

Faculté de philosophie, arts et lettres

The Role of Social Media in U.S. Presidential Elections

An Analysis of Donald Trump's Self-Presentation on Twitter

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1. Introduction

“Trump’s Twitter account is equal parts tornado, torpedo and vaudeville, smashing, attacking and entertaining its way to attention and tackling almost any topic that tickles Trump’s fancy.”¹

Trump’s use of social media, especially Twitter, during his campaign and his presidency, has been the topic of many news stories, articles and even books. Moreover, his behavior on the platform has also been the source of various controversies. Consequently, scholars and journalists have dissected Trump’s communication strategy in an attempt to understand it.

Since the “First Social Media Election” in 2008, social media has influenced and marked American political campaigns. It has shaped communication strategies, the way politicians address their voters as well as the way they present themselves in the public eye. These platforms have offered fresh opportunities for politicians to take control of their communication and to rely not entirely on third parties anymore, such as the mainstream media. Consequently, since 2008, social media became an essential tool for political communication that complements other more traditional means of communication such as television advertising, canvassing, and rallies.

As social media has become increasingly important in political communication, it has also become necessary to manage politicians’ public image. Politicians usually tend to present themselves in a very professional and polished manner. However, in 2016, Donald Trump dismissed the long-established standards of political communication and used an unusual approach on social media. This approach was based on a particular attitude that supported Trump’s self-presentation ² as “the authentic candidate” of the 2016 presidential election.

¹ Levinthal, Dave. “Shadow Candidates: Who’s More Transparent, Clinton or Trump?” *The Center for Public Integrity*, Sep. 15, 2016, www.publicintegrity.org/politics/shadow-candidates-whos-more-transparent-clinton-or-trump/

² According to the website *Psychology*, “Self-presentation refers to how people attempt to present themselves to control or shape how others (called the audience) view them. It involves expressing oneself and behaving in ways that create a desired impression. Self-presentation is part of a broader set of behaviors called impression management.” See “Self-Presentation.” *Psychology*, 2020, <http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/social-psychology/self/self->

It is important to note that the term of authenticity used throughout this thesis refers to authenticity as the quality of being authentic or genuine, synonym with honest and sincere.³ Accordingly, this notion implies transparency.

This thesis aims to explore the relationship between Donald Trump's uncommon use of social media, especially Twitter, and authenticity, during his 2016 campaign. How did his use of Twitter contribute to his image of the authentic candidate? And is this image real, or a well-elaborate construction? To answer these questions, this thesis will analyze and describe Trump's communication strategy on social media, especially on Twitter. In the next chapter, it will describe the growing role of social media, its power as well as its evolution. The third chapter will then explain how Barack Obama, during his 2008 and 2012 campaigns, and Donald Trump, during his 2016 campaign, used social media as an advantage to win the race. The analysis of Trump's use of social media will then be further described in Chapter 4, with a focus on his performance of authenticity, and will be followed by an analysis of Trump's 20 most retweeted tweets. Finally, this thesis will summarize its findings and discuss possible avenues for future research.

This thesis is based on a variety of primary and secondary sources. Regarding the latter, this thesis is informed by many articles about the importance and evolution of social media in US presidential elections, but also more specifically on Barack Obama's social media practices during his 2008 and 2012 campaigns as well as Donald Trump's use of social media during his 2016 campaign. The analysis included at the end of this thesis is mainly based on two articles about Trump's way of using Twitter, namely "The Semiotics of Authenticity: Indexicality in Donald Trump's Tweets" by author Tommy Shane, and "The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement", written by Brian L. Ott. Via those two frameworks, the analysis of @realDonaldTrump's 20 most retweeted posts on Twitter aims to evaluate if those tweets follow the patterns described in these articles. The twenty tweets analyzed were published during his 2016 campaign, between June 16, 2015 and November 8, 2016, and were classified in ascending order according to the number of retweets. The tweets were collected on June 18, 2020, which means that

[presentation/#:~:text=Self%2Dpresentation%20refers%20to%20how,of%20behaviors%20called%20impression%20management.](#)

³ "Genuine." Macmillan Dictionary, 2020, <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/genuine>

the total number of retweets is from the day they were published to the day they were collected. Finally, this combination of primary and secondary research has helped generate the conclusion that Donald Trump's use of Twitter and his self-presentation of authenticity is a well-elaborate performance, based on several elements, rather than a display of real genuineness.

2. The Use of Social Media in Politics in the United States

Since the U.S. presidential election in 2008, social media has developed into an essential part of political communication strategies.⁴ Because media and means of communication have evolved and new technologies have emerged, there are currently many ways for politicians to engage and to communicate with their audience. As a result, over the past decades, politicians have had to adapt to new technological developments and trends in order for their communication strategies to stay effective and relevant.⁵ According to Klinger and Svensson, politics is the institution that is the most in alignment with media evolution, as politicians need to continuously comply with the latest advancements.⁶ One of the most recent technological developments in the past few years is the rise of social media and its evolution. In the beginning of the 2000s, social network platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and YouTube emerged and have since then evolved and have been joined by other social media websites and apps, including Snapchat or more recently TikTok. This revolution in communication has gradually transformed society and influenced how people interact, engage, and obtain information.

In the last three decades, there has been a notable switch in the way people consume news. According to the article "New Media and Political Campaigns," the use of television as a source of information for presidential elections decreased from 82% in 1992 to 67% in 2012, in comparison to the use of the internet for obtaining information, which

⁴ Enli, Gunn, and Anja Naper. "Social Media Incumbent Advantage: Barack Obama and Mitt Romney's Tweets in the 2012 US Presidential Election Campaign." *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, 2016, p. 22

⁵ Bode, Leticia, and Kajsa E. Dalryple. "Politics in 140 Characters or Less: Campaign Communication, Network Interaction, and Political Participation on Twitter", *Journal of Political Marketing*, 2014, p. 1

⁶ Klinger, Ulrike, and Jakob Svensson. "The emergence of network media logic in political communication: A theoretical approach." *New Media & Society*, 17(8), 2015, p. 1243

increased from 3% in 1996 to 47% in 2012 and which continues to rise.⁷ As these numbers indicate, the way people consume media has changed, and consequently, political campaigns have had to adapt. An illustration of the growing importance of the use of digital media in political campaigning is the rise in investments in political advertising. The money invested in digital media campaigns has increased from a 1.7% share in 2012 to 14.4% in 2016.⁸ Moreover, aside from financial investments, politicians also invest more in experts in communication. For example, the highest paid employee in Obama's 2012 campaign was his e-campaign strategist in charge of communication on online media.⁹

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that mass media, in other words more traditional media, is not being replaced by network media, such as social media. Instead, they work in conjunction with one another.¹⁰ Although new means of communication have transformed the way traditional media is perceived and utilized,¹¹ they do not put an end to long-established channels for political communication, and there are still debates between politicians on television, traditional political advertising, rallies, knocking on doors, and so forth. However, those actions are now fortified and complemented by social media, and the media environment has been broadened with more means to communicate.¹² More traditional media and digital media are continuously competing, cooperating, merging together as they sometimes have the same functionalities, and adapting.¹³ Therefore, campaigns are divided onto multiple platforms with users who have adopted new ways to consume media and who use multiple communication channels.¹⁴ Moreover, our current communication system is defined by several actors and

⁷ Owen, Diana. "New Media and Political Campaigns." *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, 2014, p. 827

⁸ Bossetta, Michael. "The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 U.S. Election." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 95(2), 2018, p. 472

⁹ Enli, G., A. Naper, *op. cit.*, p. 8

¹⁰ Owen???? *Ibid.*, p. 823

¹¹ Enli, Gunn. "Twitter as arena for the authentic outside: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 US presidential election." *European Journal of Communication*, 32(1), 2017, p. 52

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 51

¹³ Zhang, Yini, et al. "Attention and amplification in the hybrid media system: The composition and activity of Donald Trump's Twitter following during the 2016 presidential election." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20(9), 2018, p. 3165

¹⁴ Zhang, Y., et al., *op. cit.*, p. 3162

forces including journalists, media companies, and social networks, as well as their architecture and algorithms, and the general public.¹⁵ As a result of this multiplicity of channels and agents, politicians and their staff need to be agile with the different platforms.¹⁶

It is also important to understand that each type of media is different and works based on different logic. As explained through the concept of “network media logic” defined in the article “The emergence of network media logic in political communication: A theoretical approach,” every type of media possesses a particular logic, as they follow different rules that are evolving.¹⁷ What distinguishes social media from traditional media is its interactive features, the possibility to connect through networking, and the fact that they enable politicians to mobilize voters and supporters in a more direct and engaging way.¹⁸ However, the most successful communication strategies combine traditional media and new media, as most people use a combination of both offline and online media for getting information.¹⁹

Furthermore, within the area of digital media, the different social media platforms work differently from one another. Also called “medium theory” or “media ecology,” it refers to the fact that every means of communication possesses defining physical, cognitive, emotional, and social characteristics that construct the public perception of information circulating on the platform.²⁰ These platforms differ in the way they are organized, what they are capable of, the algorithms ruling the network, and their use of data (collecting, treating, and using it).²¹ Those capabilities, perceptions, and ways people use the platform are consequently defined by this architecture.²² For example, the algorithm of a platform plays a role in the showing of the posts. Posts are selected and filtered to be shown to a user according to several factors determined by the algorithm. As a result, the algorithms

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3162

¹⁶ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

¹⁷ Klinger, U., and J. Svensson, *op. cit.*, p. 1251

¹⁸ Owen, D., *op. cit.*, pp. 828-829

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 830

²⁰ Ott, Brian. “The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(1), 2017, p. 60

²¹ Bosseta, M., *op. cit.*, p. 472

²² *Ibid.*, p. 474

influence posts published by politicians and their visibility.²³ Consequently, according to the platform's DNA, specificities, and architecture, the platform serves a particular purpose for different types of objectives in a campaign communication strategy.²⁴

On the other hand, the use of digital media in political communication is also influenced by external and contextual factors. As a matter of fact, the context of a campaign in general plays a role in how the candidates use social media.²⁵ The party to which candidates belong, for example, influences their communication strategy on social media.²⁶ On Twitter, for example, both Republicans and Democrats generally have had similar communication strategies. However, Democrats use Twitter more than Facebook, and they use social media more innovatively. On the contrary, Republicans use Facebook more than Twitter. Moreover, candidates from the Republican Party tend to publish more negative messages attacking the Democratic Party.²⁷ Social media practices are also likely to be influenced by offline political happenings, the candidate's performance,²⁸ or their position in the opinion polls. Although the influence of media on election outcome is debated, the authors of the article, "Social Media, Opinion Polls and the Use of Persuasive Messages During the 2016 U.S. Election Primaries," advance that there is a link between how candidates perform in polls and the type of messages they publish.²⁹ For example, people who do not perform well in polls are more likely to attack other candidates.³⁰ On the other hand, candidates who perform better in opinion polls during presidential elections tend to publish more persuasive messages that criticize opponents and to post positive messages about themselves,³¹ and messages that are less neutral.³²

Finally, in addition to contextual factors, the personality and the background of a candidate can also influence their way of using social media. For example, Donald Trump's

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 477

²⁴ Rossini, Patricia, et al. "Social Media, Opinion Polls, and the Use of Persuasive Messages During the 2016 US Election Primaries." *Social media + Society*, 2018, p. 1

²⁵ Bossetta, M., *op. cit.*, p. 474

²⁶ Rossini, P., et al., *op. cit.*, p. 2

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁸ Kreiss, Daniel. "Seizing the moment: The presidential campaigns' use of Twitter during the 2012 electoral cycle." *New Media & Society*, 2014, p. 5

²⁹ Rossini, P., et al., *op. cit.*, p. 2

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6

³² *Ibid.*, p. 7

celebrity has played a significant role in his communication strategy. As Trump comes from the entertainment industry, namely through his reality TV shows (*The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice*), and because his approach to communication during his campaign included aspects from popular culture, he can be categorized as a celebrity politician.³³ Moreover, because of his businessman and celebrity status, Trump was already well-acquainted with digital media and had strong communication skills, especially on social media,³⁴ which he already used on a regular basis and on which he already had many followers. In addition, politicians who are relatively famous tend to be quoted more in mass media than unknown politicians. Consequently, Trump's celebrity was a favorable asset that contributed to his campaign and his communication strategy, as his tweets were often referred to in mainstream media.³⁵

2.1. The Historical Evolution of Political Communication

Communication is a discipline that has always existed, even before it became an official field taught in universities. Over time, there have been various means of communication that have marked cultures. As civilizations have evolved so have their ways of communicating. Over centuries, numerous means of communication have appeared, and developed, and they continue to evolve rapidly because of several factors (e.g., globalization, commercialization, digitalization, and many other reasons). Along with the evolution of social media, the way people use social media has changed, and new trends emerge rapidly.³⁶

Western democracies' political communication is commonly divided into three historical eras. Those different phases and transformations in the way politicians communicate are the results of technological changes in the means of communication. This thesis focuses on the third and fourth phases of the evolution of political communication. The evolution

³³ Schneiker, Andrea. "Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump's Branding on Twitter". *Political Studies Review*, 2018, p. 4

³⁴ Enli, g., *op. cit.*, p. 54

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56

³⁶ Klinger, U., and Svensson, J. *op. cit.*, p. 1245

of digital media in U.S. election contexts first needs to be described in order to understand how political communication through social media and has evolved over the years.

The first era is called the Golden Age of the Parties (between 1945 and the 1960s),³⁷ also called the Newspaper Age.³⁸ It was a communication system dominated by the political party³⁹ as politicians were setting the agenda by talking about issues important to them and controlling their message.⁴⁰ Political systems were “seen as the primary source of initiatives.”⁴¹

The second era, the Era of the Television,⁴² or Television Age,⁴³ started in the 1960s.⁴⁴ The main medium for political communication at that time became television as this appliance was increasingly used in households. With the emergence of this new medium, politicians had to adapt, as they were not entirely in control anymore. As a result, they developed new tactics to get media coverage and maintain a certain control over the agenda.⁴⁵ This age was also the one in which presidential televised debates appeared. In the United States, the first presidential debate on television was between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, which some believe changed the outcome of the election cycle of that year.⁴⁶ According to Shontavia Jackson Johnson, more than half of the voters claimed that this debate had an impact on who they chose to become the next President.⁴⁷

Finally, the third phase is the Digital Era⁴⁸ or Digital Age.⁴⁹ This is the phase during which most of our current means of communication appeared, as well as more television channels and radio stations, and during which the use of computers has risen.

³⁷ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 51

³⁸ Negrine, Ralph, and Darren G. Lilleker. “The Professionalization of Political Communication: Continuities and Change in Media Practices.” *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 17(3), 2002, p. 306

³⁹ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 51

⁴⁰ Blumler Jay G., and Dennis Kavanagh. “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features.” *Political Communication*, 1999, p. 212

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211

⁴² Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

⁴³ Negrine, R., & Lilleker, D. G., *op. cit.*, p. 306

⁴⁴ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

⁴⁵ Blumler J. G., and Kavanagh D., *op. cit.*, p. 212

⁴⁶ Johnson, Shontavia Jackson. “Donald Trump, Disruptive Technologies, and Twitter's Role in the 2016 American Presidential Election.” *Widener Commonwealth Law Review*, vol. 27, vol. 1, 2018, p. 75

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

⁴⁹ Negrine, R., & Lilleker, D. G., *op. cit.*, p. 306

Consequently, the media environment became more diversified.⁵⁰ According to the author of the article, “The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features,” this period is characterized by five aspects, one of them being a more professionalized political support from experts in communication and approaches to media, able to elaborate strategies in this complex multimedia environment, who were not automatically attached to a specific party.⁵¹ Politicians had to rely on professional staff and various experts in the different channels to make sure to have an effective strategy, resulting in a stronger professionalizing of the political communication discipline.⁵² Another aspect characterizing this era was the emergence of the approach to political communication involving “infotainment”, which consists of the “mixing of information with drama, excitement, color, and human interest.”⁵³ This era was also marked by a desire for more personalized political advocacy and a growing desire for populism joined by an anti-elitist feeling.⁵⁴

This third age can be subsequently divided into three phases. The first phase, called “Old Media, New Politics,” is characterized by media formats that have an approach leaning towards a combination of content that is nonpolitical and entertainment, in other words infotainment, and campaigns on the internet which used basic websites, called “brochureware,” which provided the same information as offline political brochures.⁵⁵ The second phase, called “New Media, New Politics 1.0,” occurred between 1996 and 2008, when online technologies reinforced communication campaigns and allowed for more interactions. Websites that were until then very basic started to include more interactive features.⁵⁶ The third phase, “New Media, New Politics 2.0,” taking place from 2008 until present, is characterized by a more developed use of digital technology for campaigning, including more interactive features for sharing information, building networks and communities, promoting collaboration and engagement, and using “big

⁵⁰ Blumler J. G., and Kavanagh D., *op. cit.*, p. 213

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 209

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 218

⁵⁴ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

⁵⁵ Owen, D., *op. cit.*, p. 824

⁵⁶ Owen, D., *op. cit.*, pp. 824-825

data” to better target voters.⁵⁷ With better knowledge of the platforms and experts to help them, politicians had more possibilities to improve their communication strategies.

