

The Twitter of Donald J. Trump During an Age of Uncertainty: The COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In the year 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic affected both the public health and political landscapes. When the COVID-19 virus eventually reached American soil, many fabrics of our society were impacted—from the economic, social, and political landscapes. The rhetoric surround COVID-19 had proven to be an essential area of study, especially since it was so timely and continued to be impactful. Undoubtedly, this topic became a major political topic and one that President Trump was very outspoken about—in a variety of ways. This study uses ideological criticism to analyze the Twitter feed of President Donald J. Trump during the COVID-19 pandemic to uncover the sorts of ideologies and narratives his discourse about the virus portrayed; all of which have real world impacts. After conducting a rhetorical analysis, three underlying ideologies were found: First, there was a perpetuation of anti-Asian discrimination and racism. Secondly, an overall distrust in the media that reinforced an overall distrust in science and governmental institutions. Lastly, there was a continued reinforcing of our two-party system that only perpetuates the polarization between the parties.

Keywords: COVID-19, Trump, tweets, ideology

INTRODUCTION

In late February/early March of 2020, the SARS-CoV-2 virus hit American shores. More commonly referred to as Coronavirus or COVID-19, the U.S. was (and still has been) hit hard by the deadly respiratory virus. Around the second week of March 2020, the world shut down and it felt like the entire globe was in a standstill. On March 12th, the front page of the *New York Post* said the world “TURNED UPSIDE DOWN” and that this was possibly the biggest news story and world event since 9/11 (Stelter, 2021). With various state and local lockdowns and curfews, mask mandates, empty shelves in grocery stores, personal and economic uncertainty, and over 500,000 Americans dead (as of March 2021), former President Donald Trump often went to Twitter to speak his mind on the virus.

It is crucial to analyze Donald Trump’s rhetoric in regard to the virus because, nonetheless, the pandemic has become highly politicized. *Politico* reporter Dan Diamond told *National Public Radio* that in the midst of the pandemic, Trump did not push for aggressive testing because more testing meant higher COVID-19 cases and “the president had made clear: the lower the numbers on coronavirus, the better for the president, the better for his potential reelection this fall” (Gross, 2020). In order to vie for reelection, Trump went to great lengths to assure his followers on Twitter that COVID-19 was not as serious as the media was making it out to be, as will be discussed later in this study. In a relatively new and timely study on polarization and politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hart et al. (2020) found that “public opinion on COVID-19 was highly polarized during the same time that media coverage was highly polarized” (p. 692). Hart et al. also found that polarized signals from political elites contributed to polarized media coverage and thus can cause public fear and confusion. With peoples’ lives on the lines, it is important to study former President Trump’s discourse about COVID-19 during his time of presidency. More specifically, it is critical to study his social media discourse about COVID-19 because his messages on Twitter reached a mass audience that in turn has the potential to reshape the information about COVID-19.

Barack Obama’s 2008 Twitter campaign forever changed the political landscape vis-à-vis social media. In a 2008 article by *The Guardian* following a historic Obama win, the authors highly stressed his success among young people, “exit polls on Tuesday revealed that Obama had won nearly 70% of the vote among young Americans under 25” (Fraser, 2008, para. 2) indicating possibilities for successful targeting of young potential voters via social media. Similarly, three-quarters of internet users went online during the 2008 election to get their news or gather information about the candidates (Smith, 2009). Undoubtedly, following that election, social media has proved to be

essential stomping grounds for politicians to communicate to their supporters, their potential supporters, and even to those who do not support them.

What makes social media so captivating is its ability to allow users to find other users who think similarly to themselves which allows for an online social bonding and companionship (Owen, 2019). This social media phenomenon reinforces personal and political identities that then allows for even more political use (Owen, 2019); so why wouldn't politicians use social media to find their like-minded constituents or followers to support them in elections, their policies, agenda setting, and so forth? It is apparent through the Obama's 2008 win and the Trump winning the 2016 election that social media plays a major role in presidential elections. This study of President Trump's social media practice is crucial to understand what types of messages he was spreading through a communication resource like Twitter and what this type of discourse means coming from the President of the United States, who is often looked at as a source of guidance in crises.

The purpose of this study is to examine former president Donald J. Trump tweets in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic to examine the implications of his tweets and messages about the virus, as well as what ideologies his discourse reinforces. Many studies have been done on Donald Trump's past Twitter use (Coe & Griffin, 2020; Enli, 2017; McGregor & Lawrence, 2018; Ott, 2016; Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019; Ross & Caldwell, 2020), and more research will be useful to understand the implications of his rhetoric. With the current political climate today, it is essential to recognize and understand the implications of the messages a President has sent out to American citizens during a time of social uncertainty and about a virus that is highly contagious and deadly.

Donald Trump has also undoubtedly made his mark on Twitter, with a never before seen, harsh, constant, and unconventional style of tweeting from a President of the United States before he was ultimately deplatformed from the website on January 8th, 2021. Therefore, conducting a current rhetorical study of Donald Trump's tweets about the pandemic is all the more vital because it is important to understand what his discourse means in the context of presidential discourse in general. The rest of this paper address the existing literature in regard to politicians on social media and Twitter more specifically. Not only will existing literature be addressed, but any gaps in the current research will be discussed as well. After conducting an ideological criticism, it became apparent that Trump reinforced three overarching ideologies throughout his tweets in 2020, including Asian American discrimination and racism, a distrust of large institutions including the media, and an increased political polarization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politicians' Communication on Social Media

There have been various studies on politicians and social media done in the past decade or so. Many have taken varying routes and approaches to their studies. Social media has become a huge aspect of our society and it is a relatively new arena for politicians to exist on. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, President Obama's 2008 campaign highlights the success of a politician utilizing new technology like that of social media and Twitter to campaign for political elections and build public perception and approval. Therefore, it is important to analyze what research has been done on politicians and Twitter to determine what has been studied and what could be studied next.

