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The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the changing character of public discourse in the Age of Twitter. Adopting the perspective of media ecology, the essay highlights how Twitter privileges discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil. This effect is demonstrated through a case study of Donald J. Trump's Twitter feed. The essay concludes with a brief reflection on the end times: a post-truth, post-news, President Trump, Twitter-world.

KEYWORDS

Twitter; Donald J. Trump; narcissism; hate speech; media ecology

In his *New York Times* best-selling book, *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business* (1985), influential cultural critic and media ecologist Neil Postman argued that the medium of television substantially undermined the quality of public discourse in America. The first time I read Postman's book I remember thinking that it was reductionistic and perhaps even a little naïve. He seemed, after all, to be condemning an entire medium of communication on the basis that it promoted a different way of processing information than print-based media. But Postman's argument was considerably more nuanced than I originally gave him credit for. He was, after all, not denouncing all television. On the contrary, Postman was quite clear that he had no objection to "television's junk," noting that, "The best things on television *are* its junk, and no one and nothing is seriously threatened by it" (p. 16). What did concern Postman was when television aspired to be more than junk, when it presented "itself as a carrier of important cultural conversations," when political, religious, and educational discourse was filtered through television.

In the more than 30 years since the publication of the first edition of *Amusing ourselves to death*, I've become increasingly sympathetic to Postman's argument as well as alarmed about what has transpired since then. My change of heart is fueled in large measure by the fact that I, like Postman, have witnessed and lived through a paradigmatic social change, a fundamental shift in the dominant mode of communication. Just as the Age of Typography gave way to the Age of Television, the Age of Television is steadily giving way to the Age of Twitter.¹ As with all communication revolutions, the rise of Twitter, along with other social media, does not signal the disappearance of older media like television. Emerging media do, however, typically transform existing media. So, while Twitter had a "largely symbiotic relationship with television ... particularly as a cross-promotion platform" (Brouder & Brookey, 2015, p. 46) in its early years, it has begun to transform our televisual landscape and, consequently, the character of our public discourse.

Whereas television produced public discourse that was silly, ridiculous, and impotent, Twitter promotes public discourse that is simple, impetuous, and frequently denigrating and dehumanizing (“Scientists warn,” 2009).

I’m not suggesting, of course, that all content on Twitter is equally harmful. Much of the Twittersphere is relatively innocuous; its content is so trite, vacuous, and insignificant as to be of little consequence, or at least of little consequence beyond providing an outlet for narcissists to post “messages relating to themselves or their thoughts” (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 220). One study suggests that about 80% of the activity on Twitter falls in this category (Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010). The danger arises from the other 20% when issues of social, cultural, and political import are filtered through the lens of Twitter, for Twitter infects public discourse like a social cancer. It destroys dialog and deliberation, fosters farce and fanaticism, and contributes to callousness and contempt. In what follows, I make a provisional case for this claim by, first, examining the platform of Twitter from the perspective of media ecology and, second, reflecting upon the Twitter practices of President-Elect Donald J. Trump.

1. The logic of Twitter

Media ecology or “medium theory” is a perspective that suggests every communication technology (i.e. medium) has key physical, psychological, and social features that are relatively distinct and fixed, and that these features shape how users of that medium process information and make sense of the world (Meyrowitz, 1994). Basically, every communication medium trains our consciousness in particular ways. I argue that Twitter ultimately trains us to devalue others, thereby, cultivating mean and malicious discourse. To understand how it does this, I examine Twitter’s defining features. Much like Facebook’s “status updates,” Twitter is a microblogging platform, “a form of blogging in which entries typically consist of short content such as phrases, quick comments, images, or links to videos” (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 219). In the case of Twitter, users send and receive “Tweets,” messages consisting of no more than 140 characters. Since its launch in March 2006, Twitter has grown rapidly in popularity, and by 2014, it had more than 500 million users who were generating over 400 million tweets a day (Zubiaga, Spina, Martínez, & Fresno, 2015, p. 462). As a mode of communication, Twitter is defined by three key features: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility.

1.1. Twitter demands simplicity

Because of its character limitation, Twitter structurally disallows the communication of detailed and sophisticated messages. To be clear, a Tweet may be clever or witty, but it cannot be complex. On election night, for instance, Jason Sweeny tweeted, “I can’t imagine how stressed Americans are feeling right now. I’m Canadian and I’m chugging maple syrup and just punched a moose” (November 8, 2016). While this Tweet humorously captures the anxiety (and anger and sheer terror) that many felt on election night, it does not and cannot explain, analyze, or assess those feelings. In *Amusing ourselves to death*, Postman highlights smoke signals as an example of a communication technology whose form excludes complex content such as philosophical argument. “Puffs of

smoke,” he writes, “are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence, and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy” (p. 7). With respect to its capacity to convey complex ideas and concepts, Twitter is the modern day equivalent of smoke signals, which explains why one can philosophize *about* Twitter but not *on* Twitter.

