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2020: how President Donald J. Trump used social media Twitter to spread a populist political ideology

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Table of contents

| | |
|--|----|
| PART 1 – RESEARCH | 1 |
| INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| I – A short history of the American presidential communication | 4 |
| I.I – From Washington to McKinley, from the national press to silent cinema. | 4 |
| I.II – From Roosevelt to Roosevelt, from the bully pulpit to the fireside chats..... | 8 |
| I.III – From Truman to Trump, from television to Twitter..... | 10 |
| II – Twitter, populism and Trumpism | 14 |
| II.I – Communicating in 2020 on social medium Twitter. | 14 |
| II.II – Defining populism in general & the specificities of Donald J. Trump’s populism. | 17 |
| II.III – Populism in the Twitter era: how populism builds voting engagement through the social platform..... | 20 |
| III – Analyzing the relationship between Donald J. Trump, his voter base, and Twitter ... | 23 |
| III.I – Donald J. Trump’s use of Twitter as his main tool to communicate. | 23 |
| III.II – President Donald J. Trump’s populist rhetoric in tweets throughout 2020. | 27 |
| III.III – Analyze of Donald J. Trump’s Twitter rhetoric | 34 |
| CONCLUSION | 36 |
| PART 2 - DIDACTICS | 38 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 53 |

PART 1 – RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION

More than any other American Head of State before him, and despite having led the country for only a single four year term, 45th President of the United States of America, Donald J. Trump, will very likely leave a long lasting mark in American history. Although his political legacy, whether national or foreign, is still being discussed among scholars and may or may not have, as he promised to his conservative voter base, reshaped America to the point of making it “Great Again”, there is absolutely no doubt that his rhetoric and his way of communicating to the American people have had a tremendous impact on contemporary political communication in the United States and beyond.

In March 2009, New-York businessman and, back then, reality TV co-producer and host Donald J. Trump, joined social media Twitter. His first tweets, from May 4th of that year, were mostly a way for him to promote and advertise for his show. Eight days later, on May 12th 2009, his very first personal tweet – in which he quoted himself – stated ““My persona will never be that of a wallflower - I’d rather build walls than cling to them” – Donald J. Trump”¹, echoing in an almost ironic way one of the prime arguments that led him to become President of the United States in January 2017.

Although President Barack Obama (2009-2017) was the first American President to formally engage with the American people through social media Twitter – amongst others – and paved the way to an official American Presidency social media communication with the launch of the @POTUS (standing for “President of the United States”) Twitter account in May 2015, President Donald J. Trump was the first to use it to such an unexpected and almost baffling extent, with tweets ranging from self-promotion or autocongratulations to sometimes aggressive or outrageous international foreign policy, tweeting more than twenty-five thousand times in the span of a four years term. As he shed a social media light on his presidency, Donald J. Trump captivated the attention of millions of people on an international scale: from his almost fanatically devoted supporters he tirelessly praised and seduced, to

¹ <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>

those he considered “fake news” journalist elites he seemed to be obsessed with and constantly stood up against. Everyday his numerous tweets (up to a daily average of thirty-four in 2020) may have more often than not been perceived as irreverent, sometimes puzzling, but were always impatiently expected by the community of his almost ninety million followers, from his political proponents and opponents, to foreign officials including many ordinary citizen worldwide.

Throughout the four years of Donald J. Trump’s presidency, the world has been mesmerized by the never-ending flow of tweets which emanated from the White House, and as he had become an expert at using Twitter to communicate, there was no doubt that President Donald J. Trump moved with the times. But when it comes to the essence of his political communication and since the beginning of his campaign for the American presidency, he has constantly been described by observers as making use of a populist rhetoric, and many are the journalists, political analysts and scholars worldwide who have studied his speeches at length and confirmed this statement.

Since 7th President of the United States Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), no other American President had embodied the very concept of populism to such a degree. Donald J. Trump’s fierce opposition to a so-called ‘elite’ of journalists, intellectuals and politicians rapidly found a resounding echo in the minds of a conservative population who was feeling frustrated by the eight years of the Obama presidency. And his – quite unexpected – ascension to power in 2017 thrust a populist presidential communication into the forefront of the American public debate.