The author of the article “Twitter as Arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election,” also suggested that since the 2010s, there has been a fourth phase: the Era of Social Media. Through entering the fourth phase, and because of the emergence of new technologies and means of communication, politicians have had to extend their means of communication and develop appropriate strategies.⁵⁸ As social media has brought new and more direct ways to engage with citizens, there has been a change in the relationship between politicians and editorial media. Now, social media constitutes direct channels in the sense that politicians are in control, they have their own accounts, and can publish messages themselves instead of depending on other mainstream media and journalists, transforming the dynamic between those two actors.⁵⁹ The fact that they are initiating communication is comparable to the Golden Age of the Parties (mentioned above) in which political parties were the main source of communication initiatives.

2.1.1. The Rise of Digital Media in American Presidential Campaigns

Digital means of communication appeared recently in comparison to other media, but they have evolved rapidly. The worldwide web was born in the 1990s. Political campaigns then started to include the internet as a tool in their strategies from the mid-1990s. However, the use of the internet in political communication during the election cycles of 1995 and 2000 was still primitive, as the technology and strategies around it were not very developed. Websites were merely the digital versions of the offline communication literature, therefore called “brochureware.”⁶⁰ In 2000, as only one American in 10 used the internet for information about elections, 2000 campaigns were still in an experimental

⁵⁷ Owen, D., *op. cit.*, p. 825

⁵⁸ Stetka, V., Lilleker, D., Tenscher J., & Jalali C. “Professional Campaigning Online: the Role of New Media as Campaign Platforms.” ECPR General Conference, 2014, p. 3

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7

phase.⁶¹ However, since 2000, the percentage of people using the internet as source for news and information has doubled.⁶²

There was a switch toward more developed online campaigns during the 2004 election cycle, particularly with the campaign of the Democratic candidate, Howard Dean, who had a really innovative use of digital media, especially blogs.⁶³ However, the campaign did not achieve to organize supporters' enthusiasm and transform it into a concrete advantage for the election.⁶⁴

In 2008, Barack Obama and his campaign staff literally transformed political communication through their innovative use of social media. Thanks to a devoted team, very skilled experts and his understanding of the real power of social media, Obama's campaign succeeded in turning social media users into productive supporters. In 2012, as Barack Obama stood for reelection, he again had a strong digital media strategy and went further with the use of micro-targeting.

By 2016, social media and trends around them had evolved. During this election cycle, the two main candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, two vastly different candidates and personalities, showed particularly contrasting media practices. The election cycle of that year was marked by the victory of a candidate whom people did not think could win and who distinguished himself from other politicians through his use of social media, especially Twitter.

2.2. The Power of Social Media

Over the years, social media has become more advanced. The numbers of people using it has risen, and it has become a very useful tool for communication. Thanks to its huge potential, social media is now essential for political communication and brings many benefits. First of all, social media provides a large audience. Many people are on social media and use it on a daily basis, and the number of social media users continues to rise

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.7

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

year after year. In 2008, the percentage of people using at least one social media platform was 21%.⁶⁵ In 2019, over 70% of the people in the United States had a social media account.⁶⁶ Facebook is the social network that experienced the highest rise in terms of users and is the most used social media worldwide.⁶⁷ Since 2008, Facebook's number of monthly active users in the United States has grown from 100 million to 2.603 billion in 2019.⁶⁸ The number of Facebook users in 2014 reached 71% of the adults online in the United States and 58% of the total adult population.⁶⁹ Regarding Twitter, another popular social network, the numbers are not as high as Facebook. In 2014, 23% of U.S. adults online had an account on Twitter, and 19% of the adults worldwide online had an account.⁷⁰ In 2019, Twitter stated that they had 330 million monthly active users.⁷¹ Although the number of Twitter users is less significant than Facebook's number of users, Twitter remains one of the most important platforms in political communication. With that many citizens on social media, politicians have the opportunity to reach a wide audience, including people they would not reach through traditional mass media, such as younger people and voters who, according to statistics, make up the majority of social media users.⁷²

Another advantage of the use of social media is that it enables politicians to address voters directly. Thanks to social media, campaigns can bypass traditional media and directly talk to people.⁷³ By avoiding traditional media and journalists, politicians maintain control over the message they want to convey. Moreover, through engaging directly with supporters online, they can foster political engagement and mobilize people and

⁶⁵ "Social media Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Center*, Jun. 12, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/

⁶⁶ Clement, J. "Social media usage in the United States - Statistics & Facts." *Statista*, May 19, 2020, www.statista.com/topics/3196/social-media-usage-in-the-united-states/

⁶⁷ Clement, J. "Global social networks ranked by number of users 2020." *Statista*, Apr. 24, 2020 www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/

⁶⁸ Clement, J. "Number of monthly active Facebook users worldwide 2008-2020." *Statista*, Apr. 30, 2020, www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/

⁶⁹ Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6

⁷¹ Clement, J. "Number of monthly active Twitter users worldwide from 1st quarter 2010 to 1st quarter 2019." *Statista*, Aug. 14, 2019, [www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/#:~:text=How%20many%20people%20use%20Twitter,daily%20active%20users%20\(mDAU\).](http://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/#:~:text=How%20many%20people%20use%20Twitter,daily%20active%20users%20(mDAU).)

⁷² Clement, J. "Global social media account ownership and use 2019, by age group." *Statista*, Feb. 14, 2020, www.statista.com/statistics/381964/number-of-social-media-accounts/

⁷³ Kreiss, D. *op. cit.*, p. 2

resources.⁷⁴ Communication through social media can also give a sense of proximity between politicians and their supporters.⁷⁵ In addition, social media also has an impact on people's political opinions. According to Shontavia Jackson Johnson "One in five people report changing their views on a political or social issue because of something they read on social media, and nearly the same amount say they changed their views about a specific candidate based on what they read there."⁷⁶

However, although one of social media's main purposes is to create interactions, politicians do not use them as tools for dialogue and interactivity, but rather, as Enli calls it, as "an arena for political marketing,"⁷⁷ in other words, as a direct channel for political marketing.⁷⁸ Thanks to social media, politicians can promote themselves and their involvement and build their public image.⁷⁹ This is mainly because campaign staffs believe that interacting with voters comes with risks, as it reduces control over their message. Therefore, electoral campaigns in the United States do not favorize interactions and use social media in a one-way communication, in a similar way to communication via mass media campaigns.⁸⁰ In fact, the chances for audience participation on digital platforms even decreased between 2012 and 2016.⁸¹ Websites from the 2016 electoral campaigns in the United States had no comments sections, for example. Those websites were mainly used as means to promote candidates and to mobilize people, but not as means to interact.⁸² Simply put, social media created an impression of interaction and closeness in an environment of controlled interactivity.⁸³

In addition to promoting a candidate's image, social media can also serve as a platform for setting the agenda. One of the objectives of using social media for politicians is to shape the press agenda so that journalists can discuss issues at the center of the party's

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁷⁵ Schneiker, A., *op. cit.*, p. 5

⁷⁶ Johnson, Shontavia Jackson. "Donald Trump, Disruptive Technologies, and Twitter's Role in the 2016 American Presidential Election." *Widener Commonwealth Law Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2018, p. 75

⁷⁷ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 51

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53

⁷⁹ Conway, Bethany Anne, et al. "Twitter Use by Presidential Primary Candidates During the 2012 Campaign." *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57 (11), 2013, p. 1597

⁸⁰ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 54

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Rossini, P., et al., *op. cit.*, p. 2

preoccupations.⁸⁴ Before social media, media such as television channels, radio stations, and newspapers were controlled by journalists and pundits. Politicians now use social media in an attempt to shape the narratives and the journalists' perceptions and try to influence their way of detailing the race or the candidate's performance.⁸⁵ Twitter, for instance, is believed to be a crucial tool as journalists often use the platform as a source for news and stories, which was particularly noticeable in the 2016 electoral cycle as mainstream media often quoted or showed Trump's tweets. Journalists and press in general often use Twitter for content, but also as an "index of public opinion" (for evaluating a candidate's performance during debates, for example).⁸⁶ Teddy Gof, digital director of Obama's campaign in 2012, stated that they thought a great deal about how they could take the direction of the national dialogue around politics.⁸⁷

Campaigns can also use social media for datafication. Datafication is the analysis of the digital marks and footprints left by people's actions on the internet and on digital platforms. This data can be collected and used by political campaigns in order to have a better understanding of their audience and better target people.⁸⁸ This technology of using data has become common in the communication field, not only in politics but also for advertising. Already in 2008, Obama's campaign used data.⁸⁹ Then, in 2012, Obama's campaign went further and used micro-targeting, again based on data. Moreover, social media allows politicians to listen to and observe discussions and trends and assess the issues people discuss on social media.

Although social media networks have many benefits, they also have disadvantages such as the lack of real hierarchy, blurred perception of traditional audience, and the lack of control over messages already mentioned before.⁹⁰ What might also be seen as burdensome and tricky is the fact that a politician's performance on social media is essential nowadays, and influential for a candidate's success in elections. As politicians

⁸⁴ Blumler J. G., and Kavanagh D., *op. cit.*, p. 215

⁸⁵ Kreiss, D. *op. cit.*, p. 10

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10

⁸⁸ Bossetta, M., *op. cit.*, p. 477

⁸⁹ Urbain, Thomas. "Facebook as an election weapon, from Obama to Trump." *Phys.org*, Mar. 23, 2018, www.phys.org/news/2018-03-facebook-election-weapon-obama-trump.html

⁹⁰ Conway, B. A., Kenski, K., & Wang, D., *op. cit.*, p. 1597

build their image on social media, this image is influenced by their actions and conduct on those platforms.⁹¹ Politicians are always in the public eye and scrutinized.⁹² Their online image can have an impact on a candidate's offline image.⁹³ Social media can be an advantage, but it can easily turn against them and become a threat because anyone can publish positive or negative messages on the internet. Moreover, politicians' use of social media must reflect a "performative flexibility." In other words, they are expected to maneuver comfortably from one platform to another, following various standards and norms, and making their tone formal or informal according to the context.⁹⁴ If they fail to do so, they may be mocked or criticized.

2.3. Twitter and Politics

Among social media platforms, Twitter is one of the main tools used by politicians. It is a microblogging website founded in 2006, and one of the most popular social networks worldwide. Many individuals, celebrities, politicians, companies, and groups use Twitter for various outcomes; for people to communicate ideas and opinions, for politicians to mobilize supporters, but it is also a useful tool for journalists. Journalists and mainstream news media often use Twitter as a source of information.⁹⁵ Regarding political communication on Twitter, while Facebook provides campaigns with tools to start a dialogue, Twitter is more of a one-sided conversation tool.⁹⁶ In 2019, the platform reported to have 330 million monthly active users.⁹⁷ About 22% of people in the U.S. are on Twitter, but only 2% of them are responsible for the platform's number of tweets.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Bossetta, M., *op. cit.*, p. 475

⁹² Owen, D., *op. cit.*, p. 828

⁹³ Enli, Gunn, Naper Anja., *op. cit.*, p. 8

⁹⁴ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

⁹⁵ Rossini, P., et al., *op. cit.*, p. 2

⁹⁶ Vonderschmitt, Kaitlin. "The Growing Use of Social Media in Political Campaigns: How to use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to Create an Effective Social Media Campaign" (2012), p.37

⁹⁷ Kellog, Krisyi. "The 7 Biggest Social Media Sites in 2020.", *Search Engine Journal*, Feb. 3, 2020, www.searchenginejournal.com/social-media/biggest-social-media-sites/

⁹⁸ Lapin, Tamar. "Twitter doesn't reflect how most Americans think: study." *New York Post*, Apr. 24, 2019, nypost.com/2019/04/24/twitter-doesnt-reflect-how-most-americans-think-study/

The platform enables its users to publish messages called *tweets* that are composed of less than 280 characters (before 2018, the tweets were limited to 140 characters).⁹⁹ These can include pictures (maximum 4), GIFs, a video, hashtags, and mentions. Those tweets, once published, appear on the sender's profile and on the timeline of people who follow the sender's account, and can then be retweeted by other people, so that the post appears on the account page of the person who shared the post.¹⁰⁰

In politics, the practice of retweeting by politicians shows a degree of listening to people.¹⁰¹ Candidates retweeting the public's tweets is a form of acknowledging a person's message and showing that the candidate cares. However, studies have shown that retweets from political candidates are mostly retweets from organizations, public figures, and other politicians, rarely from the general public, except for Trump who retweeted numerous of tweets from the public during his 2016 campaign. By contrast, in 2012, only 3% of Obama's retweets were from the general public. This shows again how reluctant politicians are to use Twitter as a means for dialogue while still trying to give an impression of proximity.¹⁰² However, Twitter remains a useful communication tool.

Twitter has many benefits and purposes. As with other forms of social media, it enables politicians to communicate their ideas and positioning and address voters directly. Twitter is advantageous to promote candidates' image, make them known, and humanize them.¹⁰³ The platform is also used in an attempt to influence the agenda and the perceptions of reporters and to gauge people's opinions on issues and on a candidate's performance.¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, Twitter differs from other social networks through its architecture and its norms. According to "Social media, opinion polls and the use of persuasive messages during the 2016 U.S. election primaries," Twitter is mostly used for persuasive messages,

⁹⁹ "Twitter to expand 280-character tweets." *BBC News*, Nov. 7, 2017, www.bbc.com/news/technology-41900880

¹⁰⁰ "About different types of Tweets." *Twitter Help Center*, 2020, www.help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/types-of-tweets

¹⁰¹ Adams, Amelia, and Tina McCorkindale. "Dialogue and transparency: A content analysis of how the 2012 presidential candidates used Twitter." *Public Relations Review* 39 (2013), p. 359

¹⁰² Schneiker, Andrea. "Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump's Branding on Twitter". *Political Studies Review*, 2018, p. 5

¹⁰³ Vonderschmitt, K., *op. cit.*, p. 37

¹⁰⁴ Kreiss, D., *op. cit.*, p.3

unlike Facebook, which is mostly used for calls to action.¹⁰⁵ Within the category of persuasive messages, there are two subcategories: attack (criticizing a candidate or their ideas and policies) and advocacy (focusing on a candidate's qualities, image or positioning).¹⁰⁶ In other words, Twitter is mostly used to criticize other candidates, and to publish posts that influence people's opinions on particular issues, and to inform.¹⁰⁷

Those patterns of behavior and messages can be linked to the platform's architecture and norms. According to Brian L. Ott, the Twitter platform's architecture and standards encourage simple, impetuous, and often offensive messages.¹⁰⁸ As previously mentioned, a platform's architecture and features influences the way people use and perceive it. Brian L. Ott in his article stated that Twitter's platform promotes negative behavior with devaluating, disrespectful, and insulting discourse by limiting the number of characters and encouraging short sentences.¹⁰⁹ In addition, Ott argued that Twitter is actually characterized by three main aspects: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. Simplicity on Twitter is characterized by the limitation on the number of characters, which means messages must be short and concise. Although you can express great ideas or opinions on Twitter, they must be reduced or expressed in a simplified way, even for complex issues.¹¹⁰ Regarding impulsivity on the platform, publishing tweets does not require much mental preparedness or thinking about the effects of their message. This impulsivity is also often expressed via emotions, as impulsivity can be the result of the need to express intense feelings.¹¹¹ Finally, Twitter also promotes uncivil discourse. Firstly, because the platform is informal, and there is no attention for written language rules. Secondly, because Twitter's platform creates a context in which interactions are depersonalized, as users do not pay attention to the effects of their behavior. Those two aspects weaken social standards.¹¹² Messages including those three aspects can be part of a strategy to attract free media coverage.¹¹³ As we will see later in Chapter 4, those three

¹⁰⁵ Rossini, P., et al., *op. cit.*, p. 4

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹⁰⁸ Ott, B., *op. cit.*, p. 60

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 61

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Id.*, p. 62.

¹¹³ Rossini, P., et al., *op. cit.*, p.4

characteristics applied to Twitter can also be applied to Donald Trump's behavior on Twitter.