Perhaps the best evidence that Twitter is structurally ill equipped to handle complex content is the common practice of linking. Twitter users often post links to videos, news articles, government reports, and research studies because the ideas contained in those messages are too complex to be tweeted. When clever and even smart ideas are expressed on Twitter, the form demands that they are greatly simplified; and the repeated production and consumption of simple messages, which endlessly redirect our attention elsewhere via hyperlinks, reshapes human cognition in ways that nurture simple-mindedness and promote short attention-spans. Indeed, the culture of the internet in general tends to promote “‘shallow’ information processing behaviors characterized by rapid attention shifting and reduced deliberations” (Loh & Kanai, 2015). Just as the invention and spread of writing gave rise to the literate mind, the development and growth of social media has ushered in the distracted mind (Carr, 2010). By demanding simplicity, Twitter undermines our capacity to discuss and, subsequently, to think about issues and events in more complex ways (Kapko, 2016).

1.2. Twitter promotes impulsivity

While Twitter is similar to smoke signals in terms of message complexity, it is utterly dissimilar in terms of effort. When one decides to send a smoke signal, they must go to considerable effort (i.e. gathering wood, building a fire, and going to a location where the smoke can be seen at a great distance). If one chooses to go to all that effort, presumably she or he has something important to communicate and, in fact, smoke signals have historically been used as a means of signaling impending danger. Tweeting, by contrast, requires almost no effort at all. It is ridiculously easy. Thanks to wireless technology, one can tweet from virtually anywhere at any time. Since tweeting requires little effort, it requires little forethought, reflection, or consideration of consequences. Tweeting is, in short, a highly impulsive activity, something that one can do easily even if one has nothing considered or important to say. Tweets are often sparked by an affective charge, a charge that they transfer through the social network since “emotionally charged Twitter messages tend to be retweeted more often and more quickly compared to neutral ones” (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 217).

Repeated use of Twitter trains users to speak impetuously, which may partially account for why visiting New York University professor Geoffrey Miller tweeted: “Dear obese PhD applicants: if you didn’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation #truth” (June 2, 2013), or why public relations executive Justine Stacco tweeted: “Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS. Just Kidding. I’m white!” (December 13, 2013), or why Minnesota State Representative Pat Garofalo tweeted: “Let’s be honest, 70% of teams in NBA could fold tomorrow + nobody would notice a difference w/ possible exception of increase in streetcrime” (March 9, 2014). A professor,

a PR executive, and an elected official should know better than to engage in fat-shaming and racism, and judging from their public apologies, they probably do. That they tweeted these comments despite knowing better suggests just how much Twitter's form inhibits reflexivity.

1.3. Twitter fosters incivility

Uncivil communication refers to speech that is impolite, insulting, or otherwise offensive. Two dimensions of Twitter, in particular, encourage uncivil discourse. First, Twitter is decidedly informal. Its lack of concern with proper grammar and style undermines norms that tend to enforce civility. The act of writing "Dear So-and-So" at the start of a formal letter, for instance, lessens the likelihood that demeaning communication will follow. Second, Twitter "depersonalizes interactions," creating a context in which "people do not consider how their interactions will affect others" (Tait, 2016). It is much easier to say something nasty about someone when they are not physically present. Take, for example, rapper Azealia Banks' racist and homophobic Tweets about former One Direction singer Zayn Malik. Had Malik been present, it's hard to imagine that Banks would have said, "dude, I make better music than you. Simmer down with that fake white boy rebellion and that wannabe Bieber swag. Lol u a bitch nigga for even responding like that" or "Imma start calling you punjab you dirty bitch. You a dick rider for real. Ride this dick until the wheels fall off Punjab." Twitter's lack of formality and intimacy undermines the social norms that uphold civility and predisposes users to engage in both divisive and derisive communication.