Some of the research on politicians and social media takes a look at practices in a more "general" scope—meaning research on social media extends to different sites and comparing their various practices. For example, many of the research studies look at both Facebook and Twitter as the two main social media sites where politicians engage with their audiences on (Kreiss et al., 2017; Stier et al., 2018). The literature has cumulatively found that each and every social media website has its own rules and practices that heavily influences the type of campaigning a politician performs. Not only does it influence campaigns, but those same affordances can also determine how a politician's message is perceived. The research also argues that if a campaign wants to be successful, messages and practices should be composed with the medium in mind. For example, Kreiss et al. (2017) conducted in-depth interviews with officials of well-known campaigns to find that that each campaign took into consideration four main attributes: the audience they hoped to target, affordances of the media in particular, the genre of the social media, and timing. These attributes ultimately determined whether to post on say, Facebook or Twitter, and then influenced how the campaign would frame those messages on those sites.

Similarly, Stier et al. (2018) found that politicians and their campaign teams employ different strategies depending on the site they are using based on the affordances that site gives them. For example, politicians use a "masspersonal" strategy on Twitter to attract both a mass audience, while at the same time speaking to a smaller, more specific audience (Stier et al, 2018). Whereas, on Facebook, campaigns use this platform for more direct

communication practices like that of logistical campaign information and mobilization purposes (Stier et al, 2018). One of the reasons for this is because journalists have often credited Twitter for being the most news garnering due to information being able to travel more fluidly because it is “public” (Stier et al, 2018). Facebook, on the other hand, is often more “private” and used for personal reasons. For campaign purposes, if a user is actively seeking out a candidates’ Facebook page and “liking” it (and thus following it), the campaign knows this a good place to spread logistical campaign information because they know these users are interested in this type of information (Stier et al, 2018). Ultimately, the uses and affordances of Twitter and Facebook (and social media in general) play a huge role in a politician’s activity on social media.

But why does social media matter? Does it ultimately make a difference in say, the result of an election? In a study done on the 2016 presidential election, Macafee et al. (2019) correctly hypothesized that if an individual actively “followed” an ingroup candidate on social media, the individual perceives that that candidate will win the election, and thus increases their intentions to vote for that candidate. Opposingly, if an individual followed their opposing party candidate, their perceptions of that candidate of winning the election are not the same as if it was a member of their own party (Macafee, 2019). This data shows that social media does have the power to reinforce many voters’ intentions on a large scale.

Social media has shown the potential for having a pivotal and important role in the political process. The *Pew Research Center* found that social media has now surpassed print media as a primary news source (Shearer, 2018). Television does still lead the rankings as a primary news source for Americans, but nonetheless, social media plays an active role in primary news consumption. More specifically, “the web has closed in on television as a source for news—43% of adults get news often from news websites or social media, compared with 49% for television” (Shearer, 2018, para. 3). Plus, it seems as if this trend is going to keep increasing in the coming years—mainly due to new social media sites and technologies continuously appearing and becoming increasingly popular. Thus, social media does play a big role in the political process and news consumption and it should be accounted for. While all of these studies have introduced varying and interesting data on politicians’ social media activity, none of them account for global pandemics. The proposed research study hopes to add to the current literature by exploring how a major societal event, like a global pandemic, can or cannot influence ideologies through the Twitter feed of former President Donald Trump.

Politicians’ Communication on Twitter

In terms of this study, Twitter will be the primary medium to analyze and this is for many reasons. If any social media site is the most “news garnering” it has to be Twitter. Recent data shows that, “Twitter stands out as one of the social media sites with the most news-focused users. Around seven-in-ten adult Twitter users in the U.S. (71%) get news on the site” (Hughes & Wojcik, 2019). With a large number of Americans accessing some of their news on Twitter, it can also be concluded that they were more than likely witnessing political actors engaging on the site. This fact alone emphasizes the need to understand how politicians, and mainstream ones at that, utilize Twitter and then survey the implications of the messages they disseminate to the public.

Not only was Barack Obama on Twitter in the ’08 and ’12 presidential campaigns, his Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, followed suit in 2012. In her study, Janet Johnson (2012) focused mainly on Romney’s adaption to the rhetorical situation on Twitter and how he employed strategies of ethos, logos, and pathos (credibility, reasoning, and audience) through his tweets. Johnson found that Romney was able to successfully remove the middleman (the media) by sending out his own “twitter bites”, thus his messages were coming directly from him and not paraphrased or analyzed by the media. Perhaps this is a key explanation for why politicians have been utilizing social media more. Johnson’s rhetorical study revealed that conducting this type of research is becoming increasingly important in understanding the relatively new phenomena of rhetoric existing on social media platforms.

Another reason Twitter could be a vital tool to gain new voters compared to that of traditional media like print, is that it can create a more “personal experience”. It was found that the users who were shown the Twitter page felt more connected to the candidate and had a sense of “direct” or “face-to-face” conversation with him and were more likely to vote for them (Lee & Shin, 2012). Whereas those who were shown an interview article of the politician, were better able to understand the policies discussed, but did not develop as strong of a “connection” as being one-on-one like Twitter had the ability to (Lee & Shin, 2012). Similarly, in another study by Lee (2013) they found that a politician’s social media presence alone created an image of a personal connection with the candidate, thus increasing the viewers opinion of the candidate. This indicates that Twitter has the affordances to create a stronger, more prominent personal connection with a politician, increasing the likelihood for more potential voters and supporters, and gives all the more reason to explore how President Trump employs his strategies on Twitter.

Donald Trump's Communication on Twitter

Undoubtedly, Donald Trump took American politics over by storm. Being such a polarizing figure, along with a never-before-seen style of tweeting, many studies have been done on his new wave of political activity on Twitter (Coe & Griffin, 2020; Enli, 2017; McGregor & Lawrence, 2018; Ott, 2016; Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019; Ross & Caldwell, 2020). What makes Donald Trump's tweeting so noteworthy is that he was so unpredictable, which makes him interesting to study. Not only that, his style and presence on social media, no matter how controversial or negative it was, catapulted his campaign in 2016. His 2016 campaign was successful because he was able to "differentiate" himself from politicians of the past with an unfiltered, "honest", and a no holding back type of tweeting. In doing so, his word choices and statements he chooses will point to a particular way of thinking, a type of ideology, that can trickle down to his followers.