3. Social Media and the U.S. Presidential Elections in 2008, 2012, and 2016

As explained, elections in the United States have been influenced by contextual factors and especially by the rise of social media. According to the author Bruce Bimber, the 2008 and 2012 election cycles are excellent demonstrations of how politicians adapt to the rapidly evolving communication environment.¹¹⁴ This process of adaptation is the result of the competition between politicians to have an advantage over their opponents, pushing them to be innovative and to make the most of new tools and means of communication.¹¹⁵ In the last two decades, politicians have experimented with new media and practices and have taken ownership of those platforms. Moreover, throughout the years, there has been increased specialization as campaigns have become more organized and better coordinated.¹¹⁶

This chapter describes how the winning candidate of the 2008 and 2012 elections, Barack Obama, and the winner of the 2016 election cycle, Donald Trump, used social media to their advantage to win the election. This section aims to describe how each election cycle differed in its approach to social media, what is defined as "innovative," and how the candidates have distinguished themselves. Research on Barack Obama's media practices in 2008 and 2012 and Donald Trump's use of social media in 2016 demonstrated that most successful presidential candidates are actually those who distinguish themselves with an original approach toward digital platforms. Candidates who show themselves as being skilled with new methods of technological communication present themselves as leaders capable of adapting to the latest advancements.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 131

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 144

¹¹⁶ Negrine, R., & Lilleker, D. G., *op. cit.*, p. 314

¹¹⁷ "How the Presidential Candidates Use the Web and Social Media. Obama Leads but Neither Candidate Engages in Much Dialogue with Voters." *Pew Research Center*, Aug. 15, 2012, www.journalism.org/2012/08/15/how-presidential-candidates-use-web-and-social-media/

3.1. The 2008 Presidential Election: The First Social Media Election

The 2008 presidential election race was called “the first Social Media Election ” as this was the first cycle during which candidates used new tools, namely social media for political communication, especially Barack Obama, who distinguished himself with a fresh and ingenious approach toward this advanced means of communication.¹¹⁸

Since the election in 2004, new technologies and means of communication appeared, namely social media. In addition, the use of the internet had started to rise. In 2008, the internet use had increased by 10% and more and more people had begun to use social media.¹¹⁹ Accordingly, the election cycle of 2008 marks a real turn in the development of political communication strategies. In 2008, the networks Facebook, YouTube, Myspace and Flickr were adopted by both parties, Republicans and Democrats.¹²⁰ However, what distinguished Barack Obama from his opponents was his innovative use of social media compared to his opponents and his better understanding of its power. Obama’s campaign in 2008 has been compared to the campaign of John F. Kennedy in 1960 in terms of innovation, as Kennedy also used a new medium, television, in an original and advantageous way during his electoral campaign, which turned out to be a great asset for him.¹²¹ In 2008, Obama invested a great deal of money quite early in social media ¹²² and he surrounded himself with a team of experts in digital media such as Chris Hughes, one of Facebook’s co-founders; Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google; and Craig Newmark, the founder of Craigslist, among many other people.¹²³

Although Obama’s campaign used a lot of other channels to communicate, social media played a significant role in the success of his communication strategy. Firstly, Obama’s campaign created their own website, www.my.barackobama.com or MyBO for short,

¹¹⁸ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 51

¹¹⁹ Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, p. 8

¹²⁰ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

¹²¹ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 134

¹²² Adams A., and McCorkindale T., *op. cit.*, p. 357

¹²³ Lutz, Monte. “The Social Pulpit. Barack Obama’s Social Media Toolkit.” *Edelman*, 2009, www.cyber.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.harvard.edu/files/Social%20Pulpit%20-%20Barack%20Obamas%20Social%20Media%20Toolkit%201.09.pdf, p. 10

which facilitated volunteering by enabling supporters to receive updates on the campaign, download posters and flyers, make phone calls through a computer program, and to receive locations for door-knocking actions. In addition to this platform, they also used 15 different social networks (e.g., MySpace, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, Flickr, MiGente) along with more traditional media (e.g., emails, website, phone calls, television advertising).¹²⁴ In 2008, Obama had approximately 2.5 million (according to Victoria Chang, other sources say 3.2 million) supporters on Facebook, 115,000 followers on Twitter, 50 million viewers who watched videos related to the campaign on YouTube. The campaign published 1,239 YouTube videos, had three million subscribers for mobile messages, 13 million members of their e-mail segment list, and two million profiles created on www.my.barackobama.com.¹²⁵ In addition, the campaign hosted offline events and gatherings of supporter groups, and also received a great deal of money from online donations.¹²⁶

What was paradoxical was the fact that Obama's supporters were less likely to use the internet than the supporters of his opponent, John McCain. However, Obama's supporters were more politically active on online platforms. According to the Pew Research Center, Obama voters tended to post more political content online, engage more politically on social media, share more related content, sign up for online updates on the election or for email alerts, and donate online.¹²⁷

Therefore, through digital media, especially social media, Obama engaged and involved supporters at different levels of the volunteering system scale and empowered them by giving them opportunities to participate and to create content on their own.¹²⁸ The key to Obama's outstanding social media strategy lays in empowering people and building a network of enthusiastic supporters through social media. They focused on supporters'

¹²⁴ Lutz, M., *op. cit.*, p. 4

¹²⁵ Chang, Victoria. "Obama and the power of social media and technology." *The European Business Review*, 2010, p. 16

¹²⁶ Chang, V., *op. cit.*, p. 16

¹²⁷ Smith, Aaron. "The Internet's Role in Campaign 2008." *Pew Research Center*, Apr. 15, 2009, www.pewresearch.org/internet/2009/04/15/the-internets-role-in-campaign-2008/

¹²⁸ Lutz, M., *op. cit.*, p. 6

time and engagement while, until then, traditional campaigns usually had focused on votes and money.¹²⁹

The success of Obama's 2008 campaign can be explained by many factors, and one of them was the fact that he and his team were able to foster enthusiasm from voters and supporters and transform it into concrete actions such as volunteering and donating. As mentioned before, the campaign of Howard Dean in 2004 made extensive use of digital media but failed to transform online enthusiasm into effective offline actions.¹³⁰ However, Obama's 2008 campaign can be seen as an extension of Dean's campaign, as it drew inspiration from the Dean's 2004 approach using digital platforms, but also the fact that Obama hired staff and consultants who had worked for Dean in 2004.¹³¹

Finally, the Obama campaign's use of media was a transformation from a system in which the mass media controlled the dissemination of information to a new system through which digital media has enabled the large-scale mobilization of motivated supporters online and offline in an environment of controlled interactivity.¹³² Obama's campaign focused on addressing voters directly and personally and mobilizing them both online and offline.

For all these reasons, the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama marked the beginning of new political communication methods that have now become standard in election races. Politicians are now expected to use them efficiently and to be agile in their use of the different platforms as well as their corresponding norms, knowing when to adopt the right language and appropriate tone.

Although social media was an advantageous element of Obama's presidential campaign, it is important to note that the context was favorable for a victory from the Democratic party as in 2008, with the economic crisis and the unfavorable opinion on the war against Iraq, the Republican party was not viewed positively.¹³³ Obama's campaign introduced policies to protect the environment, solutions to the healthcare crisis, an engagement to

¹²⁹ Chang, V., *op. cit.*, p. 17

¹³⁰ Lutz, M., *op. cit.*, p. 1

¹³¹ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 137

¹³² Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, p. 8

¹³³ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 132

end the war, and policies regarding civil rights for the LGBTQ community and African-Americans, as well as other minorities.¹³⁴ In other words, Barack Obama had a strong communication strategy but also a solid overall program.

3.2. The 2012 Presidential Election: Obama and the Rise of Micro-targeting

Since 2008, because social media was more and more popular among the population and became common in the media environment, it became a standard tool for political communication in U.S. electoral campaigns.¹³⁵ By 2012, Facebook's use had increased significantly, Twitter had become a new platform for political communication, and other social networks had appeared.¹³⁶

After four years in the White House, President Obama ran for reelection. Consequently, the race was between a sitting president and another candidate, Mitt Romney. The context had changed since Obama's first campaign in 2008.¹³⁷ Social media was more commonly used among the U.S. population, and there was subsequently less enthusiasm and novelty around those means of communication as they became more usual. In addition, Obama's opponents had caught up with his campaign social media expertise.¹³⁸ Moreover, voter turnout had decreased from 62.2% in 2008 to 58.7%, and the unemployment rate had increased and had not been so high since the years during which Franklin D. Roosevelt was president.¹³⁹

Regarding Obama's use of social media in 2012, it was used for the same purposes as in 2008, especially for mobilizing voters and supporters.¹⁴⁰ His campaign adopted nine different social media networks,¹⁴¹ six fewer than in 2008, as they concentrated their efforts on specific platforms. Since his first campaign, Obama's number of followers had

¹³⁴ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 133

¹³⁵ Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, p. 22

¹³⁶ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

¹³⁷ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 131

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139

¹⁴¹ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

grown significantly. On Election Day, Obama had 33 million Facebook supporters, 30 million more than in 2008. On Twitter, he had more than 22 million followers, of which 12 million had been gained between September 2011 and the day of election in November 2012, while his main opponent, Romney, had only 1.8 million followers.¹⁴² Obama also organized “town halls” on digital platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook to answer questions from users. Although Obama held these meetings before the beginning of the election cycle, this demonstrates the technological sense of innovation of his campaign. Barack Obama and Mitt Romney were also on other networks such as Instagram, Tumblr, and Pinterest. The social platform from Obama’s campaign in 2008, MyBO, was also updated, redesigned, and renamed *Dashboard*. Additionally, the campaign launched its own app for mobile devices.¹⁴³ Moreover, Obama also tended to be more active on social networks by posting more and being present on more platforms than Governor Romney.¹⁴⁴

In summation, since the 2008 election, Obama had built a network of supporters and followers. To illustrate, his victory tweet from 2008 was retweeted 157 times, while his victory tweet of 2012 was retweeted 800,000 times in only three days.¹⁴⁵ Because he was a sitting president during this election cycle, Barack Obama had what is called an incumbency advantage.¹⁴⁶ Because he was the incumbent, Obama’s use of social media was characterized and influenced by several elements that turned out to be assets on social media, namely on Twitter. Thanks to his years as president, he had a large number of followers and supporters but also a significant position in the Twitter community.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, his status influenced his way to communicate and how users perceived his posts. The fact that he was such an important figure for the country using a means of communication so accessible and commonly used among people, contributed to giving his tweets a certain tone and essence of authority, while still creating an impression of

¹⁴² Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, p. 10

¹⁴³ Fox, Zoe. “The Digital Smackdown: Obama 2008 vs. Obama 2012.” *Mashable*, Sep. 23, 2012, www.mashable.com/2012/09/23/obama-digital-comparison/?europa=true

¹⁴⁴ “How the Presidential Candidates Use the Web and Social Media. Obama Leads but Neither Candidate Engages in Much Dialogue with Voters.” *Pew Research Center*, Aug. 15, 2012, www.journalism.org/2012/08/15/how-presidential-candidates-use-web-and-social-media/

¹⁴⁵ Kreiss, D., *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4

¹⁴⁶ Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, p. 8

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23

closeness to his supporters.¹⁴⁸ Barack Obama's posts and messages were either written in a public voice, conveying seriousness and authority, or in a more personal or informal way, such as when he invited people to ask him questions about his plans on healthcare in 2015, or the post sharing his summer playlist in August 2016. Barack Obama also often published positive and hopeful messages. His significant numbers of followers on social networks and the high number of likes and retweets show that Obama understands social media and also knows how to use it to foster his popularity. For example, four tweets from Barack Obama appeared on the list of the 2017 most popular tweets, two of them being his last tweets as the 44th President of the United States.¹⁴⁹

Another strength of Obama's campaign, which was already present in 2008 but grew stronger subsequently, was its understanding of the importance of performative power when using social media. Performative power describes how politicians influence people's response and behavior towards balloting through "well-timed, emotionally resonant, and rhetorically effective communication."¹⁵⁰ Social media has accelerated the rhythm of communication as it is perceived as a quick and immediate means of communication. As a result, in accordance with the immediacy of social network logic, brands and public figures are expected to be reactive and respond in real time. The 44th President of the United States and his team understood the importance of timing in social media logic and how to take advantage of it. Obama's communication team responsible for digital media was always prepared for diverse scenarios and had a great deal of autonomy compared to Romney's team. They used already approved press releases¹⁵¹ and drafts of tweets by preparing broad lines in advance of what Romney was going to declare¹⁵² and they prepared specific visuals in case Romney said particular things.¹⁵³ In comparison, the staff of Obama's opponent, Romney, had to go through a long process to approve public communication and lost precious time. In contrast, Obama's communication was quick and responsive.¹⁵⁴ This is a good illustration of the level of

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13

¹⁴⁹ Becket, Adam. "The 10 most liked tweets of all time are dominated by Obama." *Business Insider*, Aug. 16, 2017, www.businessinsider.com/10-most-liked-tweets-of-all-time-2017-8?IR=T

¹⁵⁰ Kreiss, D., *op. cit.*, p. 13

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 13

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 13

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13

organization and preparation of Obama's campaign, in line with their professional and structured strategy for political communication on digital platforms.

Finally, since 2008, communication in politics has become a more professionalized discipline. Politicians started to rely increasingly on experts and built teams of people in charge of communication on social networks, resulting in a growing specialization of their campaign. Campaigns have become more efficient, have mastered social media even more, and started to use voter data to improve their strategies.

During the 2012 election cycle, Obama's campaign again demonstrated its great capacity for innovation by exploiting a new technique called big data, data analytics, or behavioral modeling.¹⁵⁵ This technique consists of collecting data from people in order for campaigns to better target their audience on a micro-level and improve their communication strategy with micro-targeting. The use of data was already a common practice during the 2008 election cycle. Campaigns were already data-driven,¹⁵⁶ as they used data from different sources, especially social media, in order to better target voters online and offline, for advertising on television, phone calls, and even for face-to-face interactions such as knocking door-to-door.¹⁵⁷ An example of a technique used for collecting data was the campaign's website links. When users clicked on links shared on the campaign's pages or social media accounts, for instance, and were redirected on the campaign's website, it enabled the staff to access personal information from those users.¹⁵⁸ The campaign also used Facebook information for sending emails asking supporters to contact their friends living in swing states. Those emails contained photographs and names of those friends.¹⁵⁹ However, as the different systems for collecting data from various sources were created by different partners and firms, they did not work together as one central base.¹⁶⁰

Already in 2009, Obama hired Dan Wagner for analyzing voter data. Wagner then became the Chief Analytics Officer for Obama's 2012 campaign during which he developed software and technology in order to collect, treat, and analyze people's personal

¹⁵⁵ Issemberg, Sasha. "How Obama's Team Used Big Data to Rally Voters." *MIT Technology Review*, Dec. 19, 2012. MIT, www.technologyreview.com/2012/12/19/114510/how-obamas-team-used-big-data-to-rally-voters/

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 141

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

information left on digital media.¹⁶¹ By the start of 2012, Dan Wagner described his project as “the study and practice of resource optimization for the purpose of improving programs and earning voters more efficiently.”¹⁶² For his second presidential campaign, Barack Obama hired back many of his team members from the previous campaign¹⁶³ who had developed their skills and tools for data analytics during the four years Obama was the sitting president in order to continue to exploit data.¹⁶⁴ In addition, Obama also hired new developers and coders to build apps and web platforms.¹⁶⁵ The importance of data for the 2012 Obama’s campaign is demonstrated in the size of their analytics department (which was 10 times bigger than Romney’s team) and by the fact that they invested heavily in software and programs to collect and analyze data.

The use of voter data was incredibly useful for the campaign for several reasons. A major reason was behavioral modeling, a system created to better understand voters and their behavior.¹⁶⁶ Through a better perception of how and why people behave in a certain manner, and by modeling variables, they attempted to predict people’s reactions and conduct.¹⁶⁷ In addition to trying to convince voters from 2008 to vote for Barack Obama again in 2012, the objective was also to gain new supporters.¹⁶⁸ They could now try to find undecided voters and persuade them to vote for Barack Obama.¹⁶⁹ Its use of data and understanding of their audience gave Obama’s national campaign a sense of proximity with Obama’s voters similar to campaigns on a more regional level.¹⁷⁰ Overall, it allowed Obama’s staff to build a communication strategy involving personalized messages targeted at different people from different states.¹⁷¹

The real force of this technology is that they did not consider voters in geographical or demographic categories anymore to try to predict people’s behavior. Now, people were

¹⁶¹ Isseberg, S., *op. cit.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p.141

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* p. 141

¹⁶⁸ Isseberg, S., *op. cit.*

¹⁶⁹ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 142

¹⁷⁰ Isseberg, S., *op. cit.*

¹⁷¹ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p.131

approached “on their own terms”¹⁷² and seen as a group of individuals with their own specificities. Campaign staffers used that information in order to better target people; that is, they adapted their message according to whom they were targeting and where they would find those people.¹⁷³ Their analysis combined the forces of qualitative and quantitative research, helping them understand their audience better. Although the Obama campaign’s data collection strategies largely remain unrevealed,¹⁷⁴ this represents a real transformation into a system with strategies based on research, studies, and tests.¹⁷⁵

3.3. The 2016 Presidential Election: Trump’s Untraditional Use of Social Media

By 2016, digital media and norms around it had evolved significantly since 2008 and 2012. There had been many changes in the way people use and consume media but also in people’s mindset in general. According to the author of the article “Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election,” in 2016, social media networks were increasingly used for obtaining information on the elections.¹⁷⁶ In January 2016, 44% of adults in the United States claimed that they acquired information regarding the presidential election from social networks.¹⁷⁷ Consequently, those factors influenced the way candidates in the 2016 U.S. presidential election used social media.