The features that define Twitter are not equally appealing to everyone. Recent research indicates, for instance, "links between Dark Triad constructs and Twitter usage" (Sumner, Byers, Boochever, & Park, 2012, p. 386). In other words, the personality traits of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—commonly referred to as the Dark Triad—are positively related to Twitter usage. Since the messages on Twitter are neither complex nor considered, heavy Twitter users are not motivated by the fact that they have something significant to say. They rarely do. What tends to motivate them is self-interest and self-promotion. Above all, heavy Twitter users appear to have a desperate, even compulsive, need for attention, and to ensure that they get that attention, "they tend to post more emotionally charged tweets" (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013, p. 241). While emotion can vary from positive to negative, heavy Twitter users favor negativity and aggressiveness, which is not surprising since "negative sentiment" is the key to popularity on Twitter (Thelwall, Buckley, & Paltoglou, 2011, p. 415). All of this means that Twitter breeds dark, degrading, and dehumanizing discourse; it breeds vitriol and violence; in short, it breeds Donald Trump.

2. Assessing @realDonaldTrump

What FDR was to radio and JFK to television, Trump is to Twitter. (Gabler, 2016)

On November 10, 2012, Donald Trump tweeted, "Thanks- many are saying I'm the best 140 character writer in the world." As a number of Twitter users were quick to point out, it was not clear that anyone had ever said that. Jim Spellman tweeted,

“FYI ‘Many’ is twitter slang for ‘No one’ @realDonaldTrump,” while Leslie Abravanel responded, “when he says ‘many’, he means the voices in his overinflated, inexplicably coiffed head, right?” But Jon Sosis was the most incredulous, tweeting, “@realDonaldTrump You’re not even the best 140 character writer in your car right now. Shut your trap you waste of life.” As doubtful as it is that anyone other than Donald Trump (with the possible exception of “John Miller”) has declared Donald Trump “the best 140-character writer in the world,” I’m quite comfortable granting him this “honor,” for as Virginia Heffernan notes, “Trump ... makes himself heard in fragments, monosyllables and exclamation points, a proud male hysteric with the deafening staccato and hair-trigger immune system that Twitter exists to host” (Heffernan, 2016). Personally, I’m willing to go even further and say that Trump’s natural style of speaking and Twitter’s underlying logic are wholly homologous.

As anecdotal evidence of this homology, consider that in March 2016, Massachusetts Institute of Technology scientist Brad Hayes programed a Twitterbot to mimic the then presidential candidate. The bot, which is called DeepDrumpf, “uses an artificial intelligence algorithm based on Trump’s language in hundreds of hours of debate transcripts” to generate Trump-like tweets (Garfield, 2016). According to Hayes, Trump’s debate rhetoric during the Republican primary displayed three prominent traits: it “use[d] simple language,” it “defer[red] to trusted friends and colleagues,” and it “constantly insult[ed] his opponents.” The first and third of these characteristics mirror the defining logics of Twitter, allowing DeepDrumpf, which was not “taught any rules about the English language,” to generate these “terrifyingly real” Tweets (Biggs, 2016): “I’d like to beat that @HillaryClinton. She is a horror. I told my supporter Putin to say that all the time. He has been amazing” (April 5, 2016); “If I get elected president, believe me folks. I will bring unbelievable aggression. I bring that out in people. @tedcruz #Trump2016” (April 27, 2016); and “I can destroy a man’s life by firing him over the wall. That’s always been what I’m running, to kill people and create jobs. @HillaryClinton” (May 5, 2016). Importantly, DeepDrumpf learned to create Trump-like Tweets not by emulating his Twitter feed, but by studying 42 pages of debate transcripts, which affirms the idea that Trump’s ordinary speech reflects the underlying logic of Twitter.

And, in fact, commentators who have studied Trump’s public discourse have observed speech patterns that correspond closely to what I identified as Twitter’s three defining features. *Simplicity*. According to Shafer (2015), “Trump isn’t a simpleton, he just talks like one. ... [he] resists multisyllabic words and complex, writerly sentence constructions when speaking extemporaneously in a debate, at a news conference or in an interview.” When Trump’s public discourse is run through the Flesch–Kincaid grade-level test, it rates at a 3rd or 4th grade reading level. *Impulsivity*. Reflecting on how Trump’s speech favors the momentary over the considered, Gabler (2016) wrote, “Above all else, Donald Trump is the candidate of impulse running against candidates of calculation.” *Incivility*. Based on an analysis of Trump’s public utterances during the campaign, Merrill (2015) concluded, “Mr. Trump’s language is darker, more violent and more prone to insults.” The homology between Trump’s public rhetoric and the logic of Twitter suggests that Trump’s popularity is due, at least in part, to the fact that “He is a man of his technological moment” (Gabler, 2016). It may also account for the popularity of Trump’s Twitter

account, @realDonaldTrump, which had 12.7 million followers as of this writing, although 64–79% of those are believed to be fake or inactive (Bilton, 2016; Petersen, 2016).