Clarke and Grieve (2019) stated that even though it was unlike any other type of campaign of years past, Trump and his team did have some sort of strategy:

We see clear shifts in the way the campaign uses Twitter depending on their general communicative goals, including appealing to different audiences, promoting the campaign, defending Trump against criticisms, deflecting controversies, and attacking opponents—all of which are fundamental to successful political campaigns" (para. 40).

Despite the unpredictability, there are three main themes that have come from various studies done on Donald Trump's tweeting practices: negativity, nontraditional, and the ability to reach mainstream audiences. Nonetheless, the findings below highlight why a more recent study on Donald Trump's tweeting in the year 2020 could be useful to better understand his very particular type of rhetoric.

Negativity. A key finding across a variety of studies finds that Trump's style of tweeting is often negative. Twitter, with its short form and simplistic style, allows for quick, impulsive reactions that create uncivil discourse (Ott, 2016). Since Twitter fosters simple, impulsive, and uncivil discourse, Ott (2016) correlated this through quantitative analysis with Trump's rhetoric and found that much of his tweeting activities relate to this Twitter "style". For example, he often uses short "simple" words like "good", "bad", and "sad" and that the majority of tweets are negative in connotation and even outright insults (Ott, 2016).

Ross and Caldwell (2020) found that after analyzing 3000 of his tweets towards the end of the 2016 election, as well as three months afterwards, Trump consistently personally attacked political opponent Hillary Clinton's character, calling her "Crooked", as well as attacking her track record and her family. Ultimately, their study confirmed that Trump does indeed use a style of tweeting that they call "going negative". By going negative, Trump prioritized character assassination and attacking opponents over positive self-promotion or his own policies.

Not only is Trump's overall tone negative, while also overwhelmingly negative towards his opponents, Trump's negativity also exists when he tweets about marginalized groups as well. In a study by Coe and Griffin (2020), the researchers found he is willing to be explicit when invoking marginalized groups. They found that only 41% of his tweets during his first two years of presidency were negative towards marginalized groups, which for Trump's Twitter style is seemingly surprising. However, an earlier study found that in major presidential speeches from 1933 to 2011, there were no instances of negative invocations of marginalized groups (Coe & Schmidt, 2012). This indicates that Trump's frequency of being negative towards marginalized groups is well above the norm both for presidents how have existed during the social media age and even those prior.

Nontraditional. Not only are Trump's tweets largely negative, they can be labeled nontraditional as well. During the months of March-July 2016, a quantitative content analysis was conducted on Donald Trump and opponent Hillary Clinton's tweets between the months of March-July 2016 based upon a decided framework of traditional versus nontraditional practices (Enli, 2017). It was found that 82% of Clinton's tweets were labeled as "traditional" or professional, whereas only 38% of Trump's tweets were traditional and the rest were labeled as "nontraditional" or amateurish and unconventional (Enli, 2017). This points to a contributing factor of how Trump gained popularity during his campaign to the White House and is an important distinguishable factor in his rhetoric and tweeting style.

Reaches Mainstream Audiences. Tweets sent out by Donald Trump not only reach social media audiences, but mainstream audiences as well, indicating some large implications based solely on the amount of people his messages have the opportunity to reach. With a large social media presence (in 2020 before he was deplatformed, he had 88.7 million followers) and the issues he often talked about negatively including immigration, foreign affairs,

women, and the media—Trump tweets had the ability to determine what is on the front page of the most popular newspapers. For example, in the first 100 days of his presidency, Trump’s negative approach to highly politicized issues on Twitter led to newspapers like “*USA Today*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Times* [to] dedicate their front pages to the President and to the issues he gives priority in his daily tweets, irrespective of whether or not they have anything to do with current affairs” (Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019, p. 71). This evidence highlights Trump’s ability to reach mainstream audiences and also shift the focus to his own personal or political agendas. Very similarly, a study done found that 87% of Trump’s tweets during his first 100 days in office were translated onto at least one mainstream news (McGregor & Lawrence, 2018). Both of these studies indicate that the rhetoric of Donald Trump not only exists on social media, but it spreads to more mainstream “traditional” news sources like newspapers and television that has the potential to reach even more people than just those who see it on social media.

Ideological Criticism on Social Media

The tweets that politicians send out are meant to be persuasive, which makes studying tweets sent out by prominent political figures an area to be successfully studied through a rhetorical lens. Not only are they persuasive, but their tweets have the potential to either reinforce or challenge hegemonic ideologies. The term “ideology” is a complicated term and has a long-rooted history with means of power. For the purposes of this research study, the definition provided by Sonja Foss (2017) is a good one to mention. According to Foss (2017), ideology is a “system of ideas or a pattern of beliefs that determines a group’s interpretations of some aspect(s) of the world. It is a mental framework—the ‘concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation’ that a group deploys to make sense of and define the world or some aspect of it” (p. 237). The issue with ideology then becomes apparent when a certain ideology becomes dominant and controls or dictates what is seen as “normal”. As Foss explains, when a person or group tries to challenge a hegemonic norm, they and their ideas are then seen as abnormal.

One very important aspect of hegemonic ideologies is that a process has to occur to keep them seen as the norm. As Foss (2017) put it: “To maintain a position of dominance, a hegemonic ideology must be renewed, reinforced, and defended continually through the use of rhetorical strategies and practices” (p. 239). Therefore, it is crucial to conduct an ideological study of President Trump’s tweets during a time of political, economic, and health uncertainty in the world. The purpose of this study is to analyze Trump’s tweets in order to discover the dominant ideologies Trump reinforces through his discourse on Twitter. Not only is it important to recognize what hegemonic forces are at play through his messages and symbols, but it is equally important to recognize what counter set of beliefs or ideas he is challenging. In other words, what ideologies is he trying to silence while simultaneously reinforcing hegemonic norms? Finally, completing critical research is necessary to understand the implications of the messages Trump, as a former President, spreads to the American public and to the world.