The 2016 election cycle had its fair share of controversies related to social media, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal in which it was revealed that a company specializing in data analytics that worked with Trump’s campaign had collected personal information from millions of U.S. voters’ profile on Facebook. The company had collected and used the

¹⁷² Issemberg, S., *op. cit.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ Bimber, B., *op. cit.*, p. 142

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 144-145

¹⁷⁶ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

¹⁷⁷ “Election 2016: Campaigns as A Direct Source of News. Candidates differ in their use of social media to connect with the public.” Pew Research Center, Jul. 18, 2016, www.journalism.org/2016/07/18/candidates-differ-in-their-use-of-social-media-to-connect-with-the-public/

data, without authorization, to influence voters through personalized political advertising.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, although the election cycle of 2016 saw a high level of interest from the public and the mainstream media, the majority of voters did not like either of the two remaining candidates after the primaries, namely Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.¹⁷⁹ According to the article “Shadow candidates: who’s more transparent, Clinton or Trump?”, neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton were considered as very honest by voters. Fifty percent of the respondents of the survey considered Clinton to be dishonest and 58% found Trump dishonest.¹⁸⁰

The first surprise of this election season was the candidacy from an unexpected contender, Donald Trump. Trump is a wealthy businessman and an entertainer with his own reality TV shows that have run for many years, *The Apprentice* and *The Celebrity Apprentice*, but he had no background in politics. Trump was facing a number of contenders who were familiar to the political world, and his main opponent was Hillary Clinton, a woman who has been in national politics since 1992 when she served as First Lady, followed by stints as Senator (from New York state) and Secretary of State under the 44th President of the U.S., Barack Obama. As a result, the race was between two highly contrasting candidates who had different approaches toward politics in general and political communication, especially on social media. But then, on November 8, 2016, the biggest surprise of the election occurred; Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States, although most of media had predicted Hillary would be the winner. *The Huffington Post* had predicted Clinton would win this election with 98% chance.¹⁸¹ Moreover, a study by the Pew Research Center demonstrated that when asking voters who would be the most qualified candidate to be president between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, and the one who would have the best judgment in difficult situations, more than 50% selected Hillary. However, when asking which of the two candidates was the most honest and truthful, 40% of the respondents answered Trump and 37% chose

¹⁷⁸ Cadwalladr, Carole, and Emma Graham-Harrison. “Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach.” *The Guardian*, Mar. 17, 2018, www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election

¹⁷⁹ Williams, Christine B. “Introduction: Social Media, Political Marketing and the 2016 U.S. Election.” *Journal of Political Communication*, vol. 16, 2017, p. 208

¹⁸⁰ Levinthal, D., *op. cit.*

¹⁸¹ Francia, Peter L. « Free Media and Twitter in the 2016 Presidential Election: The Unconventional Campaign of Donald Trump”. *Social Science Computer Review*, 36(4), 2017, p. 4

Hillary.¹⁸² In addition, 44% of the interviewees stated that Trump would change the functioning of politics in the United States but in a negative way.¹⁸³ In general, the study of the Pew Research Center showed that Donald Trump was not perceived positively as a candidate for President of the United States. For these reasons, Donald Trump's victory on November 8 was a complete shock. According to Shontavia Jackson Johnson, Trump's victory was "fueled by everything from sensationalism, silent Trump supporters, and the power of celebrity to populism, sexism, anti-establishment sentiment, and deep divides along races, class and cultural lines."¹⁸⁴

From the beginning, Donald Trump was an unusual candidate. First, there was his background as a businessman and reality television star. Secondly, throughout the campaign, Trump distinguished himself particularly by his attitude and his communication style, especially on social media. Although social media was no longer new and had become a commonly used tool worldwide, Trump managed to stand out with his approach toward social networks by not following the long-established rules of political communication and standards of politicians' attitude on social media. Trump said it himself during an interview with FOX News.¹⁸⁵

Donald Trump's success on social media has been analyzed and scrutinized by media and pundits and many have published articles describing how he achieved to win the presidential election and how his communication on social media contributed to his victory. Before the election cycle of 2016, and prior to his candidacy for president of the United States, Trump was well-acquainted with the media. He had his own reality TV shows¹⁸⁶ and appeared as himself in several movies, TV series (*Home Alone* and *Sex and the City*, for instance), and talk shows. He was already a well-known public figure, which

¹⁸² "2016 Campaign: Strong Interest, Widespread Dissatisfaction. Candidate traits and perceptions." *Pew Research Center*, Jul. 7, 2016, www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/07/07/5-candidate-traits-and-perceptions/

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ Johnson, Shontavia Jackson. "Donald Trump, Disruptive Technologies, and Twitter's Role in the 2016 American Presidential Election." *Widener Commonwealth Law Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2018, p. 41

¹⁸⁵ Schwartz, Ian. "Trump: 'I Wouldn't Be Here If It Wasn't For Twitter,' 'I Have My Own Form Of Media'." *Real Clear Politics*, Mar. 15, 2017, www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2017/03/15/trump_i_wouldnt_be_here_if_it_wasnt_for_twitter_i_have_my_own_form_of_media.html

¹⁸⁶ Francia, P. L., *op. cit.*, p. 1

as we said before, it played an advantageous role in his campaign. Moreover, he had been using social media regularly for years to proclaim his opinions about various subjects.

During the 2016 campaign, author Gunn Enli pointed out that there was less social media platforms used during this election.¹⁸⁷ Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, were used by both Clinton and Trump, and Hillary's campaign also used Pinterest and LinkedIn.¹⁸⁸ As Obama did in 2012, they focused their efforts on specific platforms, although the candidates of the 2016 election cycle also used new means of communication, such as Trump using Twitch (a live streaming platform) and the mobile app Snapchat. Trump also used gamification,¹⁸⁹ the technique of including typical elements from games to make something that is not a game more interesting, with a reward system for example, in order to increase participation.¹⁹⁰ Every candidate in the 2016 election used this technique to varying degrees, but the Trump campaign app was entirely based on this approach.¹⁹¹

In comparison to the other candidates, studies have shown that Trump was the contestant with the best presence on digital platforms. The article, "Donald Trump Vs. Hillary Clinton – The Social Media Report," reports on Trump and Clinton's online presence by comparing their numbers of Google entries and followers on different social networks until August 5, 2016. When searching for "Donald Trump" on Google, the author of the article found that there were 228 million Google results, whereas searching for "Hillary Clinton" resulted in 145 million entries. Regarding Facebook's figures, Donald Trump had 10.2 million people who liked his page, and Hillary Clinton had 5.4 million page likes. However, it is important to note that the two pages had a similar level of engagement. Unlike Obama during his 2008 and 2012 election campaigns, neither Clinton nor Trump had a personal YouTube channel, but when the author compared Google video search results, Donald Trump had 14.9 million entries while Hillary Clinton had 10.6 million.¹⁹² On Instagram,

¹⁸⁷ Although the Pew Research Center has published a complete list of all social media networks Obama and McCain used during their 2008 campaigns, a similar list does not exist for Trump and Clinton's campaigns in 2016.

¹⁸⁸ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 52

¹⁸⁹ Baldwin-Philippi, Jessica. "The technological performance of populism." *New Media & Society*, Vol. 21(2), 2019, p. 382

¹⁹⁰ "Gamification." *Macmillan Dictionary*, 2020, www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/gamification

¹⁹¹ Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, p. 383

¹⁹² Arruda, William. "Donald Trump Vs. Hillary Clinton -- The Social Media Report." *Forbes*, Aug. 7, 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/williamarruda/2016/08/07/donald-trump-vs-hillary-clinton-the-social-media-report/#5604cac7128f

both contestants had more or less similar statistics with Donald Trump having slightly more followers (2.2 million) compared to Hillary Clinton's 1.8 million. Regarding Twitter, on August 5, 2016, Trump had 10.7 million followers (which grew to 13 million by Election Day on November 8, 2016), while Hillary had 8.1 million.¹⁹³ These numbers demonstrate that Donald Trump dominated digital media when compared to his opponent, Hillary Clinton.¹⁹⁴

Although Trump posted at the same rate on Facebook and Twitter, compared to the other main candidates in the race, he received more comments, reactions, and retweets. On Facebook, the average reactions per post during the studied period was 76,885, while Hillary Clinton had an average of 12,537 and Bernie Sanders 31,830. Regarding tweets, Trump's tweets were retweeted 6,000 times on average. In comparison, Hillary Clinton's tweets were retweeted 1,581 times and Bernie Sanders 2,463 on average.¹⁹⁵

Regarding candidates' retweets, as mentioned before, candidates for presidential elections tend to retweet posts from other politicians, public figures, or organizations but rarely from citizens. However, Trump, again, did not follow this rule. Most of his retweets (78%) came from posts from the general public, then in second place were retweets from news media (18%). In contrast, Hillary Clinton adopted a completely opposite approach with 80% of her retweets coming from her campaign account and none from the general public.¹⁹⁶

Another unusual aspect of media usage by Trump was the links he shared. When politicians shared links on social media, those links were mostly redirecting people to the campaign website. During the 2012 election cycle, 54% of the links Obama shared on his Twitter profile were links redirecting to the website of his campaign. More than 30% were links to pictures and videos, and only 4% were links to media coverage. Trump, however, did not follow this norm. None of the links he shared on Facebook redirected to his

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ "Election 2016: Campaigns as A Direct Source of News. Candidates differ in their use of social media to connect with the public." *Pew Research Center*, Jul. 18, 2016, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/07/18/candidates-differ-in-their-use-of-social-media-to-connect-with-the-public/>

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

campaign website, but 78% linked to news media, and on Twitter, only 20% were links redirecting to the campaign website while 48% were links to news media websites.¹⁹⁷

Another fact that contributed to Trump's victory and demonstrated his social media skills was his ability to get media coverage for free. Thanks to Twitter in particular, Trump was often referred to in the traditional news media resulting in high free media coverage, which contributed to Trump being at the center of news. According to Peter L. Francia, Trump's attitude on social media, especially on Twitter, was purposefully provocative and controversial as part of his communication strategy in order to attract the press' attention.¹⁹⁸ Journalists often use Twitter as a source of information. Consequently, Trump was an entertaining candidate as he often made controversial statements on his social networks. News coverage in election campaigns can be useful to place the candidate at the center of conversations. Thanks to Trump's media coverage, he was reported to have been more often the topic of conversation between people than Hillary Clinton was.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, Peter L. Francia estimates the free media value that Trump generated at \$4.9 million. In contrast, Obama's free media value generated in 2012 was estimated at \$1.1 million.²⁰⁰

Trump's campaign understood the importance of three aspects in celebrity culture, which he then transferred to his campaign: "mediation, visibility, and attention."²⁰¹ Donald Trump succeeded in monopolizing news stories during the electoral cycle mostly through his approach on social media but also by acknowledging the importance of the press in keeping the attention on him, namely by being more accessible to the journalists and media with press conferences, interviews, and calls to talk radio or newscasts.²⁰² Trump represented an inexhaustible source of stories and managed to keep a certain level of attention on himself. According to the author of the article "Attention and amplification in the hybrid media system: The composition and activity of Donald Trump's Twitter following during the 2016 presidential election," attention is crucial when it comes to

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ Francia, P. L., *op. cit.*, p. 6

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11

²⁰⁰ Francia, P. L., *op. cit.*, p. 8

²⁰¹ Wells, Chris, et al. "How Trump Drove Coverage to the Nomination: Hybrid Media Campaigning." *Political Communication*, 2016, p. 669

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 670

mobilization or changing audiences' opinion and is a medium for calling people to action.²⁰³ Attention on social media is usually calculated through metrics such as the click-through rate and engagement rate (number of likes, comments, shares, and retweets), and as described above, Trump had a higher number of followers and a higher engagement rate than Hillary Clinton during their campaigns.

Therefore, Donald Trump distinguished himself from other candidates of the race, and even from all politicians in general, through his approach to communication on social media, especially on Twitter. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump displayed different attitudes on Twitter. While Hillary Clinton perpetuated the tradition of a structured professional political communication style,²⁰⁴ Trump, on the contrary, used a more amateurish style,²⁰⁵ as a counter to the traditionally professionalized approaches. For example, videos posted by Hillary Clinton were usually professionally filmed footage from campaigns videos, very neat, and skilled.²⁰⁶ Trump, on the other hand, published more videos that were considered as having an "amateur character" with a weak visual and audio quality (blurred images and low-quality editing, for example).²⁰⁷

Since the 2008 election, political communication on social media had gained in professionalism and was not an amateur enterprise anymore. Politicians hired pundits and qualified people to manage their presence on digital platforms and used focus groups as well as state-of-the-art techniques based on research.²⁰⁸ This trend has continued over the years and in different elections cycles worldwide. This was a traditional political communication system in which politicians usually built a polished and controlled representation of themselves on social media in particular and in the media in general. While Obama's campaign tried to display a less professional approach and tried to de-professionalize his staff in 2012, Obama still relied on his staff to manage his accounts and communication and prepare messages or visuals to post in advance, whereas Trump did

²⁰³ Zhang, Yini, et al. "Attention and amplification in the hybrid media system: The composition and activity of Donald Trump's Twitter following during the 2016 presidential election." *New Media & Society*, vol. 20(9), 2018 p. 3164

²⁰⁴ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 55

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54

²⁰⁶ "Election 2016: Campaigns as A Direct Source of News. Candidates differ in their use of social media to connect with the public." *Op. cit.*

²⁰⁷ Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, p. 387

²⁰⁸ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 55

not delegate as much, often practiced live-tweeting, and did not rely on the supervision of his communication department.²⁰⁹ Both approaches, professional and amateur, have their advantages according to contextual factors, the audience at which the message is targeted, and the objective.²¹⁰

It is important to note that an amateur approach to social media does not mean that there is no strategy altogether. An amateur style of communication is a strategy²¹¹ that contributed to the image Trump wanted to portray, namely the image of the authentic candidate. The construction of a politician's self-presentation is actually a common practice in marketing called branding, which is now also used by people, countries and cities, Non-Governmental Organizations, and others beyond commercial advertising territories.²¹² The image Trump tried to convey was that he was not like other politicians. By adopting a very contrasting attitude on social media rather than the pre-established standards of political communication, he set himself apart from other presidential candidates, as well as from the political elites. According to Gunn Enli, politicians who are too professional in their approach to communication can be perceived as "calculated and cynical."²¹³ In contrast, Trump's way of using social networks in an amateur style contributed to giving him the opposite image, that of an authentic outsider.²¹⁴

The image Trump and his team wanted to convey through his attitude, in addition to his positioning on certain issues, and his focus on the United States' culture and economy, is part of what the author Jessica Baldwin-Philippi calls "the performance of populism."²¹⁵ In her article, she describes populism as a " 'cultural backlash' [...] that is simultaneously about economic insecurity and nationalism or xenophobia, and as a "fundamental rejection of pluralism,"²¹⁶ in addition to a "central distrust of institutions and elites of both the political and economic realms,"²¹⁷ as well as criticizing the dominant culture's structures and values. Populism is an approach more centered around "the people,"

²⁰⁹ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 57

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² Schneiker, A., *op. cit.*, p.3

²¹³ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 58

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58

²¹⁵ Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, pp. 377-378

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 378

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

whose key values are authenticity and amateurism, based on making a division between ‘us,’ the people, and ‘them,’ the political elite.²¹⁸

The performance of populism on social media can be expressed through four practices.²¹⁹ All of these aspects were present to some extent in Trump’s discourse. Firstly, there is controlled interactivity. Managing interactivity in a way that one does not lose control is, as seen before, usual for political campaigns on social media. This aspect includes inviting people to give their feedback, to retweet, to comment, to answer polls, and so forth,²²⁰ but Trump’s campaign took it a step further as it answered and retweeted tweets from everyday citizens and supporters.²²¹ Tweets from the general public were more retweeted by Trump’s campaign than tweets by any other organization or important figures. Trump also sent emails to the public in a more interactive format as they included surveys and sets of questions about their opinions.²²²

