In both cases, however, economics trumped these political concerns, and Trump ultimately benefited from an enormous amount of coverage on these and other networks.

In economic terms, this arrangement works well both for Trump's backers, like the chastened Fox News, and his critics like CNN. Fox News has re-established its cable news ratings pre-eminence, helped no doubt by Trump's subtle and not-so-subtle endorsements, as when he urged viewers in a recent tweet to tune in to the Fox show "Justice with Judge Jeanine." Yet CNN has also benefited: the recent profile of Zucker notes that "as it turns out, the only thing better than having Donald Trump on your network is having him attack it." In the interview with Remnick, Zucker acknowledged the "tremendous audience interest" in Trump's campaign, betraying the centrality of ratings to his coverage considerations (Remnick, 2017). CNN, as "the first major news organization to give Trump's campaign prolonged and sustained attention," now rides the waves of his criticism, with ratings

expected to rise still further in the first year of Trump's presidency. CNN anchor Jake Tapper was described in a recent *GQ* profile as "the realest man in fake news."

Finally, it is important at this juncture to emphasize the centrality of Twitter to Trump's strategy, which manifested itself in several ways. First, Trump as noted brought to the campaign a pre-existing following on the network, guaranteeing a direct line to supporters and reporters alike. Trump's often provocative tweets helped bolster his paranoid populist ideology, and contributed to the sense that he was, *a priori*, "newsworthy"—perhaps paving the way for the blanket coverage his rallies received. A *New York Times* article published shortly before his inauguration suggested that for Trump, "Twitter provides the veneer of populist connection without the hassle of accountability" (Hess, 2017). Second, when Trump received negative coverage on given a network, as in the Kelly controversy, Trump turned to Twitter—as well as to rival networks—to air his grievances. Twitter was in this sense both the nexus of his campaign and a "channel of last resort," allowing him to seize back the mainstream media spotlight. Finally, as president, Trump has used Twitter both as a way to amplify favorable reports from right-wing entities like Fox News, and to decry the "fake," "failing" news sources who criticize him, saving his fiercest criticism—without any observable irony—for CNN.

### **Conclusion: from @realDonaldTrump to President Donald Trump**

Over the course of this thesis, I have argued that Donald Trump's use of Twitter should be central to any understanding of his election victory, for three interrelated reasons.

First, Twitter was the nexus of Trump's paranoid populism, an ideology that, though not foreign to American politics *per se*, was anathema to American presidents prior to Trump. Twitter marked the manifestation of Trump's paranoid populism, and mainstream coverage of Trump's Twitter handle greatly exceeded that of all his rivals. The deviance that his ideology represented likely explains much of this disproportionate focus.

Second, Twitter provided a usefully unfiltered line of communication between Trump and both supporters and reporters. At times when it seemed that Trump's vice-like grip on media attention was under threat—as with his boycotting of a presidential debate following a dispute with Fox News—Twitter provided a means for Trump to present his side of the story, and gain attention for it.

Finally, looking ahead, Trump's willingness to use Twitter while in office to amplify paranoid, conspiratorial news stories—often initially discovered (or invented) by far-right outlets like Breitbart—gives him unprecedented power to set the agenda as president, whether to advance his political agenda or, seemingly more often, to distract from other negative coverage.

Crucially, Trump had more political success than his paranoid-populist progenitors, Charles Coughlin and Pat Robertson. Coughlin and Robertson were both eventually brought down by a combination of constraints which never quite caught up with Trump. Coughlin's fiery broadcasts eventually earned him the ire of the government, media networks, and the church—a powerful alliance able to effectively take him off the air just in time for World War II. It was only by skirting around the “Fairness Doctrine”—a legacy of Coughlin—that

Pat Robertson's untrammelled televangelism could find a growing audience on satellite TV. Yet due to the narrowness of his audience, Robertson was unable to grow his relatively niche following into a reliable voting bloc when he ran for president. Trump, whether by accident or design, stumbled on a hybrid communications strategy centered on Twitter, which enabled him to simultaneously nurture his dedicated following and grow it, through amplification both on the network and beyond it.

The implications of this study are thus both explanatory in terms of Trump's election victory, and predictive, perhaps, of how the forty-fifth president will communicate with the public and the press going forward. Of course, my research leaves much out. Little mentioned here are several other factors underpinning Trump's success, from the weaknesses of his opponent, to the failure of polling to accurately predict the outcome, to the potential involvement of foreign actors in his ultimate success. Each of these considerations would undoubtedly make for worthy and important studies; my sole intention here has been to argue that Trump's use of Twitter is at least as significant to his success as any other factor. In short, I hope to have demonstrated here that President Donald Trump owes much to @realDonaldTrump.

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