I am currently working on a sustained analysis of Trump’s Twitter feed. But since this is a work-in-progress, I will simply share the results of one 7-month-long study of Trump’s tweets. Based on more than 2,500 tweets from @realDonaldTrump from October 2015 to May 2016, Crockett (2016) drew the following conclusions. First, Trump’s lexicon is simple and repetitious, relying heavily on monosyllabic words such as “good,” “bad,” and “sad,” such as this Tweet which managed to incorporate all three: “Failing @NYTimes will always take a good story about me and make it bad. Every article is unfair and biased. Very sad!” (May 20, 2016). Second, Trump’s Tweets are overwhelmingly “negative in connotation—and the majority of them are out right insults.”² Indeed, in October 2016, *The New York Times* published a list of the 282 people, places, and things Trump has insulted on Twitter (Lee & Quealy, 2016). As a specific example, consider Trump’s Tweet of August 28, 2012: “@ariannahuff is unattractive both inside and out. I fully understand why her former husband left her for a man- he made a good decision.” Trump’s offensive, bullying, and abusive comments contribute to the high rate at which he is retweeted, which, as of January 2016, was 2,201 times on average (Tsur, Ognyanova, & Lazer, 2016). Third, Trump makes frequent use of exclamation points and all caps, such as in the following tweet: “Why doesn’t the failing @nytimes write the real story on the Clintons and women? The media is TOTALLY dishonest!” (May 15, 2016). These stylistic practices reinforce the negative sentiment of his Tweets and heighten their emotional impact, which is, in turn, reflected in the intense emotion of his followers, a phenomenon scholars refer to as “emotional contagion” (Auflick, 2016).

Frankly, I can think of no better word than “contagion” to describe the toxic effect that Twitter, as a mode of communication, and Trump, as a model of that mode, have had on public discourse. Trump’s simple, impulsive, and uncivil Tweets do more than merely reflect sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia; they spread those ideologies like a social cancer. There is mounting evidence that Trump’s Twitter feed appeals to, resonates with, and even endorses white supremacists (Kharakh & Primack, 2016). His Tweets teach us to see others as less-than-human and they inspire hatred and violence. If this all sounds a bit alarmist, consider the case of Tay, an artificial intelligence engineered by Microsoft to learn how to Tweet by interacting with humans. After just 24 hours, Microsoft ended the experiment because Tay had adopted a profane vocabulary, developed a disturbing affinity for Adolf Hitler, and began spewing racism and hate (Horton, 2016). After Microsoft shut down the “malfunctioning” Twitterbot, one user tweeted, “So the robot repeated what society taught it and you think the robot needs fixing?” In the words of Donald Trump, sad!

3. A post-election postscript

Following the election, Dr. Brookey graciously offered me the opportunity to make one final set of revisions to this piece. And, indeed, with the election now behind us, there are several issues worth reflecting upon. But none of them fundamentally alter the argument I made in this essay, which was completed a short time following the Democratic National Convention. So, aside from a few minor edits and updates, I have chosen to integrate my reflections as a “post-election postscript” to preserve the integrity of the piece.

Like many, I am deeply troubled by the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. I am disheartened—horrified actually—that a figure whom the *Huffington Post* has accurately described as “a serial liar, rampant xenophobe, racist, misogynist and birther” has been elected President of the United States. But, unlike many, I am not surprised by this outcome. To me, the Age of Twitter virtually guaranteed the rise of Trump. Public discourse simply cannot descend into the politics of division and degradation on a daily basis without significant consequence.

In the coming months, the election will be endlessly dissected; there will be countless attempts to explain how a figure so uniquely unqualified and temperamentally unfit to be President was ultimately elected. Some will be quick to blame the Republican establishment, who for decades implicitly endorsed the racism, sexism, fear-mongering, and reckless disregard for the truth that explicitly characterized the Trump campaign. Fair enough; they should be called out for this despicable behavior. But I want to briefly mention two other contributing factors: (1) the uncritical acceptance of social media platforms such as Twitter as the principal source of news and information concerning public affairs, and (2) the mainstream news media’s treatment of Twitter itself as news.