Secondly, there is the production of amateur content. In the beginning of the use of the internet for election campaigns, the norm was usually to use digital platforms in a professional way, meaning publishing engaging and nice visual representations with nice aesthetics and clarifying or describing complicated issues as well as the candidates’ positioning. In other words, the content published was typically of high quality. However, Trump chose to turn the tide and publish mostly content in a more amateur style (e.g., blurred pictures, no central focus, lacking in light quality, or badly cropped). Only 34.9% of Trump’s content on Instagram was presented in a professional style, in comparison to Hillary Clinton, whose content on Instagram was described as being 89.9% in a professional style.²²³ Moreover, Trump’s campaign did not focus on having a coherent brand content esthetically speaking, which is usually done through using matching colorimetry or the same font for every visual.²²⁴ Trump’s campaign used different fonts that were often difficult to read.²²⁵ Pictures and videos did not follow professional

²¹⁸ Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, p. 378

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 381

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 382

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 385

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, p. 386

standards either, as they were weak regarding quality, blurry, not steady, and barely edited, with low quality sound and misplaced text.²²⁶

A third aspect of populism on social media is encouraging people to generate content on their own. Trump and Clinton both strongly encouraged their supporters to create content, promoting participation through self-references and through the creation and diffusion of memes (i.e., a visual representation, image, or video that is diffused on the internet quickly and is usually amusing or interesting ²²⁷). Memes in political communication can be used to inform about issues, and also to present the candidate in a more human light, or attack political opponents with a lighter tone. ²²⁸

Fourthly, there is the use of data for campaigns,²²⁹ which has been long used and was already very present in 2008 and 2012 for Barack Obama and which has since developed. The use of data during the 2016 election cycle was namely for the purpose of targeting, especially micro-targeting, but it was also used in an attempt to predict the outcome of the race. According to the article “How Big Data Broke American Politics”, political parties mainly use data to target like-minded people, rather than trying to persuade swing voters. Authors Chuck Todd and Carrie Dann stated that parties address voters who agree with their ideas, and do not try to reach swing voters or independent voters, who, as a result, feel “alienated by both parties”.²³⁰ However, according to the article “Big Data And The 2016 Election,” the Trump campaign avoided the use of data analytics and they mainly focused on free media exposure.²³¹ Although, it was recently revealed that Trump’s use of data was more advanced than he stated as his campaign hired a company called Cambridge Analytica that collected data from 50 million profiles, without authorization, and used it for their targeting strategy.²³²

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 387

²²⁷ “Meme.” *Merriam-Webster*, 2020, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meme

²²⁸ Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, p. 389

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 380

²³⁰ Todd, Chuck and Carrie Dann. “How Big Data Broke American Politics.” *NBC News*, Mar. 14, 2017, www.nbcnews.com/politics/elections/how-big-data-broke-american-politics-n732901

²³¹ Markman, Jon. “Big Data And The 2016 Election.” *Forbes*, Aug. 8, 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/jonmarkman/2016/08/08/big-data-and-the-2016-election/#31c989e14504

²³² Cadwalladr, Carole, and Emma Graham-Harrison. “Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach.” *The Guardian*, Mar. 17, 2018, www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election

To conclude, Donald Trump's use of social media was innovative in the sense that it introduced a new approach to political communication.²³³ It distinguished him from other candidates, and also from other politicians in general, who usually adopted a more traditional and professional strategy regarding media. By distinguishing himself from the political elite, Trump also gained significant attention, which enabled him to mobilize supporters. Therefore, we can conclude that social media, but more specifically the approach and use of social media by Trump has made him a very different figure in comparison to Barack Obama in terms of ideas and attitude.

4. Authenticity on Social Media

For the past few years, U.S. politicians have had to face a new challenge in the electoral environment: people are increasingly distrustful toward politicians and do not believe politicians are authentic anymore.²³⁴ The problem is that perceived authenticity plays an important role in elections as it has a significant impact on voter's choice.²³⁵ As a result, there is a growing desire for authentic candidates. Consequently, political campaigns have tried to influence how candidates are perceived by people. Politicians then try to appear, on the one hand likeable, sincere, and trustworthy and, on the other hand, competent and able to realize the changes and policies they promise during their campaign,²³⁶ and this combination of traits must seem real and genuine. This process is related to branding, as campaigns focus on candidates' self-presentation.²³⁷ Although there is no general agreement about a fixed definition of the concept of authenticity, it is often associated with the notion of the presentation of "a genuine, critically reflective and true self."²³⁸ Simply put, authenticity is displayed when politicians do not perform a fake character but act naturally.²³⁹ To present an authentic image, politicians have to be able to display a

²³³ Francia, P. L., *op. cit.*, p. 2

²³⁴ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 3

²³⁵ Grow, G. and Janelle Ward. "The role of authenticity in electoral social media campaigns.", *First Monday*, vol. 18(4), Apr. 1, 2013. *First Monday. Peer-reviewed Journal on the Internet*, www.firstmonday.org/article/view/4269/3425 , p. 1

²³⁶ Grow, G. and Ward J., *op cit.*, p. 2

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p1

²³⁸ Grow, Gabrielle. "The role of authenticity in Electoral Social Media Campaigns." *Media, Culture and Society*, Jun. 22, 2012, p. 11

²³⁹ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 2

series of characteristics through the production of verbal and non-verbal cues (e.g., pictures, videos, words and symbols, punctuation).²⁴⁰ Authenticity is not only expressed through verbal signals but also via non-verbal cues. People do not only pay attention to the content of a message, but also to how it is said.²⁴¹ The concept of typographical texture and the display of emojis and punctuation for example all have an impact on how a message is perceived.

Author Tommy Shane made a distinction between what he calls frontstage and backstage performance. Frontstage is the public arena in which, according to a specific context cultivating certain expectations, a person behaves in a certain way.²⁴² On the other hand, backstage is the private setting, hidden from the public eye, where the person can act without the pressure of people's scrutiny.²⁴³ Backstage behavior is for example when a politician shows a highly emotional state such as crying.²⁴⁴ As a result, the desire for "political authenticity is a demand for backstage access"²⁴⁵. Users then judge the performance of a politician as authentic or fake according to the cues aforementioned.²⁴⁶ Ultimately, political authenticity is about perception and depends on diverse criteria.²⁴⁷

Some experts say that "social media is an environment where authenticity is simultaneously promised, demanded and disputed."²⁴⁸ Social media, in this process of politicians' self-presentation, can represent an opportunity as it allows politicians to address people directly with their own words, and build a relationship between the candidate and its constituents, as authenticity helps to build trust.²⁴⁹ Moreover, it is also an advantageous tool to maintain control of the message and image they want to convey.²⁵⁰ However, it can also constitute a threat, as content on social media is created by users and everyone can publish messages on the platforms and criticize whomever

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 2

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁴⁹ Grow, G. *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

they want. As a result, campaigns have less control over a candidate's representation.²⁵¹ According to Tommy Shane, people on social media have become increasingly capable of assessing content and spotting "fake authenticity."²⁵² On Twitter, for example, people feel that "consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic."²⁵³ Moreover, politicians often do not publish posts themselves and accounts are often managed by their staff.²⁵⁴ This growing untrustworthiness toward the field of politics and politicians in particular was heavily exploited by Donald Trump during his campaign.

According to Gabrielle Grow, there are four dimensions playing a role in the construction of authenticity online: authority, identity, transparency, and engagement.²⁵⁵ The first dimension is authority, which is an important characteristic for political leaders in democracies. It is expressed through the credibility of a candidate and their expertise but can also be expressed through a politician's skills in using advanced technologies. On social media, a candidate's authority can be expressed through personal, professional, and educational information and through an innovative approach to new technologies.²⁵⁶ Candidates who use new technologies in an innovative way are perceived as tech-savvy and seen as politicians who understand how to connect with people.²⁵⁷ As explained in Chapter 3, Barack Obama's ingenious use of social media in 2008 played a favorable role in his campaign by showing that Obama was innovative and in touch with the evolution of the world. During the 2016 presidential election, however, Hillary Clinton, who had the most experience in politics, was seen as unauthentic. In contrast, Donald Trump, who had no political background, was perceived as an authentic candidate. Despite his lack of political experience, Trump managed to give an impression of authenticity through other means, especially on Twitter which will be later explained in Section 5.1.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

²⁵² Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 3

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁵⁵ The four dimensions were firstly introduced by the authors Gilpin Palazzolo and Brody, and were then revised in Gabrielle Grow's thesis in order to match them with the social media logic. The author of the thesis describes the four dimensions and then analyzes how they are displayed on social networks' platform. Although this study is mostly about Facebook, the article's findings can be applied to Twitter as well.

²⁵⁶ Grow, G. *op. cit.*, p. 67

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 68

The second aspect playing a role in authenticity is identity. Identity is a dynamic construction; it is not fixed, and it relies on multiple traits, such as if the politician is trustworthy, sincere, believable, fair, and reliable. Identity is consequently managed through impression management and self-presentation.²⁵⁸ Voters, when choosing for whom they will vote, pay attention to a candidate's image, character and performance.²⁵⁹ Campaigns attempt to express identity traits through "experience, knowledge, responsiveness, concern, sincerity and independence."²⁶⁰ Voters want to see human and relatable politicians, and this can be conveyed on digital platforms via candidates' sharing about their activities and passions, as well as pictures of their private life or in an informal setting.²⁶¹ Nevertheless, identity is a complex notion as it is subjective to individuals' judgement of whether the identity's performance is sincere or not.²⁶² Social media in this sense can be tricky as it can be used to publish messages, images, or videos that can undermine candidates' self-presentation and threaten their authenticity.²⁶³ Moreover, identity on online platforms can be perceived as a performance rather than a display of genuineness.²⁶⁴

During his campaign in 2016, Donald Trump succeeded in producing a self-presentation that seemed authentic, especially on social media. One of the reasons for this was the fact that Trump's behavior during his campaign was in line with his past attitude already displayed on social media. When presenting himself in the presidential campaign, Trump did not try to present a more polished image of himself; he simply continued to act as he always had. Consequently, his behavior and identity were perceived as genuine.

The third dimension is transparency. Transparency is the action of revealing information about the functioning of a particular organization (an electoral campaign, for example), showing openness and interactivity. Transparency is an essential element for building a relationship and has become increasingly important, as stakeholders demand that organizations and brands be more open and transparent. Moreover, sharing candidates'

²⁵⁸ Grow, G. *op. cit.*, p. 16

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 16

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 17

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

personal details is a way to humanize the candidate.²⁶⁵ As a result, political campaigns and politicians are expected to be transparent.²⁶⁶ This can be achieved through interactivity and dialogue, as this provides an opportunity to reveal useful information or content to the public.²⁶⁷ On social media especially, this is done by being active, dialoguing with users, and answering comments, or even leaving people's negative comments on one's page, as all these elements make the candidate more accessible and open.²⁶⁸ Regarding Donald Trump's transparency on social media, according to Ron Fournier, "No presidential nominee has ever, for better or for worse, been more unfiltered on social media."²⁶⁹ The fact that Trump is so vocal about his opinions on everything can be perceived as transparency. According to the article "Can Donald Trump's social media genius take him all the way to the White House?", the topics of Donald Trump's tweets, especially those related to popular culture, are a way to be more in-touch with his supporters. Connecting through gossip and referring to popular culture and celebrities, things that everyday people know and follow, helps to distinguish him from "fusty" politicians.²⁷⁰ However, according to Gabrielle Grow, the level of interactivity can influence how people perceive candidates, suggesting that too much interactivity can be unfavorable. Although, she does not specify at what point interactivity becomes excessive.²⁷¹

The final dimension of authenticity is engagement between users and politicians. This includes offline and online political participation, which is fostered by effective communication from campaigns, namely through engaging directly with voters and creating places where they can easily interact and participate.²⁷² Online engagement on social media translates into likes and shares, and this can also be beneficial for gaining attention.²⁷³ For example, Donald Trump's campaign was considered to be very engaging

²⁶⁵ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 4

²⁶⁶ Grow, G. *op. cit.*, p. 18

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19

²⁶⁸ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 4

²⁶⁹ Levinthal, D., *op. cit.*

²⁷⁰ Parkinson, H. J., *op. cit.*

²⁷¹ Grow, G. *op. cit.*, p. 21

²⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23

²⁷³ Grow, G. *op. cit.*, p. 73

with supporters due to retweeting the general public's posts on Twitter, in opposition to other politicians who rarely retweet posts from the general public.

As the descriptions of these four dimensions demonstrates, they are interrelated, as they support and influence one another. Interactions between political candidates and voters, mentioned in the third dimension, namely transparency, contribute to create engagement, for instance.²⁷⁴ A high level of online engagement can lead to authority, as it sends the message that people trust this candidate. To summarize, the demand for authenticity on social media is a request to access the human part of the candidates through personal information about them but also a demand for more openness, transparency, and more interaction.

4.1. Donald Trump's Display of Authenticity on Twitter

After describing the general approach and strategy of Donald Trump for his campaign communication on social media and the importance of authenticity, this section describes Trump's uncommon way of using one social network in particular: Twitter. Although many politicians and presidential candidates have used Twitter, Trump did so in a way that was unprecedented. As mentioned previously, Trump made great use of Twitter during his 2016 campaign and even after he became the 45th President of the United States. His way of tweeting was so unusual and intriguing that it was repeatedly mentioned in news stories in the mainstream media as journalists often talked about his posts. After Trump's victory, numerous scholars investigated his use of the platform and how it helped him to win the election against his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, who many journalists and pundits had predicted would be the next President of the United States. According to the article "The semiotics of authenticity: Indexicality in Donald Trump's tweets," Donald Trump has even been described as "a social media genius" who has succeeded in mastering Twitter.²⁷⁵ Obama's former digital and social media mentor, Dan Pfeiffer, stated that Trump is "way better at the internet than anyone

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 24

²⁷⁵ Shane, Tommy. "The Semiotics of Authenticity: Indexicality in Donald Trump's Tweets". *Social Media + Society*, 2018, p. 4

else in the GOP which is partly why he is winning.”²⁷⁶ Trump’s tweets are so ‘famous’ that they have recently been compiled into a book.²⁷⁷ Finally, Trump’s digital director, Brad Parscale, has even stated that Twitter greatly contributed to Trump’s victory, claiming “Twitter was the reason we won this thing.”²⁷⁸

Donald Trump has had a Twitter account since 2009. He posted about his family, his reality TV shows, and in 2012 he became more vocal about his political opinions and began to tweet about politics,²⁷⁹ particularly about Obama after he was reelected in 2012.²⁸⁰ However, Trump’s Twitter activity increased dramatically during the presidential campaign. According to a *Morning Consult* poll in December 2016, more than 50% of voters thought that Trump used Twitter too much, even people who voted for him, and 49% believed that the way Trump used Twitter was not positive.²⁸¹ Since his election, however, Trump’s rate of tweeting decreased until 2019 when his rate of tweets started to rise again,²⁸² which might be related to the fact that he is running for reelection. However, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, during the period studied (between May 11 and May 31, 2016), Trump posted the same number of tweets per day on average, as his opponents Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, that is 11 to 12 posts a day.²⁸³ Thus, the particularity of Trump’s use of Twitter is not related to a higher number of tweets, though he is capable of a high number of tweets. For example, there have been particular days during which Donald Trump has broken records by publishing more than a hundred tweets on the same day, in January 2020 for example, when he published 142

²⁷⁶ Parkinson, Hannah Jane. “Can Donald Trump’s social media genius take him all the way to the White House?” *The Guardian*, Dec. 23, 2015, www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/dec/23/donald-trump-social-media-strategy-internet-republican-nomination-president

²⁷⁷ Brookey, Robert Alan, and Brian L. Ott. “Trump and Twitter 2.0.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 36(1), 2019, p. 92

²⁷⁸ Francia, P. L., *op. cit.*, p. 2

²⁷⁹ “Trump on Twitter: A History of the man and his medium.” *BBC News*, Dec. 12, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38245530

²⁸⁰ Prakash, Neha. “Donald Trump Freaks Out on Twitter After Obama Wins Election.” *Mashable*, Nov. 7, 2012, www.mashable.com/2012/11/06/trump-reacts-to-election/?europa=true

²⁸¹ Easley, Cameron. “Donald Trump Tweets Too Much, Most Voters Say.” *Morning Consult*, Dec. 6, 2016, www.morningconsult.com/2016/12/06/donald-trump-tweets-much-voters-say/

²⁸² McCarthy, Niall. “Trump Tweeting As Much As Ever Amid Twitter Standoff.” *Statista*, May 29, 2020, www.statista.com/chart/19561/total-number-of-tweets-from-donald-trump/

²⁸³ “Election 2016: Campaigns as A Direct Source of News. Candidates differ in their use of social media to connect with the public.” *Pew Research Center*, Jul. 18, 2016, www.journalism.org/2016/07/18/candidates-differ-in-their-use-of-social-media-to-connect-with-the-public/

tweets on one day, and his ultimate record in 2015 when he published 161 in a single day.²⁸⁴

What makes the 45th President of the United States' use of Twitter so unusual and interesting for journalists and scholars is the fact that it contrasts with Twitter practices of previous presidential candidates and politicians. As explained in the previous chapter, politicians tend to use social media in a very professional way, with a polished self-presentation and a controlled environment of interactivity. Trump, on the other hand, did not follow these conventional standards.