COVID-19. Trump’s dialogue and discourse both on Twitter and in real life address a wide array of issues that each have their own ideologies imbedded within them. Starting in the year 2020 and now into the beginning of 2021, COVID-19 has drastically become a huge topic of concern and debate. As stated earlier in this paper, Trump’s tweets prior to his deplatforming had a large potential of reaching mainstream news and contributing to the discussion and knowledge around COVID-19. Hart et al. (2020) concluded that the media along with political elites have played a part in the large polarization of opinion on the virus. Politicians were quoted more in news sources than actual, qualified health officials (Hart et al., 2020). Similarly, a study done by MIT found that false information spreads at alarming rates on Twitter compared to that of the real news (Dizikes, 2018). For example, a false news story is 70% more likely to be retweeted than a true story (Dizikes, 2018). This highlights the urgency of understanding the impact a factually incorrect tweet sent by Trump could have, especially considering his large following at the time and in terms of public health.

This study examines how ideology is reinforced or challenged during a global pandemic. By analyzing the language and symbols Trump uses in regard to COVID-19 on Twitter, the study will be able to draw conclusions about his ideological rhetoric style. Focusing on tweets regarding COVID-19 will prove to be beneficial because it is a highly relevant topic and the messages being spread about it prove to have life and death implications. Ultimately, this study aims to analyze if and how Trump used ideology in his tweets about COVID-19 and what those implications could mean in a time of uncertainty in a global pandemic.

METHODS

The current study utilized rhetorical criticism as a method within the critical research paradigm. Critical research does not aim to be objective or impartial, it seeks to be evaluative and judgmental especially in the case of

critiquing persuasive messages. “Ultimately good criticism and good critics aspire to add to our understanding of how humans use symbols to influence on another” (Campbell & Burkholder, 1997, p. 15). In terms of analyzing persuasive and symbolic presidential tweets, a critical lens is the best suited paradigm to conduct a proper critique. The role of the researcher in this study is to, again, be subjective and evaluative.

It is also important to note that Twitter, whether intended or not, is a place where persuasive political rhetoric can thrive. In fact, it has been found that Twitter is a space that can advance social movements (i.e., the Black Lives Matter Movement) through its users deploying social identities and mobilizations tactics to influence the movement (Wilkins et al., 2019). Not only do methods in rhetorical criticism hope to add to the theory of rhetorical criticism, but another of its main goals is to improve our practice of communication (Foss, 2017, p. 8). In other words, by completing this research within this method, as a critical researcher, I can identify persuasive messages and evaluate them with a critical lens and improve the ways I read politics on online formats. For all these reasons, a critical rhetorical approach is the best method to analyze presidential tweets in regard to COVID-19.

Texts

This study sampled selected tweets sent out by Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) that were originally posted on the social media site Twitter. Considering Donald Trump was deplatformed from Twitter on January 8th, all of his former Tweets were no longer accessible on Twitter itself. For the purposes of this study, the website “Trump Twitter Archive” (Brown, 2021) was used to gather tweets President Trump had formerly posted. When Trump was still on Twitter, the site constantly checked his Twitter account every 60 seconds and recorded every tweet he had sent into a database. The website started in 2016 and recorded every single one of his tweets up until he was deplatformed. All tweets regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, excluding retweets, were collected between the dates of January 1st, 2020 and January 9th, 2021. Retweets were not considered for this study in order to concentrate on rhetoric written by Trump himself and due to Trump’s constant tweeting and retweeting practices, the pool was exceptionally larger when retweets were included (there was a total of 640 tweets and retweets). Using the site’s algorithmic insight tool, his tweets were narrowed down by using the keywords “COVID”, “virus”, “coronavirus”, and “pandemic” considering the proposed area of concentration and study. Finally, a total of 228 tweets coincided with the sample dates and keywords for analysis.

Procedure

After COVID-19 was determined as the area of concentration in regard to Trump’s tweets, I went through each of the 228 tweets and coded them as certain themes became apparent. Trump consistently used recurring keywords and phrases that allowed for identifying the presented elements of his tweets that could point to ideology. Identifying presented elements “involves identifying the basic observable features of the artifact” (Foss, 2017, p. 243). Since Twitter is not a visual artifact, observing the phrases and words Trump used and then recording them allowed for themes to emerge. Foss (2017) explains that after identifying the explicit observations of an artifact, the critic must identify the suggested elements of the discovered elements. After all keywords and phrases were coded and recorded, I made claims of what those keywords of what those explicit words mean as a basis for forming an ideology. Finally, I took the suggested elements from his tweets to create ideological clusters. Questions asked are things like: What does the artifact ask the audience to believe, understand, feel, or think about? What values or conceptions of good/bad are suggested? What points of view are ignored? Who is empowered/disempowered?

ANALYSIS

After analyzing Trump’s tweets from the dates and criteria established for this study, three major themes became apparent across his tweeting practices. Trump consistently referred to COVID-19 as the “China” or “Chinese” Virus, he often referred to left leaning media outlets as “Fake News”, and he chose to deflect responsibility onto others, especially the Democratic party. All themes reinforce ideologies that have become apparent within his four years of presidency. More specifically, three ideological clusters became apparent: 1) A perpetuation of anti-Asian discrimination and racism, 2) A distrust in the media also reinforces an overall distrust in science and governmental institutions, and 3) A continued reinforcing of our two-party system that only increases the political divide between “conservatives” and “liberals”. What is important to distinguish across these findings is that it was very common for these themes to appear simultaneously in his tweets. For example, it was not uncommon for a single tweet to use the term “China Virus” and “fake news” while also shifting the blame. Throughout the analysis, this will become apparent, but it is important to recognize that these themes did not exist separately from each other, but that they occurred quite frequently together.