According to the Pew Research Center, 62% of U.S. adults get their news on social media (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). This is alarming, *profoundly so*, since the “news” content on social media regularly features fake and misleading stories from sources devoid of editorial standards. Moreover, it is specifically targeted to users based on their political proclivities (i.e. what items they “like,” which sites they visit, and whom they’re “friends” with). “Currently,” writes Olivia Solon, “the truth of a piece of content is less important than whether it is shared, liked, and monetized.” In short, people across the political spectrum (the right *and* the left) are being fed a steady diet of what they want to hear. The result is the creation of ideological silos, powerful echo chambers of misinformation that, thanks to confirmation bias, reaffirm our existing beliefs (Solon, 2016). For millions of Americans, their primary political involvement during this election cycle was limited to tweeting and retweeting snarky anti-Clinton or anti-Trump memes to like-minded individuals (i.e. “followers”), or posting and liking links to articles on Facebook that reflected their political leanings. These activities do not foster reasoned public deliberation among people of diverse backgrounds and experiences; they produce a uniformed, uncritical, and irresponsible electorate. And, let’s be honest, such activities are not really even about trying to share information; they’re self-interested performances undertaken to project a particular political image of oneself.

Unfortunately, the situation with the mainstream news media is no more encouraging. In addition to failing to adequately vet Trump during the primary race, to providing unprecedented free advertising to him through its obsessive coverage, to normalizing his candidacy by adopting a traditional “horse race” mentality, and to repeatedly furnishing his surrogates with a platform to perpetuate obvious and outrageous falsehoods, the U.S. news media consistently treated Trump’s Twitter feed, as well as many others’, as news.³ Now, I’m not certain when “reporting” (yes, I mean that ironically) on Tweets began to count as “journalism” (again, ironically), but it signals the complete de-evolution of the news media.

So, I think it needs to be said in no uncertain terms: people’s opinions on Twitter are opinions, not news! And in many cases, thanks to the ubiquity of bots, they’re not even *people’s* opinions! According to *The Atlantic*, “more than a third of pro-Trump tweets

and nearly a fifth of pro-Clinton tweets between the first and second debates came from automated accounts, which produced more than 1 million tweets in total” (Guilbeault & Woolley, 2016). Despite this fact, the news media seem intent on treating Twitter as a legitimate source of news, and that is likely to have several consequences going forward. First, Twitter and its underlying logic will continue to supplant television and its underlying logic as the dominant epistemology of the moment. Second, we will continue to witness the rise and mainstreaming of divisive and incendiary public discourse. This has, in fact, already begun. As *USA Today* reports, there was a massive increase in hate speech on Twitter during the presidential election (Guynn, 2016). The continued collapse of thoughtful, reasoned, and respectful discourse is hardly limited to Twitter though, since Twitter’s pernicious properties are reflected in other social media platforms. Thus, we are likely to witness a growing intolerance for cultural and political difference. Fourth, we will see more dangerous demagogues rise to prominence. Whatever else it may portend, Trump’s election marks the beginning, not the end, of the Age of Twitter.

Notes

1. I’m calling it the “Age of Twitter” both because this essay is primarily about Twitter and because I like the linguistic parallelism with the Age of Typography and the Age of Television. But the Age of Twitter is really the Age of Social Media.
2. After Donald Trump formally became the Republican nominee for President, his Twitter feed saw an uptick in more positive, supportive messages, though his highly negative Tweets continued. Analysis of his Tweets suggests that “the more haughty, critical ones come from an Android device, while the nice ones comes from an iPhone ... [leading to the] suspicion that the Android tweets are written by Trump himself [and the] iPhone tweets might be penned by his campaign staff” (Matyszczyk, 2016).
3. Twitter increasingly performs the agenda-setting function in politics once dominated by television. Television or, at least, televised news now follows the lead of Twitter. Gone are the days when TV journalists engage in serious investigative reporting, challenge obviously false and misleading information, or just generally report on events of public significance. Frankly, I’m nostalgic for the world of television that Postman (1985) argued, produced the “least well-informed people in the Western world” by packaging news as entertainment (pp. 106–107). Twitter is producing the most self-involved people in history by treating everything one does or thinks as newsworthy. Television may have assaulted journalism, but Twitter killed it.

Notes on contributor

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What's next for whiteness and the Internet

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores future areas of inquiry for those interested in understanding the dynamic character of whiteness in the social media environment. Whiteness is not static, but changes to secure its position of domination and it is important for scholars to pay attention to the role of social media in reproducing whiteness.

KEYWORDS

Anonymity; globalization; interactivity; social media; vilification

In May 2015, when President Barack Obama posted his first Tweet from a newly opened Twitter account, it was clear that something had changed with the digital environment layered on top of our existing cultural climate. His first Tweet cheerfully announced:

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