Firstly, while Barack Obama had multiple Twitter accounts, Donald Trump kept his personal account, @realDonaldTrump, for his entire campaign and continued to use it after his election. Moreover, a distinction must be made between Obama's personal account, @BarackObama; his team account for the campaign, @Obama2012; and the account he personally used as the 44th President of the United States, @POTUS44. In addition, other accounts were closely connected to his profile: @ObamaForAmerica, @TruthTeam, @MichelleObama, and @JoeBiden, all of which worked in synergy, as they often mentioned or retweeted one another.²⁸⁵ Trump, on the other hand, mentioned mostly news media, in addition to mentioning other celebrities, and family members.²⁸⁶

However, although @BarackObama is Obama's personal account, it does not mean that he personally writes all the tweets published on that account. As stated in the account's bio, only tweets that are signed "-bo" are written by Barack Obama himself. The others are written by his staff,²⁸⁷ and they explicitly refer to Obama with third-person pronouns.

It was not until May 18, 2015, after seven years as President of the United States, that Barack Obama finally opened his own personal Twitter account with the handle @POTUS44 and the name "President Obama." His first account, @BarackObama, was created in 2007 for his presidential campaign and was always managed by his staff.

²⁸⁴ Cummings, William. "Trump sets record for most tweets in a single day since he took office." *USA Today*, Jan. 23, 2020, www.eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2020/01/23/trump-record-most-tweets-since-taking-office/4551815002/

²⁸⁵ Enli, G., Naper A., *op. cit.*, p. 12

²⁸⁶ "Election 2016: Campaigns as A Direct Source of News. Candidates differ in their use of social media to connect with the public." *Op. cit.*

²⁸⁷ Adams A., and McCorkindale T., *op. cit.*, p. 359

However, tweets on the @POTUS44 account were exclusively written by President Barack Obama himself during the rest of his presidency. Through this account, Obama wanted to engage more directly with the American people.²⁸⁸ The account was exclusively for the President of the United States. As a result, the last tweet on the account's profile was published on January 20, 2017,²⁸⁹ the day on which Obama and his family left the White House for the next President of the United States, who subsequently received his own account, @POTUS45.

Regarding authorship of politician's tweets in general, candidates usually rely on their staff to write them and when they personally write posts, they usually sign them with their initials. To illustrate, only 1% of Obama's tweets were signed "-bo."²⁹⁰ Hillary Clinton in 2016 followed the same pattern, as she did not write most of her tweets herself, and when she did, she signed them with "-H".²⁹¹ In contrast, most of the tweets published on the @realDonaldTrump account are believed to be written by Donald Trump himself. Although they were not signed explicitly by him, certain elements of his tweets (discussed later in this chapter) suggest that they were written by him and not his staff.

Another unusual practice of Trump's use of Twitter in comparison to other politicians is the links he shared and the posts he retweeted. He shared more links to news media than to his campaign website, and he retweeted mostly posts from the general public while his opponents, and Barack Obama in his 2012 campaign, usually tended to retweet posts from their campaign account or posts from news media, but almost never from the general public. According to a study from the Pew Research Center, only 3% of retweets from Barack Obama, in June during his 2012 campaign, were retweets from the general public, and in 2016, none of the retweets from Hillary were from the general public. In contrast,

²⁸⁸ "President Obama gets his own Twitter account." *BBC News*, May 19, 2015, www.bbc.com/news/technology-32780520

²⁸⁹ @POTUS44. "I'm still asking you to believe - not in my ability to bring about change, but in yours. I believe in change because I believe in you." *Twitter*, Jan. 20, 2017, 3:11 p.m., twitter.com/POTUS44/status/822446334787600385

²⁹⁰ Adams A., and McCorkindale T., *op. cit.*, p. 358

²⁹¹ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 57

78% of Trump's retweeted posts (between May 11 and May 31, 2016) came from the general public.²⁹²

As mentioned earlier, Trump had more followers on Twitter than his counterparts. His number of followers grew from 5.5 million in January 2016 to 13 million on November 8, 2016.²⁹³ However, the higher number of followers of Trump on Twitter is not related to the tweeting rate. According to "The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement," there is no correlation between the rate at which a user publishes posts and the number of followers.²⁹⁴ Popularity on Twitter and the number of followers are mainly influenced by external factors, showing again the link between offline and online performance as they influence each other.²⁹⁵ However, according to a study from the Pew Research Center, only half of Trump's U.S. followers consider him positively.²⁹⁶ It is important to note that the journalist Hannah Jane Parkinson discovered that only 64% of Trump's supporters seem to be real accounts, 42% being U.S. profiles. The author points out that the other portion of his followers come from developing countries where it is not unusual to see people being paid to engage on social media with particular brands, events, or people, to give an impression of a high number of followers and engagement.²⁹⁷

Consequently, one might argue that Trump's strategy and branding is not as successful as people might think. However, the authenticity of Trump is not only important for getting followers, likes, or retweets. Trump's way of using Twitter, his attitude and self-presentation, made him won attention from journalists, the press, and others in the mainstream media. As mentioned earlier, Trump's media coverage was much higher than his opponents' during the race. As a result of this significant media coverage, even people who were not on Twitter heard about Trump's controversial tweets.

In addition to Trump's unusual media practice on Twitter, the content of Trump's tweets often also raised eyebrows. Donald Trump is well-known for being very vocal about his

²⁹² "Election 2016: Campaigns as A Direct Source of News. Candidates differ in their use of social media to connect with the public." *Op. cit.*

²⁹³ Francia, P. L., *op. cit.*, p. 9

²⁹⁴ Ott B. *op. cit.*, pp. 56-57

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁶ Hughes Adam., and Stefan Wojcik. "10 facts about Americans and Twitter." *Factank, Pew Research Center*, Aug. 2, 2019, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/02/10-facts-about-americans-and-twitter/

²⁹⁷ Parkinson, H. J., *op. cit.*

opinions on the platform, which created multiple controversies throughout the election campaign and often led to Trump's posts being quoted in the mainstream media. It is no secret that Trump prefers Twitter to more traditional media and the press,²⁹⁸ and he justified it in a tweet by saying that "If the press would cover me accurately & honorably, I would have far less reason to 'tweet.' Sadly, I don't know if that will ever happen!".²⁹⁹ In fact, Trump's use of Twitter to bypass traditional media can be compared to Franklin D. Roosevelt's use of the radio. During his presidential campaign in 1932, Roosevelt used the radio, a new medium at the time, to address his constituents directly, because he believed that newspapers held a prejudice against him.³⁰⁰ Donald Trump even stated, during an interview with *Fox*, "I think that maybe I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for Twitter, because I get such a fake press, such a dishonest press."³⁰¹ What is paradoxical is that Trump announced his candidacy in a relatively traditional way, during a speech at Trump Tower on June 16, 2015,³⁰² while Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy via Twitter.³⁰³ However, the platform gave Trump the opportunity to present himself on his own terms to a huge audience.³⁰⁴ Furthermore, Trump believes journalists and most of media companies to be liars and has often accused them of publishing fake news. However, as the author of the article "Can Donald Trump's social media genius take him all the way to the White House" claims, Donald Trump lies frequently. Trump uses Twitter to "authoritatively set what he considers to be 'the truth.'"³⁰⁵ He has often been called out for publishing false statistics and figures and facts that are not true.³⁰⁶ He is also well-

²⁹⁸ "Trump on Twitter: A History of the man and his medium." *BBC News*, Dec. 12, 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38245530

²⁹⁹ @realDonaldTrump. "If the press would cover me accurately & honorably, I would have far less reason to 'tweet.' Sadly, I don't know if that will ever happen!" *Twitter*, Dec. 5, 2016, 5:00 pm, www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/805804034309427200

³⁰⁰ Johnson, S. J., *op. cit.*, 52

³⁰¹ Schwartz, I., *op. cit.*

³⁰² "Donald Trump Fast Facts." *CNN Politics*, Jun. 4, 2020, www.edition.cnn.com/2013/07/04/us/donald-trump-fast-facts/index.html

³⁰³ @HillaryClinton. "I'm running for president. Everyday Americans need a champion, and I want to be that champion. -H." *Twitter*, Apr. 12, 2015, 9:27 p.m., www.twitter.com/hillaryclinton/status/587336319321407488

³⁰⁴ Schneiker, Andrea. "Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump's Branding on Twitter." *Political Studies Review*, 2018, p. 6

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ Parkinson, Hannah Jane. "Can Donald Trump's social media genius take him all the way to the White House?" *The Guardian*, Dec. 23, 2015, www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/dec/23/donald-trump-social-media-strategy-internet-republican-nomination-president

known for his numerous offensive comments, attacks on and insults of numerous people, places, news companies, and journalists. Trump does not restrict his attacks to other candidates from the election cycle, as demonstrated in the list published by Jasmine C. Lee and Kevin Quealy who listed the “282 People, Places and Things Trump has Insulted on Twitter.”³⁰⁷ *The New York Times* also published a list of the 598 people, places and things that Trump has attacked since becoming President of the United States, until May 24, 2019.³⁰⁸ As a matter of fact, Trump has often published sexist insults, as well as hate speech about minority communities including Muslims³⁰⁹ or immigrants from Central and South America.

According to the article, “Twitter as arena for the authentic outsider: exploring the social media campaigns of Trump and Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election,” Trump’s celebrity played a role in the shaping of his strategy and use of social media as it enabled him to use social media, especially Twitter, in an unexpected and controversial way.³¹⁰ As an illustration, Figure 1 shows the percentage of Trump’s tweets that are considered non-traditional, in other words, amateur, as opposed to more traditional tweets. The table also shows Hillary Clinton’s tweeting style in order to compare Hillary and Trump’s contrasting ways of tweeting. While a majority of Clinton’s tweets (81.7%) are considered traditional (i.e., following professionalized standards), Trump’s tweets are mostly considered unconventional (54.5%) or amateurish.³¹¹ According to author Jessica Baldwin-Philippi, an amateur style in communication is a key ingredient for building an authentic representation.³¹² Trump’s campaign staff has even confessed they wrote tweets in an amateurish style with spelling mistakes and typos as part of their communication strategy.³¹³

³⁰⁷ Lee, J. C. and Kevin Quealy. “The 282 People, Places and Things Donald Trump Has Insulted on Twitter: A Complete List.” *Flubu*, Oct. 23, 2016, www.flubu.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/The_282_People_Places_and_Things_Donald_Trump_Has_Insulted_on-Twitter.pdf

³⁰⁸ Lee, J. C. and Kevin Quealy. “The 598 People, Places and Things Donald Trump Has Insulted on Twitter: A Complete List.” *The New York Times*, May 24, 2019, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/01/28/upshot/donald-trump-twitter-insults.html

³⁰⁹ Parkinson, H. J., *op. cit.*

³¹⁰ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p. 56

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, p. 378

³¹³ *Ibid.*

Table 1. Percentage of conventional, non-traditional, and neutral tweets of Donald Trump compared to Hillary Clinton’s tweets, during their 2016 campaign.

<i>Tweeting style</i>	<i>Trump</i>	<i>Clinton</i>
<i>In line with established stylistic standards</i>	38.3%	81.7%
<i>Unconventional</i>	54.5%	12.9%
<i>Neutral</i>	7.2 %	5.4 %

Justin McConey, director of new media for Trump’s campaign, said that “the two most important things for a celebrity on social media are to be authentic and to give your fans what they want.”³¹⁴ This statement highlights a significant aspect of Trump’s strategy on social media, especially on Twitter, that played an important role in his candidacy for president, especially regarding his communication strategy, namely that Trump is categorized as a celebrity politician. The article, “Telling the Story of the Superhero and the Anti-Politician as President: Donald Trump’s Branding on Twitter,” explains that Twitter’s platform has allowed Trump to display an image of himself as a “superhero anti-politician” celebrity.³¹⁵ According to Schneiker, Trump’s identity as an entertainer allowed him to not obey the same rules as others and to publish offensive comments, for example.³¹⁶ This status of celebrity politician has also allowed him to adopt, and even to keep, his controversial attitude on social media. If Donald Trump had started to act politically correctly as soon as he announced his candidacy for president of the United States, it would have come across as unauthentic and not credible.³¹⁷ However, even though Trump could have moderated his words and comments, he chose to do the opposite.

The paradox of Trump’s self-presentation on Twitter is that he is a celebrity, but he also remains an everyday man, part of ‘the people.’³¹⁸ His self-portrayal combines elements

³¹⁴ Parkinson, H. J., *op. cit.*

³¹⁵ Schneiker, A. *op. cit.*, p. 5

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8

from the personality of what Andrea Schneiker calls the “superstar political celebrity” when he presents himself as a unique and able leader³¹⁹ and the “everyday political celebrity” when he needs to create a bond with voters.³²⁰ Combining elements from both types of politicians has resulted in the creation of a distinctive representation of the “superhero anti-politician celebrity.”³²¹ This superhero anti-politician celebrity image is characterized by his statements that he would save America, while not being part of the traditional political elites, unlike his opponents.³²² Authors Michael Jenson and Henrik Bang also stated that Trump often presented himself as the leader who would save America and make the country great again as echoed in his campaign slogan, “Make America Great Again!”.³²³

Although those two personalities are conflicting, this self-presentation is consistent because Trump’s plural identity is composed of two characters: the businessman, owner of an empire; and the entertainer with his own reality TV shows and cameos in movies.³²⁴ In addition to those two identities, his status of presidential candidate brought an additional aura to his tweets. This contrasting attitude on Twitter was also a way for Trump to distinguish himself from other typical politicians and emphasize the fact that he is not like them.³²⁵

Another strength of Trump’s way of using Twitter is that his behavior matches with the platform’s standards. As shown in the section on Twitter in Chapter 3, three characteristics are inherent to the platform and its architecture: simplicity (because of the limitation of the number of characters), impulsivity (as tweeting is an activity that is usually impulsive as people do not always think about the effects of their tweets, and it is usually influenced by emotions), and incivility (because of the informality of the platform and the fact that it “depersonalizes interactions”).³²⁶ Those three traits influence the way people behave on the platform and how it is perceived. Brian L. Ott stated that Trump’s

³¹⁹ Schneiker, A. *op. cit.*, p. 8

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

³²² *Ibid.*, p. 10

³²³ Williams, C. B., *op. cit.*, p. 210

³²⁴ Schneiker, A. *op. cit.*, p. 11

³²⁵ Enli, G., *op. cit.*, p.58

³²⁶ Ott, B., *op. cit.*, pp. 60-62

tweets are characterized by a simple, repetitious, and monosyllabic type of discourse. Secondly, most of Trump's tweets are insulting, offensive, and negative.³²⁷ Thirdly, his tweets display an odd use of punctuation with many exclamation marks and frequent use of capital letters. Moreover, Trump often publishes tweets impulsively, which is apparent through typos and through the expression of strong feelings.³²⁸ These elements mirror the three aforementioned traits and reinforce the emotional charge of Trump's way of tweeting.³²⁹ Ott concluded that all those elements are key factors in Trump's success.³³⁰ Therefore, Trump's effectiveness on Twitter could be related to the fact that Trump's self-expression mirrors Twitter's features.³³¹

Trump's behavior on Twitter and his way of tweeting matches the characteristics of simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility, and his speech patterns during public discourse and debates also follow the same characteristics. In other words, the way Donald Trump expresses himself in public actually reflects the same patterns he demonstrates on Twitter.³³² Firstly, he speaks in a simple way. As authors Yaqin Wang and Haitao Liu demonstrated it in their article, Donald Trump speaks like a fourth-grade student and the stylistic features of his speeches are characterized by "simple, pompous and repetitive language"³³³ and a "rambling conversational style."³³⁴ Secondly, Trump prefers "the momentary over the considered."³³⁵ Thirdly, Trump's speeches are characterized by incivility, as he often uses insulting and offensive language.³³⁶ As a result, even his speaking style during debates is described as genuine.³³⁷ In short, Trump tweets like he speaks, and this contributes to giving his tweets an aura of authenticity.