“China Virus”

On March 16th, 2020 President Trump first referred to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” in one of his tweets. He said, “The United States will be powerfully supporting those industries, like Airlines and others, that are particularly affected by the Chinese Virus. We will be stronger than ever before!” (2020, March 16). Throughout the pandemic, Trump consistently called it either the “China virus”, “Chinese virus”, or sometimes “China’s Coronavirus”, even up until he was deplatformed in January of 2021. It is important to note that he did refer to it as its official name, COVID-19 or some version of that more often than he used “Chinese virus”, but it is important to recognize what it means for a President of the United States to call a virus the “Chinese virus” on varying platforms, not just Twitter. He used the term “China/Chinese” virus, all in a variety of contexts, for a total of 47 times out of 228 tweets analyzed. Here are just some examples:

- “...The onslaught of the Chinese Virus is not your fault! Will be stronger than ever!” (2020, March 18)
- “I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning, including my very early decision to close the “borders” from China - against the wishes of almost all. Many lives were saved. The Fake News new narrative is disgraceful & false!” (2020, March 18)
- “Great reviews on our handling of Covid 19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus.” (2020, May 25)
- “\$2000 for our great people, not \$600! They have suffered enough from the China Virus!!!” (2020, December 29)

On the surface, it may not seem problematic to call a virus by where it originated in the world. Up until 2015, it was common to identify a virus by where it originated, e.g. “Spanish” Flu or “Ebola” (*ABC News*, 2020). However, the World Health Organization has now recommended for scientists to avoid this practice to “minimize unnecessary effects on nations, economies, and peoples” (*ABC News*, 2020, para. 5). With this in mind, considering the United States’ history with Asian American discrimination, President Trump’s consistent use of the “China/Chinese” virus through Twitter only perpetuates and amplifies Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) discrimination. Not only did the hashtag #chinesevirus increase by nearly ten times after Trump first tweeted it in 2020, but threats and racist attacks against Asian Americans have increased (Salcedo, 2021). From the deadly Atlanta shooting in March 2021 where six Asian women were killed, to a 150% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2020 in metropolitan areas like that of New York City and Los Angeles (Yam, 2021), the effects of such a discourse are dangerous and even deadly to Asian Americans.

In many instances, Trump used terminology around the phrase “Chinese virus” to imply how deadly and or dangerous the virus is, which yes, is true. However, when he uses verbs such as “the *onslaught* of the Chinese virus is not your fault” like in the tweet above, it insinuates that it is not Americans’ faults, but rather China’s fault, which can have negative effects on how people view the AAPI community in this country. Another verb he used was “clobbered” like he did in this tweet: “European Countries are sadly getting *clobbered* by the China Virus. The Fake News does not like reporting this!” (2020, November 16). In a tweet from January 1st, 2021, Trump again used particular terminology that has important implications:

“Our Republican Senate just missed the opportunity to get rid of Section 230, which gives unlimited power to Big Tech companies. Pathetic!!! Now they want to give people *ravaged* by the China Virus \$600, rather than the \$2000 which they so desperately need. Not fair, or smart!”

Considering the instances in which the verb “ravaged” is used, particularly natural disasters or even war zones, this particular choice of words creates a very hostile attitude towards specifically China. In another tweet, Trump said “All over the World the CoronaVirus, a very bad “gift” from China, marches on. Not good!” (2020, May 28). Here, he explicitly states that officials in China sent the coronavirus as a “gift” to create turmoil around the world. This is a dangerous claim to make, especially on behalf of a president on a social media platform. This perpetuates the belief that the disease is the fault of the Chinese and normalizes the idea that viruses are racial and not biological.

Similarly, he made another claim around the fact that China is responsible:

“Some wacko in China just released a statement blaming everybody other than China for the Virus which has now killed hundreds of thousands of people. Please explain to this dope that it was the “incompetence of China”, and nothing else, that did this mass Worldwide killing!” (2020, May 20)

Here, again, Trump uses hostile language and even name calling to focus on pointing fingers at where the virus originated, rather than focus on how to slow the curve or urge Americans to be safe and/or take it seriously. “The incompetence of China” may be a hit towards Chinese officials who Trump, and his administration have had tough relations with, however, this continued hostile language in his tweets about China, combined with the phrase “China/Chinese virus” can trickle down from just political jabs at Chinese government officials to an even broader population, the entire AAPI community. If a President is continuously using harsh language and shifting blame towards China, it is not surprising that ideologies and prejudice towards China and Asian and Pacific Islanders at large are going to be reinforced.

Borders

Not only did Trump consistently use language and terminology to create unease and distrust towards a country like China while also stigmatizing those in the AAPI community, but he also often referenced closing borders during the pandemic. This again, at first glance, might be unsurprising or even expected considering the importance of trying to stop a virus from reaching U.S. shores. However, when you take into account each tweet where he discusses border regulation, the tone and context he discusses them in only perpetuate his very strong nationalistic stance on immigration.

One of his very first tweets during the pandemic was on March 8, 2020:

“We have a perfectly coordinated and fine-tuned plan at the White House for our attack on CoronaVirus. *We moved VERY early to close borders to certain areas, which was a Godsend.* V.P. is doing a great job. The Fake News Media is doing everything possible to make us look bad. Sad!”

Here, it was a “Godsend” that Trump made the decision to close the borders. Trump did not cease to highlight his early decisions to close borders, especially to certain areas. There are two specific tweets that should be shown to highlight his emphasis on border control:

“Spending the morning speaking to @fema and Military relative to CoronaVirus. Also, spoke to leaders of various countries including Poland, South Korea and Bahrain. Last night had a very gold conversation with the President of Mexico on numerous topics. Border is very strong!” (2020, April 18)

It is interesting that in this tweet Trump starts off with discussing his conversations with countries like that of Poland, South Korea and Bahrain, but at the end he chooses to say “Border is very strong” after stating his discussion with the President of Mexico. It is important to recognize that he chose to say that the singular “border” is very strong, implying the U.S. and Mexico border.

“Mexico is sadly experiencing very big CoronaVirus problems, and now California, get this, doesn’t want people coming over the Southern Border. A Classic! They are sooo lucky that I am their President. Border is very tight and the Wall is rapidly being built!” (2020, May 4)

In both cases, Trump was able to take topics of COVID-19 as reason or justification for tight border control—*especially* the southern border. If it was his intention to close the borders to *every* country in order to stop the virus, that is one thing. However, in the tweets where he discusses borders, it is often accompanied with talks of the southern border, which only stresses his hopes to enact rigorous border control to stop immigrants coming from South America. His plans for the U.S. and Mexico border and restricting immigration was a major part of his campaign that got him elected in 2016. Despite a global pandemic, Trump still chose to highlight border restrictions, especially Mexico, in his Twitter activity to further perpetuate ideologies on bringing the United States to a more nationalistic, independent nation.

Fake News

Not only did Trump unceasingly refer to COVID-19 as the “China/Chinese” virus, but he continued his “Fake news” rhetoric and attack on left leaning media all throughout the pandemic. Some of the most common phrases Trump used when discussing COVID-19 and the media were the “Radical Left Media”, “Lamestream Media”, “Fake News”, or a combination of all those phrases. Prior to his election in 2016, Trump was very critical of mainstream media outlets, specifically the left leaning media and would try to undermine their reporting by calling it “Fake news”. Trump’s presidency has undoubtedly brought the term “Fake news” into the mainstream and has forever changed how we interpret fake news. For example, on Google Trends, in September 2016 the phrase “Fake news” was at a 6 in terms of popularity (Google Trends has a scale of 1-100, with 50 being half popular and 100 being peak popularity). The term jumped from a 6 to 100 by January 2017 (Google Trends, 2015). However, it is important to understand the implications of dubbing a platform or piece of information as fake news. It is vital to understand what the term originally meant and how the use has shifted.

Trump certainly was not the one who coined or “invented” the phrase “fake news”. It started becoming mainstream in 2015 by a man named Craig Silverman who worked as a reporter at *BuzzFeed* (Beaujon, 2019). Silverman’s definition of “Fake news” was, and argues still should be, “completely false content, created to deceive, and with an economic motive” (para. 6). In 2019, Trump took the credit for inventing the phrase: “I don’t even use fake anymore,” he said. “I call the fake news now corrupt news because fake isn’t tough enough. And I’m the one that came up with the term—I’m very proud of it, but I think I’m gonna switch it to corrupt news” (Beaujon, 2019, para. 1).

But indeed, it was Trump who took the term “Fake news” and brought it a completely new meaning as shown by Google Trends. Fake news has now become such a loaded term—partly, because of its continued use and the contexts it is used in. It is now something people throw out when they don’t believe a news source or a particular

piece of information and usually, that news source is often on the opposite political spectrum that they identify with. Trump, undoubtedly, contributed to this fake news phenomenon and his tweets in 2020 are evidence to that. In my sample dates alone (Jan 1, 2020-Jan 9, 2021) Trump's tweets included the phrase "Fake news" 289 times (Brown, 2021). That amount is larger than my sample tweets about COVID-19. For the terms of my study, Trump tweeted about COVID-19 and "Fake news" 46 times. In doing so, President Trump's constant use of "Fake news" maintains the ideology that undermines large institutions like that of the government, the media, and even science.

As mentioned earlier, Trump often used "Fake news" and "lamestream media" to describe the left media. He called out the media for supposedly making the virus appear worse than it actually was. For example:

- "The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the CoronaVirus situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant. Surgeon General, "The risk is low to the average American." (2020, March 9)
- "Why does the Lamestream Fake News Media REFUSE to say that China Virus deaths are down 39%, and that we now have the lowest Fatality (Mortality) Rate in the World. They just can't stand that we are doing so well for our Country!" (2020, July 6)
- "Totally Negative China Virus Reports. Hit it early and hard. Fake News is devastated. They are very bad (and sick!) people!" (2020, October 13)

In these tweets, Trump is urging that the media is partly to blame for the reaction COVID-19 caused across the U.S. and the world. This was a mindset by many conservatives that the virus was either, not as bad as the flu or that the world was overreacting (Bittle, 2020). Also note that he uses the term "China Virus" when calling out the "Fake news". In this tweet by Trump, he said:

"So last year 37,000 Americans died from the common Flu. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life & the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!" (2020, March 9)

Here, he urges that the virus is not something worth taking serious steps to prevent, prepare, etc. Because of this rationale, Trump called out the "lamestream media" for taking a different approach. He even implies that the people at these sources are "very bad (and sick!) people"; playing off the fact that COVID-19 is a sickness and that these news sources are just as bad, if not worse, as COVID-19.

Trump also claims that news sources are out to make him look bad. Take this tweet for example:

"With the exception of New York & a few other locations, we've done MUCH better than most other Countries in dealing with the China Virus. Many of these countries are now having a major second wave. The Fake News is working overtime to make the USA (& me) look as bad as possible!" (2020, August 3)

In that tweet specifically, he was trying to appeal to his audience by creating as much anger towards the media for making the U.S. look bad with our response to the virus. He was also urging Americans that the media is not one to be trusted. He also called out certain news platforms explicitly like *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*:

- "Advertising in the Failing New York Times is WAY down. Washington Post is not much better. I can't say whether this is because they are Fake News sources of information, to a level that few can understand, or the Virus is just plain beating them up. Fake News is bad for America!" (2020, April 6)
- So now the Fake News @nytimes is tracing the CoronaVirus origins back to Europe, NOT China. This is a first! I wonder what the Failing New York Times got for this one? Are there any NAMED sources? They were recently thrown out of China like dogs, and obviously want back in. Sad! (2020, April 11)

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were the only two specific news sources he called out in his tweets; all other times "Fake news" was just thrown out as an all-encompassing term to describe the media outlets most likely being critical of him or reported something he did not agree with. As the 2020 election was nearing, Trump called out the media for only focusing on COVID-19 as a way of getting him out of office, as well the common misconstrued theory that "COVID will disappear once the election is over":

- "We have made tremendous progress with the China Virus, but the Fake News refuses to talk about it this close to the Election. COVID, COVID, COVID is being used by them, in total coordination, in order to change our great early election numbers. Should be an election law violation! (2020, October 26)
- "The Fake News Media is riding COVID, COVID, COVID, all the way to the Election. Losers!" (2020, October 26)
- "Covid, Covid, Covid is the unified chant of the Fake News Lamestream Media. They will talk about nothing else until November 4th., when the Election will be (hopefully!) over. Then the talk will be how low the death rate is, plenty of hospital rooms, & many tests of young people." (2020, October 28)

Those three tweets were just a few out of a string of tweets Trump sent out in the days before the election. Not only was Trump amplifying the idea that COVID will disappear after the election, but he was also insinuating that the

media is trying to rig our democracy's free and fair election. This distrust in the media also translates into a larger distrust of large institutions and the government in general. Creating such sentiments and continuously reinforcing them, especially from the President, can spread not only distrust, but also fear, anxiety, and skepticism to large amounts of people.