³²⁷ Ott, B., *op. cit.*, p. 64

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 63

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ Wang, Yaqin, and Haitao Liu. "Is Trump always rambling like a fourth-grade student? An analysis of stylistic features of Donald Trump's political discourse during the 2016 election." *Discourse & Society*, vol. 29(3), 2018, p. 299

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 300

³³⁵ Ott, B., *op. cit.*, p. 63

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63

³³⁷ Wang, Y., and Liu H., *op. cit.*, p. 315

After describing the broad outlines of Trump's strategy on Twitter and how several elements contribute to shape Trump's authenticity and distinguish him from other politicians, the following paragraphs describe how subtle elements have reinforced an impression of authenticity, namely through three main cues hidden in his tweets. According to "The semiotics of authenticity: Indexicality in Donald Trump's tweets," this sense of genuineness expressed in Trump's posts is the result of a combination of cues that together build a formal architecture of authenticity.³³⁸ There are three authenticity cues displayed in Trump's tweets: typographical texture, timestamps, and operating system tags.

Firstly, Trump's tweets are characterized by a specific and distinguishable use of syntax and punctuation: uncommon and excessive use of uppercase letters, dashes, and exclamation marks; including spelling or typos mistakes; or new words such as "unpresidented" or "covfefe" (a typing mistake of the word "coverage").³³⁹ Together, these elements create a distinctive typographical texture.³⁴⁰ Among 2,375 tweets the author Tommy Shane analyzed, 2,545 words were in uppercase, with 10 of those tweets with all words in uppercase. Thirty-one included more than one exclamation mark, and 47 contained ellipses. As a matter of fact, punctuation and syntax in written messages contribute to the conveyance of intonation, rhythm, and tone and help cultivate a unique, authentic voice. Furthermore, typing and spelling mistakes suggest that the message was quickly typed or composed suddenly, without input from the campaign staff, and give the impression that the writer is expressing thoughts off the top of his head. In addition to the aural character of Trump's tweets, his use of dashes, exclamation marks, and periods give a peculiar visual character similar to handwritten messages. Finally, his typographical texture participated in the construction of what the author calls "Trump's voice"³⁴¹ and can serve as identifying elements that suggest that Donald Trump himself authored those tweets.³⁴² Trump's tweets have consequently a distinctive typographical texture compared to most politicians' professional communication style.

³³⁸ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 4

³³⁹ "Covfefe." *Dictionary.com*, 2020, www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/covfefe/

³⁴⁰ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 6

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6

³⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6

Secondly, timestamps are a small feature indicating the date and time for every tweet published. Timestamps have indicated that some of Trump's tweets were published during off hours for a politician, as they were posted at night. As mentioned, Trump wrote a number of his tweets during his campaign (unlike most other politicians) but not all of them. According to Robert Draper's *New York Times* article, "The man behind the President's Tweets," Dan Scavino wrote some of the tweets on the @realDonaldTrump account and was described by many as "the conductor of the Trump Train."³⁴³ Throughout the campaign he carried out many functions despite the fact that he had no official title, but his main purpose was to "assist Trump in operating the @realDonaldTrump account, which included drafting and posting tweets to the account."³⁴⁴ Officials from the White House claimed that Scavino only published what Trump dictated to him. However, according to the article, Scavino may have suggested ideas for posts during the campaign. He often provided Trump with information about Hillary Clinton and her "various malfeasances" or about the "FBI's corrupt activity."³⁴⁵ Draper highlighted that, half of the time, the content from those tweets came from Scavino himself.³⁴⁶

However, in regard to timestamps, Trump stated that tweets after 7 p.m. are exclusively from him, as his staff does not access the account after these hours. As a result, timestamps for those tweets signify Trump's authorship. Nevertheless, only 3% of his tweets were written between 12 p.m. and 6 a.m.³⁴⁷ While this does not mean that tweets written outside of those hours are not written by Donald Trump, it suggests that tweets written during this period of time can be attributed to Trump himself.

Finally, operating system tags are hidden within the tweet's data and indicate from which type of device the tweet has been sent, the tag "via Twitter for iPhone," for example indicates that the tweets was published via the app Twitter on an iPhone. This feature is more a result than a tactical mark. According to Tommy Shane, the operating system tag

³⁴³ Draper, Robert. « The Man Behind the President's Tweets. », *The New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 16, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/magazine/dan-scavino-the-secretary-of-offense.html

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁷ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6

of Trump's personal phone is from a Samsung phone, run on Android software while his staff's tweets are published via iPhone. Forty-nine percent of tweets on Trump's accounts have the Android operating system tag and consequently can be linked to Trump's phone.³⁴⁸

To conclude, the three elements are indexically related to Trump through a semiotic model, as "indexes are signs that relate to their object through a direct causal link."³⁴⁹ This indexicality is one of the reasons why Trump's strategy worked so well. Through the three aforementioned indexes of authenticity (typographical texture, timestamps and operating system) there is a causal relationship between Trump's personality and behavior and the authorship of tweets published on the @realDonaldTrump account. Typographical texture is the result of Trump's unconventional way of expressing himself in a unfiltered manner.³⁵⁰ Timestamps are caused by Trump's impulse to tweet even without staff supervision, and the system tag indicates which operating system has been used to publish the tweet.³⁵¹ As a result, Trump's authenticity in his tweets are the consequence of indexical marks implying his authorship and, consequently, his direct thoughts, published spontaneously, instead of trying too hard to appear authentic or use symbols or emojis to try to look genuine.

In consequence, one might conclude that Trump's communication on social media, particularly on Twitter, is not entirely the result of a constructed strategy.³⁵² Instead, Trump's image on social media was rather representative of his real self, and he presented himself as more coherent and genuine than the other candidates. However, Donald Trump's campaign strategy regarding communication might have been to play on his controversial behavior and personality and not change it after he announced his candidacy for presidency. As a result, Trump's campaign staff, including Dan Scavino, built his communication strategy around his real personality, which led to the image of him as an authentic candidate.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7

³⁴⁹ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 2

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 7

4.2. Analysis of @realDonaldTrump's 20 Most Retweeted Tweets

As this thesis has shown, many different authors have analyzed and tried to understand Trump's use of Twitter, particularly how he succeeded in building his image of the authentic candidate during the U.S. Presidential Election of 2016. This section aims to analyze a number of tweets from Donald Trump during his campaign, between his announcement on June 16, 2015 and his victory on November 8, 2016. The tweets chosen are the 20 most retweeted tweets from the candidate's Twitter account, @realDonaldTrump, during the period indicated. The collection of tweets, and as a result the number of retweets and likes, were gathered on June 18, 2020. This means that the number of retweets and likes were from the date of publication until this date.

The reason these specific tweets were selected is because of how important retweeting is in the Twitter world. Retweeting is a high form of engagement, as the user shares another person's tweet on their own profile. In addition, the practice of retweeting brings more attention to both the post and to the sender's account. In 2016, Donald Trump was the candidate who had the highest retweeting rate. According to authors Oren Tsur, Katherine Ognyanova, and David Lazer, by January 2016 Donald Trump's tweets were retweeted 2,201 times on average, while in 2015, his tweets were shared 79 times on average.³⁵³ The number of times the tweets in this analysis were retweeted range from the most popular one being retweeted more than 333,700 times and the least popular one being retweeted more than 29,600 times.

It is important to emphasize that retweeting a tweet does not necessarily mean that people like or endorse the post's content. Retweeting allows the user to add a text above the tweet they are sharing, in order to comment or respond to the post. As a result, retweeting can be a sign of agreement, but it can also serve to debate or criticize what the person has published. However, 19 out of the 20 tweets analyzed had more likes than retweets. In other words, in all tweets except for one, likes exceeded retweets, and likes are a form of endorsing the tweet's content.

³⁵³ Tsur Oren, Katherine Ognyanova and David Lazer. "The Data Behind Trump's Twitter Takeover." *Politico*, Apr. 29, 2016, www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/04/donald-trump-2016-twitter-takeover-213861

This thesis uses the article “The Semiotics of Authenticity: Indexicality in Donald Trump’s Tweets” to analyze Trump’s tweets through the lens of the three main authenticity cues to explain how the impression of authenticity is created in Donald Trump’s tweets, namely through his typographical texture, the timestamps of his tweets, and the operating system tag. In addition to the analysis of these cues, this analysis also briefly discusses other elements from Donald Trump’s behavior on Twitter, namely the fact that Brian L. Ott argues that Donald Trump’s behavior on Twitter is ruled by three main characteristics: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility.

The Three Authenticity Cues

Firstly, this section presents the analysis of the three cues of authenticity introduced in the article, “The Semiotics of Authenticity: Indexicality in Donald Trump’s Tweets”. As explained in Chapter 5, author Tommy Shane explained that there are three main cues contributing to giving an aura of authenticity in Trump’s tweets by implying his authorship. First, a particular typographical texture with a distinctive use of syntax and punctuation; second, the timestamps, particularly when indicating the tweet was sent after seven o’clock in the evening, as Donald Trump has stated to be the only one to access his account after this time; and third, the operating system tag, as the author stated that Donald Trump uses a Samsung run on an Android system, and his staff uses an iPhone. The findings of this analysis are summarized in the table in Appendix B.

Typographical Texture

Regarding typographical texture, three main elements were analyzed: the presence of at least one word in capital letters, the use of exclamation marks, and eventual mistakes or ellipses. Four of the tweets contained at least one word in capital letters, two of them being entirely in uppercase: the tweet he published the day American people went to the polls, namely on November 8, 2016, “TODAY WE MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”³⁵⁴ and

³⁵⁴ @realDonaldTrump. “TODAY WE MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” *Twitter*, Nov. 8, 2016, 12:43 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/795954831718498305

the slogan of his campaign published on November 5, 2016, “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”³⁵⁵. Fifteen out of the 20 tweets contained a least one exclamation mark. Three of the tweets also contained mistakes. First, in the tweet “If Obama worked as hard on straightening out our country as he has trying to protect and elect Hillary, we would all be much better off!”³⁵⁶, in which the verb tense is not correct. Second, the tweet “FBI director said Crooked Hillary compromised our national security. No charges. Wow! #RiggedSystem”³⁵⁷ in which the first letter of the word “director” should be in uppercase. Third, the tweet “Don't let up, keep getting out to vote - this election is FAR FROM OVER! We are doing well but there is much time left. GO FLORIDA!”³⁵⁸ in which the negation is missing. The lack of negation in this tweet is categorized as a mistake and not as an ellipsis because ellipses are usually used on purpose. Ellipses are produced by leaving a word out of a sentence because the word is not essential to understand the meaning of the sentence. However, the negation in this sentence is quite important in the tweet’s signification. Finally, the tweet “Wow, President Obama's brother, Malik, just announced that he is voting for me. Was probably treated badly by president-like everybody else!”³⁵⁹ contained two ellipses as the author omitted two words: the third singular personal pronoun “he” between the period and the verb “was” and the determiner “the” before the word “president”. In addition, some tweets also lacked grammatically correct punctuation.

³⁵⁵ @realDonaldTrump. “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” *Twitter*, Nov. 5, 2016, 2:33 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/794895332941381633

³⁵⁶ @realDonaldTrump. “If Obama worked as hard on straightening out our country as he has trying to protect and elect Hillary, we would all be much better off!” *Twitter*, Nov. 4, 2016, 8:07 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/794617042888491008

³⁵⁷ @realDonaldTrump. “FBI director said Crooked Hillary compromised our national security. No charges. Wow! #RiggedSystem” *Twitter*, Jul. 5, 2016, 5:39 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/750353319084843008

³⁵⁸ @realDonaldTrump. “Don't let up, keep getting out to vote - this election is FAR FROM OVER! We are doing well but there is much time left. GO FLORIDA!” *Twitter*, Nov. 8, 2016, 10:31 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/796102830352465921

³⁵⁹ @realDonaldTrump. “Wow, President Obama's brother, Malik, just announced that he is voting for me. Was probably treated badly by president-like everybody else!” *Twitter*, Jul. 24, 2016, 1:56 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/757182723089895424

Table 2. The number of tweets containing each of the typographical texture elements analyzed in this thesis.

<i>Typographical Texture</i>	<i>Number of Tweets</i>
<i>Tweets containing at least one word in capital letters</i>	4
<i>Tweets containing at least one exclamation mark</i>	15
<i>Tweets containing at least one mistake</i>	3
<i>Tweets containing at least one ellipsis</i>	1

Timestamps

The analysis of the timestamps on the tweets analyzed revealed that 12 tweets out of the 20 were written between 7 o'clock in the evening and 7 o'clock in the morning. Among the 12 posts, four were written before 7 a.m., and eight were written after 7 p.m. Among those tweets written before 7 a.m., some were written during odd hours such as the tweet "Such a great honor to be the Republican Nominee for President of the United States. I will work hard and never let you down! AMERICA FIRST!"³⁶⁰ published at 1:52 a.m., or the tweet "Mike Pence won big. We should all be proud of Mike!"³⁶¹ published at 4:36 a.m. In total, 12 tweets were written during off hours for a politician.

Table 3. Table comparing the number of tweets sent before 7 a.m., between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. and after 7 p.m.

<i>Hours</i>	<i>Number of Tweets</i>
<i>Before 7 a.m.</i>	4
<i>Between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.</i>	8
<i>After 7 p.m.</i>	8
<i>Total tweets</i>	20

³⁶⁰ @realDonaldTrump. "Such a great honor to be the Republican Nominee for President of the United States. I will work hard and never let you down! AMERICA FIRST!" *Twitter*, Jul. 20, 2016, 1:52 a.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/755551039244341253

³⁶¹ @realDonaldTrump. "Mike Pence won big. We should all be proud of Mike!" *Twitter*, Oct. 5, 2016, 4:36 a.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/783495937708527616

Operating System Tags

Among the 20 tweets analyzed, 10 were sent via “Twitter for Android,” six were sent via “Twitter for iPhone”, three were sent via “Twitter Web Client,” which is usually from a computer, and one was sent via “Twitter for iPad.” As explained earlier, Shane stated that the operating system tag “Twitter via Android” is an element implying that a tweet was sent from Trump’s phone, while his staff, including Dan Scavino, used an iPhone.

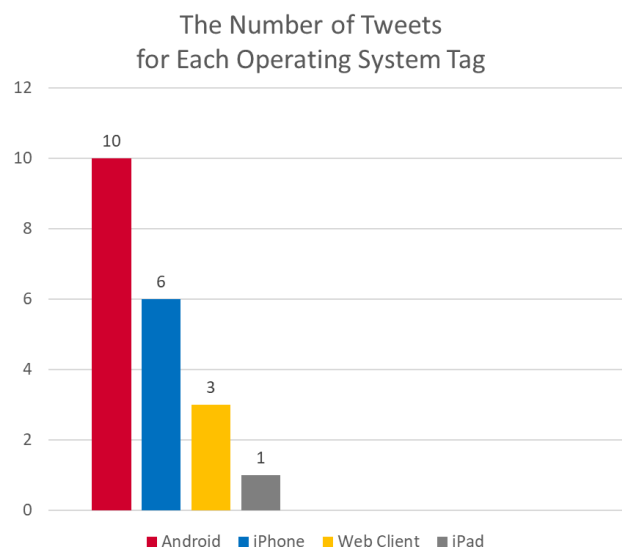


Figure 1. Graph comparing the total number of tweets sent via “Twitter for Android”, “Twitter for iPhone”, “Twitter for Web Client” and “Twitter for iPad”.