All of these tweets about the media, all in varying contexts, point to a much larger ideology that the media is something to inherently distrust—which Trump has based his policies and ideas off of. There is no denying that the media structures that exist in the world, and the U.S. specifically, have their issues. From framing events as spectacles, to dramatization for clicks and views, and yes, even the spreading of inaccurate information that could mislead audiences. However, there is still something to be said about a President describing specific news sources he does not agree with interchangeably with “Fake news”. This creates an overall distrust in media and news outlets that could lead to even more confusion on who are what is telling the truth.

Deflection

Another tactic Trump utilized during 2020 was a frequent shifting of the blame, while also insulting the members of the Democratic party and his Presidential opponent, Joe Biden. In doing so, he is perpetuating the increased political divide and polarization that we see in this country. This mindset and polarization has existed before Trump; however, Trump has taken it to new lengths as has become apparent just in his tweets about COVID-19. It also became clear after analysis that Trump was using COVID-19 as a means of trying to make his opponents look as bad as possible, especially in hopes of reelection. He also took it as an opportunity to undermine Joe Biden's competency with regards to global health epidemics. He insulted Democrats and opponents nineteen times, while deflecting responsibility onto others 39 times. Take these tweets, for example, where he brought up the H1N1 virus that occurred during the Obama/Biden Administration starting in 2009.

- Sleepy Joe Biden was acknowledged by his own people to have done a terrible job on a much easier situation, H1N1 Swine Flu. The Obama Administration failed badly on this, & now he sits back in his basement and criticizes every move we make on the China Virus. DOING GREAT” (2020, September 3)
- Joe Biden has no plan for Coronavirus - ALL TALK! He was a disaster in his handling of H1N1 Swine Flu. He didn't have a clue, with his own Chief of Staff so saying. If he were in charge, perhaps 2.2 million people would have died from this much more lethal disease! (2020, October 8)
- Joe Biden's response to the H1N1 Swine Flu, far less lethal than Covid 19, was one of the weakest and worst in the history of fighting epidemics and pandemics. It was pathetic, those involved have said. Joe didn't have a clue! (2020, October 23)
- Biden did a very POOR job of handling H1N1 Swine Flu, yet all he talks about is Covid, Covid, Covid, like he would actually know what he is doing. He doesn't. Plus, he would be TERRIBLE with the Economy! (2020, November 1)

If you notice the dates on these tweets, they line up with the months and even days leading up to Election Day on November 4th. It is clear that through insulting and name calling (“Sleepy Joe Biden”), Trump was shifting the focus from COVID-19 to his own interpretation of how Obama and Biden handled the H1N1 virus. This really is not surprising, especially considering a major election was looming—however, this type of sporadic, and insulting discourse that occurred on Twitter is something we do not typically see in politicians campaign strategies. Sure, politicians will create discourse around their opponent to undermine them or make themselves look better; but in the case of COVID-19 in 2020, there was no logical reason to focus on an epidemic of the past *without* addressing how the current administration is dealing with the current pandemic.

Trump consistently used varying narratives to shift the focus from his administrations' actions and plans in regard to the pandemic. One was to again, call out the “Do Nothing Democrats”:

“The Do Nothing Democrats are spending much of their money on Fake Ads. I never said that the CoronaVirus is a “Hoax”, I said that the Democrats, and the way they lied about it, are a Hoax. Also, it did start with “one person from China”, and then grew, & will be a “Miracle” end!” (2020, April 25)

In this particular tweet, Trump not only insults and blames Democrats for lying about something he said, but he also reiterates their association with “Fake news” while simultaneously implying it is all China's fault and that the virus will be gone once the election is over. This tweet is just one example of how multiple ideologies appeared in single tweets across the board. This focus on Joe Biden and the Democrats that show up continuously throughout the sample again perpetuates the continued political divide in the U.S. today. If a President is actively pointing fingers at the “other side of the aisle” and exclaiming just how “bad” they are, instead of reaching over the aisle to find a compromise, there is an overarching idea that Republicans and Democrats cannot get along with one another.

In other tweets, Trump would insist that our numbers are only so high because we have such great testing:

“The only reason the U.S. has reported one million cases of CoronaVirus is that our Testing is sooo much better than any other country in the World. Other countries are way behind us in Testing, and therefore show far fewer cases!” (2020, April 29)

This again plays into Trump’s desperate need for reelection. As *Politico* reporter Dan Diamond emphasized, Trump was constantly trying to downplay the number of COVID-19 cases to ensure a better potential for reelection (Gross, 2020). In doing so, he claimed our testing was “sooo much better than any other country in the world”, but also was not pushing for even more aggressive testing through his actions.

It was not uncommon for Trump to shift the blame from himself to either the CDC, Obama, Congress, his own intelligence, and China.

- For decades the @CDCgov looked at, and studied, its testing system, but did nothing about it. It would always be inadequate and slow for a large scale pandemic, but a pandemic would never happen, they hoped. President Obama made changes that only complicated things further.....” (2020, March 13)
- Great businessman & philanthropist Bernie Marcus, Co-Founder of Home Depot, said that Congress was too distracted by the (phony) Impeachment Witch Hunt when they should have been investigating CoronaVirus when it first appeared in China. Media played a big roll also!” (2020, April 12)
- Intelligence has just reported to me that I was correct, and that they did NOT bring up the CoronaVirus subject matter until late into January, just prior to my banning China from the U.S. Also, they only spoke of the Virus in a very non-threatening, or matter of fact, manner...” (2020, May 3)
- As I watch the Pandemic spread its ugly face all across the world, including the tremendous damage it has done to the USA, I become more and more angry at China. People can see it, and I can feel it! (2020, June 30)

As apparent in all of these tweets, Trump went to great lengths in his tweets to assure that it was the actions of others that contributed to the state of the world as it was in 2020. It became a constant pointing of fingers and not stepping up taking action to slow the spread, provide accurate information, or any responsibility. From discrediting the CDC and creating a distrust towards health experts, to again blaming the media, and explicitly expressing his anger at China, Trump was able to reinforce a variety of ideologies throughout this process of deflection. With all that being said, an important ideology to dissect from this deflection strategy was the shifting of blame onto Democrats. It is not atypical for a politician to call out members of the opposing party; it is almost expected. However, Trump’s negativity and name-calling as he was doing so is impactful because of the amount of people he is reaching. As was discussed earlier, Trump has the ability to reach mainstream audiences as well as his own followers. With this capability and constant hostility towards the Democratic party, he is only reinforcing our bipartisan system’s polarization and the idea that bipartisan cooperation and compromise is long gone.

What does it mean if Republicans and Democrats cannot get along? To put it simply, there is a staggering amount of affects and we can see the affects from varying levels. In Congress, government shutdowns have become more and more frequent; partisan disagreements and its affects do not just appear in Congress but can trickle down into many aspects of society. In an article by Jilani and Smith (2019), polarization is causing what they call “tribalism” in our society. Tribalism is “clustering ourselves into groups that compete against each other in a zero-sum game where negotiation and compromise are perceived as betrayal, whether those groups are political, racial, economic, religious, gender, or generational” (para. 2). Polarization has affected many walks of life, from families, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and even religious organization (Jilani & Smith, 2019). With an increase in negativity in our politics, judgment of those who identity in the opposing affiliation, family disagreements, distrust, economic struggles can all be traced back to polarization. Not only that, but it can have physical and mental health impacts due to the stress and uncertainty. Finally, we saw polarization exist in Trump’s rhetoric on Twitter as a means of political gain, but it important to understand the implications of this along with his other ideologies that have become apparent throughout this study.

IMPLICATIONS

All three ideological clusters that have been discussed have important implications, some of which have been already laid out earlier in this paper. However, I think it is important to reiterate what they can mean for large groups of people. Then, it is equally important to discuss what this study means for future rhetorical studies as well.

First, America has long mistreated Asian Americans in this country; from the Chinese Exclusion Act and other exclusion acts and orders in the 19th century, to using Asian Americans as a scapegoat following World War II, and even the stereotype of AAPI individuals being the “model minority immigrant”—anti-Asian hate is unfortunately nothing new in the U.S. In the case of COVID-19 and Trump’s use of the “China virus”, he is taking this

discrimination to new heights in contemporary society. Russell Jeung said how “It demonstrates how words matter... the term ‘Chinese virus’ racializes the disease so that it’s not simply biological but Chinese in nature, and stigmatizes the people so that Chinese are the disease carriers and the ones infecting others.” (as cited in Salcedo, 2021, para. 16). This racist language and stigmatization that has increased following Trump’s amplification of such ideas is, once again, dangerous and impactful for so many AAPI individuals and one that should not be ignored.

Trump’s distrust toward the media, as well as his inability to create a semblance of cooperation with the Democratic party enforce long withstanding ideologies about our government, politics, and the media. “Fake news” has started off as a way to sow doubt among Americans about the media but has also morphed perceptions about other large institutions—such as our democracy and its free and fair election, as well as scientific organizations and experts. Such ideologies have affected the political landscape into a deeply divided two-party system. Polarization is a problem that has clearly made itself prior 2020, but this past year has only shed even more light on it.

Trump’s continuous downplaying of the virus, and thus labeling media outlets who were stressing its severity as “Fake news”, not only causes people to distrust the media, but also causes distrust institutions of science, especially among his likeminded followers and supporters. For example, in an interesting study it was found that geographical location and motivated ideological cognition are reasons for conservatives to feel they are less affected by the virus and thus, do not believe in its severity (Mehta, 2020). Motivated ideological cognition “maintains that pre-existing ideologies motivate behavior, shape beliefs, and inform how we interpret events” (Mehta, 2020, para. 5). With this in mind, ideology is a huge factor in how individuals perceive major world events, like that of COVID-19. Then, when you add in how the President is discussing this world event, it makes sense for why conservatives are more likely to shrug the virus off because they feel threatened more by the government’s response and restrictions than the actual virus.

It can be extremely frustrating when personalized bias plays a role into the types of media people are willing to believe and trust. This constant framing of “Fake news” as inherently deceptive and biased is not what the term means. The term is now being used in a way to discredit or critique reporting that is coming from the opposite identified party. It does not allow for people to hear the other point of view and even urges Trump’s supporters that certain left media outlets are meaning to be deceptive and false. It even urges people to only digest news that they agree with and not seek out other points of view, which only increases personal political bias. Since this foundation of distrust in the media is being repeated over and over by President Trump, this distrustful ideology and way of thinking extends from the media to the discrediting of science. If no trust is being established from the media and science and health officials, why would individuals trust the government and its institutions? This constant spewing of distrust is an endless cycle can cause fear and anxiety, and if people are not willing to trust governmental and science institutions, our democracy may experience turmoil ahead.

CONCLUSION

From a broader standpoint, it is important to ask whether or not Trump has completely changed the expectations of typical President discourse? Have his actions and his four-year presidency changed how view how a President should speak or act? I definitely think his presidency has altered, at least a little bit, how we perceive our future Presidents. It is something to consider when conducting future research, possibly even with President Joe Biden. It would be interesting to study how Biden was perceived as President following Trump. Are people looking just as close at him as they did Trump? Is he newsworthy enough? All questions and observations are important to consider in the future.

Finally, rhetoric and ideology are going to continue to be important areas of study under critical studies—especially in communication and politics. It will always be important to keep a critical eye on the discourse that comes out of our politics and what it means for generations to come. Ideology can work subtly and quietly, in both positive and negative ways. Therefore, it is vital to keep analyzing and viewing discourse from Presidents and other powerful politicians to at least be aware of what their messages mean both on the surface and at a powerful and persuasive ideological level.

LIMITATIONS

The scope of this study was particularly narrowed towards a very specific topic of COVID-19. Even though it is a prominent topic, the range of topics and issues deployed from Trump’s Twitter ranges across various topics that are also important to recognize and sample. From issues of immigration, the 2020 election, climate change, and a plethora of various social and political issues, all of these topics of discussion could pinpoint to important ideologies

and ideas that Trump was perpetuating or reinforcing through social media. My sample size only included 228 tweets and the number of tweets at future researchers' disposal is vast and equally important to study.

Another possible limitation of this study was the fact that the sample tweets did not come directly from Donald Trump's Twitter account due to his deplatforming. Even though the site used to extract the sample texts was reliable, the study could have been enhanced and legitimized by going through his actual Twitter feed.

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