The analysis of these three cues in Trump’s 20 tweets revealed contradictory elements. Firstly, four tweets sent after 7 p.m. were published via an iPhone, despite the fact that Trump, whose phone uses an Android system, has stated that only he accesses the @realDonaldTrump account after this hour. Moreover, two of the tweets sent via an iPhone were published very early in the morning, one at 12:51 a.m. and the other at 6:19 a.m. Furthermore, tweets sent via Twitter for iPhone showed similar typographical texture to tweets sent via “Twitter for Android”, such as the use of exclamation marks or the presence of a spelling mistake. Additionally, tweets also shared similar type of content as four of the six tweets sent via iPhone belonged to the category of “attack tweets,” two against Obama and two against Hillary, and one of which contained the phrase, “Crooked Hillary.” Moreover, following the hypothesis that every tweet published via “Twitter for

iPhone” is from Trump’s staff, and not Trump himself, other elements are worth noting too, namely that two of the tweets published via iPhone contained a first person singular pronoun, “I” in the post “Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!”³⁶², or the possessive determiner “my” in the tweet, “Here is my statement”³⁶³ which makes it sound like Trump is the author of those tweets.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the article “The Man behind the tweets” demonstrated that tweets’ authorship on the @realDonaldTrump account is more complex to attribute than it may seem. As mentioned before, some White House officials have said that Scavino, the man helping managing the @realDonaldTrump account, only tweeted what Donald Trump dictated to him, whereas others have stated that he sometimes contributed to the content of certain tweets.³⁶⁴ Moreover, it is also confusing that tweets sent via Twitter for iPhone used first-person pronouns, despite the fact that the operating system tag indicates that the tweets were not sent via Trump’s phone. Because he does not make the distinction between the messages he writes himself and the messages his staff publishes, it is unclear who the true author is. As the analysis shows, tweets sent via “Twitter for iPhone” follow the same patterns as tweets sent via “Twitter for Android” (Trump’s phone) regarding typographical texture, but were also published at hours during which Trump’s staff was not supposed to have access to the account. They also contained first-person pronouns, and one of the tweets contained the insult “Crooked Hillary.” Those features and characteristics are similar to the way Trump expresses himself. As a result, it is unclear who wrote the tweet.

Regarding the content of the 20 tweets, some patterns emerged, and the tweets were divided into multiple categories. Among the tweets, eleven of them can be categorized as attacks. Some tweets contained critiques or insults directed toward two different people in a single post. As a result, the number of attacks outnumbers the count of tweets. In total, there were seven attacks against Hillary, his main opponent during the race. Those attacks

³⁶² @realDonaldTrump. “Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics! <https://facebook.com/DonaldTrump/posts/10157008375200725:0>” *Twitter*, May 5, 2016, 8:57 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/728297587418247168

³⁶³ @realDonaldTrump. “Here is my statement.” *Twitter*, Oct. 8, 2016, 6:19 a.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/784609194234306560

³⁶⁴ Draper, Robert. « The Man Behind the President’s Tweets. », *The New York Times Magazine*, Apr. 16, 2016, www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/magazine/dan-scavino-the-secretary-of-offense.html

were mostly about the FBI investigation she was under at the time, such as the second most retweeted tweet in which he shared her post asking him to delete his account. Trump, to answer her tweet, wrote, “How long did it take your staff of 823 people to think that up – and where are your 33,000 emails that you deleted?”³⁶⁵. The other tweets were mostly declarations that she is not a good fit to lead the country. Three of the tweets attacking Hillary also contained the words “Crooked Hillary.” Of the other attacks, four were directed against Obama and two against the media.

Among the nine remaining posts, two of them were celebratory tweets to celebrate an event related to Trump’s campaign, namely the one he published the day American people went to the polls on November 8, 2016, “TODAY WE MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”³⁶⁶ and the other one for his nomination as candidate for the Republican Party “Such a great honor to be the Republican Nominee for President of the United States. I will work hard and never let you down! AMERICA FIRST!”. Then two others were calls to action. The first was the slogan of his campaign, published on November 5, 2016, “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!”³⁶⁷ as it encourages people to go to the polls and vote for him, three days before election day, and the second one was a tweet encouraging people to go vote, published on November 8, 2016, “Don’t let up, keep getting out to vote - this election is FAR FROM OVER! We are doing well but there is much time left. GO FLORIDA!”³⁶⁸. One of the 20 posts was categorized as advocacy, or self-promotion, “For those few people knocking me for tweeting at three o’clock in the morning, at least you know I will be there, awake, to answer the call!”³⁶⁹ in which he presented himself positively. Finally, four of them were statements.

³⁶⁵ @realDonaldTrump. “How long did it take your staff of 823 people to think that up--and where are your 33,000 emails that you deleted?” *Twitter*, Jun. 9, 2016, 10:40 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/741007091947556864

³⁶⁶ @realDonaldTrump. “TODAY WE MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” *Twitter*, Nov. 8, 2016, 12:43 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/795954831718498305

³⁶⁷ @realDonaldTrump. “MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!” *Twitter*, Nov. 5, 2016, 2:33 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/794895332941381633

³⁶⁸ @realDonaldTrump. “Don’t let up, keep getting out to vote - this election is FAR FROM OVER! We are doing well but there is much time left. GO FLORIDA!” *Twitter*, Nov. 8, 2016, 10:31 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/796102830352465921

³⁶⁹ @realDonaldTrump. “The media is spending more time doing a forensic analysis of Melania’s speech than the FBI spent on Hillary’s emails.” *Twitter*, Jul. 20, 2016, 5:36 p.m. www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/755788382618390529

Simplicity, Impulsivity, and Incivility

Most of the tweets analyzed also reflected the description of Brian L. Ott in his article, “The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement,” in which he argued that Donald Trump’s way of using Twitter actually fits the platform’s characteristics: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. Firstly, regarding *simplicity*, due to the limited number of characters, tweets are kept short and concise.

Secondly, most of the tweets analyzed in this thesis contained emotions, which is, according to Ott, an element implying *impulsivity*. Those emotions were expressed through features such as capital letters, exclamation marks, or emotionally charged words. For example, the phrase “great honor” in the tweet “Such a great honor to be the Republican Nominee for President of the United States. I will work hard and never let you down! AMERICA FIRST!”³⁷⁰ shows a positive state of mind. On the other hand, the phrase “rigged election” in the tweet “Hillary Clinton should have been prosecuted and should be in jail. Instead she is running for president in what looks like a rigged election”³⁷¹ shows negative feelings. Moreover, three of the tweets contained the word “wow.”

Finally, more than half of Trump’s tweets follow the pattern of *incivility* fostered by the platform. Eleven out of 20 of Trump’s tweets analyzed were attacks, and one of them was a lie. As explained before, attacks were directed toward Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and the media. He used the insult “Crooked Hillary” three times, criticized Obama’s presidency, and used the phrase “Very dishonest media!” to describe Twitter, Google, and Facebook.³⁷² The tweet containing a lie is the tweet in which Trump says that the best taco bowls are made in the Trump Tower Grill, although the restaurant did not sell this dish at the time of the tweet.³⁷³

³⁷⁰ @realDonaldTrump. “Such a great honor to be the Republican Nominee for President of the United States. I will work hard and never let you down! AMERICA FIRST!” *Twitter*, Jul. 20, 2016, 1:52 a.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/755551039244341253

³⁷¹ @realDonaldTrump. “Hillary Clinton should have been prosecuted and should be in jail. Instead she is running for president in what looks like a rigged election” *Twitter*, Oct. 15, 2016, 2:23 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/787267564405653505

³⁷² @realDonaldTrump. “Wow, Twitter, Google and Facebook are burying the FBI criminal investigation of Clinton. Very dishonest media!” *Twitter*, Oct. 30, 2016, 3:26 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/792734426912337920

³⁷³ Lange, Jeva. « The 65 worst Trump tweets of the 2010s.” *The Week*, Oct. 26, 2019, www.theweek.com/articles/870368/65-worst-trump-tweets-2010s

Although one of Trump's tweets enters the category of statement, "Mexico will pay for the wall!"³⁷⁴, it is important to note that this statement can also be perceived as a threat against the country. For the candidate, this tweet is a promise for his supporters and voters, but for Mexico, this tweet can be perceived as if Donald Trump is threatening the country. This can also be considered as a lie, as Mexico never agreed to pay for the wall.

Some of the tweets also display one of the characteristics of the performance of populism mentioned in Section 4.3. This characteristic appears in five different tweets in which Trump criticizes the established political system at that time, namely Obama and his way of ruling the country, and the electoral system by referring to Hillary Clinton, her campaign and the FBI investigation she was under at the time.

5. Conclusion

Since the arrival of social media as a new means of political communication, politicians have adopted different approaches towards social media. In the presidential elections in 2008 and 2012 the approaches remained mainly professional. Barack Obama relied heavily on a great team of experts during his two campaigns and understood the power of social media. However, the 2016 U.S. presidential election was defined by two contrasting candidates. On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton, who had an already well-established background in politics as Secretary of State during Obama's presidency, a senator from New York and First Lady from 1992 to 2000. On the Republican side, the candidate was Donald Trump, a wealthy businessman and entertainer with no political background. Although Donald Trump was not taken seriously in the beginning of his campaign, and despite many predictions that Hillary Clinton would win the election, the Republican candidate became the 45th President of the United States after Barack Obama.

Many journalists and scholars have claimed that one of the reasons Donald Trump won the election was his unusual use of Twitter. Consequently, Trump's use of Twitter was analyzed by numerous scholars, and a number of characteristics and patterns emerged from those studies, namely that the key to Trump's social media strategy relies on self-

³⁷⁴ @realDonaldTrump. "Mexico will pay for the wall!" *Twitter*, Sept. 1, 2016, 12:31 p.m., www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/771294347501461504

presentation as an authentic candidate. Research has shown that Trump's strategy for this self-presentation was especially apparent in how Trump performed authenticity through his behavior on Twitter.

In order to evaluate authenticity and Trump's use of Twitter, the thesis relied on two analytical frameworks. The first relied on three cues: typographical texture, timestamps, and operating system tags. The second posited that Trump stayed true to the platform by creating tweets that reflected Twitter's characteristics: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility.

The analysis of the 20 most retweeted tweets on Trump's personal account, @realDonaldTrump, during his campaign (from June 16, 2015 to November 8, 2016) examined via these two frameworks revealed two major points regarding Trump's use of Twitter and his branding as "the authentic candidate". First, Donald Trump's tweets follow Brian L. Ott's Twitter characteristics, reinforcing the impression of authenticity. Second, as the analysis shows, this impression of authenticity is manipulative.

Firstly, the tweets analyzed in this thesis generally follow the characteristics explained by Ott. They are simple, namely due to the limitation of the number of characters. Most of them follow characteristics expressing impulsivity such as the expression of a passionate mindset, namely through the use of exclamation marks, emotionally charged words, insults or the word "wow." Then, as 11 tweets include an attack against someone or something, most of the tweets follow the pattern of incivility. This expression of incivility often resulted in high media coverage, which lent credibility to Trump's self-presentation of authenticity. When talking about Trump's tweets, media implied that the only person behind those tweets is Donald Trump himself.

Although Ott's three characteristics give tweets published on the @realDonaldTrump account an aura of authenticity, the analysis of the three cues of authenticity reveal inconsistent details. It is true that most of the tweets were published via "Twitter for Android" (which is presumably the mark of Trump's phone), however the tweets that were sent via "Twitter for iPhone" show elements that are conflicting with the impression of authenticity that Trump wants to convey. Firstly, among the 20 tweets analyzed, some were sent via Twitter for iPhone during hours during which Trump claimed that only he

had access to the @realDonaldTrump account. Those two contradictory elements, the operating system tag of these tweets and the time at which they were published, proved that Trump was not entirely honest and transparent, which is an essential element for authenticity.

Secondly, the results of our analysis suggest that, while other politicians are honest regarding their communication and the tweets they write themselves by signing the posts, Trump's campaign staff in charge of the communication on Twitter, including Dan Scavino, actually tries to write tweets like Trump does. As mentioned earlier, Trump's campaign staff confessed they wrote tweets with spelling mistakes and typos on purpose as part of their communication strategy.³⁷⁵ Moreover, as the analysis showed, tweets sent via an iPhone are very similar to tweets sent via an Android.

By signing tweets with their initials to clarify authorship, politicians signify that they do not always write them, but they are honest enough to recognize it explicitly. For example, Barack Obama, on his account @BarackObama on Twitter, explicitly specified in his bio that he does not write all of the tweets, except those which are signed "-bo". As a result, the lack of signature is confusing, as one may think that Trump is the author of all of the account's tweets when the evidence suggests otherwise.

As a result, although Trump succeeded in creating "the perception that his Twitter voice was the most authentic,"³⁷⁶ Trump's alleged authenticity on Twitter is actually a well-elaborate performance. Although the communication approach is certainly based on his personality, and Trump has surely written many of his tweets himself, there is still a hidden strategy behind his communication. Trump's campaign has shaped its communication strategy around the image of "the authentic candidate who is not like other politicians." However, our findings suggest that this is a manipulative strategy as Donald Trump does not reveal what, or more specifically who, is behind his tweets. This approach shows a lack of transparency, an essential element of authenticity. Donald Trump's self-presentation on social media is, consequently, not as authentic as he would like to make it appear.

³⁷⁵ Baldwin-Philippi, J., *op. cit.*, p. 378

³⁷⁶ Johnson, S.J., *op. cit.*, p. 79

Trump's communication on social media, especially on Twitter, is not only manipulative, but has also negative consequences in real life. After he won the presidential election on November 8, 2016, Trump had promised to temper his discourse. However, he did exactly the opposite, as he is even more divisive and undemocratic today. In addition to using negative rhetoric, his tweets pose a real danger, as his posts tend to promote hate speech and racism, as well as claim that the mainstream media is publishing fake news.³⁷⁷ Donald Trump has often criticized what he calls "political correctness," stating that it is a waste of time.³⁷⁸ According to Jessica Gantt Shafer, Trump's popularity and his behavior on social media have contributed to people being more accepting of racist content, simply describing intolerant comments and behavior as "politically incorrect" instead of calling it directly racism.³⁷⁹ Trump also tries to make his racist comments appear as the truth, when he shared false statistics on Twitter about criminality for example, stating that "81% of white murder victims were killed by black offenders,"³⁸⁰ although official numbers from the FBI demonstrate that is not true.³⁸¹

Twitter has long been criticized for not doing anything against Trump's behavior on Twitter. However, in May 2020, Twitter put a fact-check tag on two of Donald Trump's tweets. The tags indicated that the two tweets, in which Trump claimed that vote-by-mail ballots were "fraudulent,"³⁸² contained misleading content.³⁸³ The fact-check labels "Get the facts about mail-in ballots" subsequently redirected people to news articles published by trustworthy sources such as *The Washington Post*, *CNN* and *The Hill*, providing users with more contextual elements about the topic.³⁸⁴ Although Donald Trump reacted by accusing Twitter to interfere with the 2020 elections and signed an executive order to

³⁷⁷ Brookey, R. A. and Ott B., *op. cit.*, p. 93

³⁷⁸ Shafer, Jessica Gantt. "Donald Trump's 'Political Incorrectness': Neoliberalism as Frontstage Racism on Social Media." *Social Media + Society*, 2017, pp. 2-3

³⁷⁹ Shafer, J.G., *op. cit.*, p. 8

³⁸⁰ Gillman, Ollie. "Donald Trump branded a 'racist' after retweeting made-up statistics that claim most white people are killed by black people." Mail Online, Nov. 23, 2015, www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3329934/Donald-Trump-branded-racist-retweeting-statistics-murders-committed-black-people.html

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ Dwoskin, Elizabeth. "Twitter labels Trump's tweets with a fact check for the first time." *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2020, www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/05/26/trump-twitter-label-fact-check/

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

undermine legal protection for social media platforms³⁸⁵, Twitter declared that it would not stop labeling tweets they consider deceptive with the fact-check tag.³⁸⁶

5.1. Future research

Trump's media practices certainly had an influence on his victory. Future research could investigate if Trump adopted a similar strategy for his reelection campaign in 2020, and if those effects influenced the 2020 election and subsequent elections in the United States and worldwide. It has been shown that other countries often follow the United States in terms of media practices. The question would consequently be whether other candidates in other countries have adopted similar approaches.

Moreover, not only could future research evaluate if other candidates have adopted the same way of using social media, but it could also assess whether it was as successful as Donald Trump's use of social media. As this thesis has pointed out, Donald Trump's use of Twitter was particularly effective because he was a businessman and an entertainer with no background in politics. His background distinguished him from the other candidates in the race and allowed him to adopt an unusual way of using social media. The question would then be: would Trump's attempts at authenticity via Twitter work for another candidate, especially one with previous experience in politics? With former vice president Joseph Biden running against Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election, we should soon have an answer.

To conclude, as the author Tommy Shane stated, "social media is an environment where authenticity is simultaneously promised, demanded and disputed."³⁸⁷ Donald Trump claimed to be "the authentic presidential candidate". Nevertheless, this thesis demonstrates that Trump's way to communicate on social media, during his 2016 campaign, was a well-elaborate performance, rather than a real display of authenticity.

³⁸⁵ "Trump signs executive order targeting Twitter after fact-checking row." *BBC News*, May 29, 2020, www.bbc.com/news/technology-52843986

³⁸⁶ Conger, Kate and Mike Isaac. "Defying Trump, Twitter Doubles Down on Labeling Tweets." *The New York Times*, May 28, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/technology/trump-twitter-fact-check.html

³⁸⁷ Shane, T., *op. cit.*, p. 3

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