If the four years of Donald J. Trump’s term as President of the United States of America largely contradicted his own assertion that he would tweet in a “very restrained”² way, year 2020 was his most prolific of all with about twelve-thousand tweets in a year. The Covid-19 pandemic and the global recession that followed, the Black Lives Matter protests and riots, the process of his own impeachment or the race for the presidential election were a

² Stahl, L. *President-elect Trump speaks to a divided country.*

succession of events that triggered a plethora of tweets on his side, up to an all-time record of two hundred tweets in a single day on June 5th³.

But as journalist and head of investigation of British newspaper *The Guardian* Paul Lewis underlined, research suggest that President Donald J. Trump's populist rhetoric changes depending on whether he is 'scripted' or not. According to Lewis, it seems that President Trump is 'more populist' when he reads a scripted speech from a teleprompter than when he is off-script and 'rambling'. And even though it is acknowledged that he was not always the one who wrote and published his tweets⁴ (although it seems difficult to measure up to which extent), the frenetic pace at which he tweeted and the informal character of many of his messages seem to suggest that most, if not all, his tweets weren't strategically planned ahead and therefore scripted. Can we thus conclude that his tweets had less of a populist rhetoric than he accustomed his audience to during, for example, the rallies he held for his presidential campaign?

Professor of English Language Susan Hunston of the University of Birmingham points out that Trump's populism does not only reside in the formal speeches he gives, and his 'highly distinctive' informal, 'non-complex' and 'familiar' language that some 'commentators' perceived as a 'savage mauling of [English]', 'assert his identity as a 'common man'', hence making it 'the true language of populism'⁵: the kind of language one can expect to read in his tweets. Furthermore, Doctor Benjamin Moffitt of the Australian Catholic University highlighted that "Populism is not just about what political actors say, but also how they act."⁶ as he analyzed how, on more than one of his public speeches, President Trump 'theatrically ditched his teleprompter', exhibiting the behavior of 'an authentic figure' whose purpose was to create a link of empathy with his voter base. These conclusions by both scholars naturally lead to the idea that it doesn't seem far-fetched to esteem that populism in President Trump's tweets was the combination of a sum of factors such as who they targeted, or how they strengthened his relationship with his supporters, those he liked to call 'the country's real elite'.

³ Perrett, C. *Trump broke his all-time tweeting record amid nationwide protests, sending more tweets in a single day than he did during his impeachment trial.*

⁴ Chute, N. U. T. *He writes Trump's tweets and has been with Trump's campaign since day one.*

⁵ Hunston, S. *Donald Trump and the language of populism.*

⁶ Smith, D., Lewis, P., Holder, J., & Hulley-Jones, F.. *The Teleprompter Test : why Trump's populism is often scripted.*

From this point onward, one may wonder to what extent did President Trump's relationship to Twitter and how he made use of its tools support his political agenda, and contribute *de facto* to the enforcing of his quite populist political ideology. Even though columnist for *The Washington Post* Paul Waldman showed that President Trump was only missing a total of 45,000 votes to be reelected⁷ in November 2020, it is difficult to imagine how his social media omnipresence could have been responsible for the close call that his failure was. This thesis aims at better understanding the dynamic between President Trump's view on politics and his all-time favorite social media Twitter during the year of his second race for the White House and therefore raises one fundamental question: how did President Donald J. Trump use social media Twitter to spread a populist political ideology in 2020?

This thesis will be divided into three parts with the goal of attempting and addressing that question. The first part will provide an overview of how successive American presidents have communicated with the American people throughout history, from the national newspapers era of the 18th century to the social media era. In the second part, we will dive into political communication and populism in the era of social media, by exploring how Twitter works as a communication tool and identify the meaning of populism as a political concept and the ties between President Donald J. Trump's political rhetoric and populism. Finally, in the third part, we will try and understand why President Trump chose Twitter as his main communication tool, analyze the content of President Donald J. Trump's tweets in 2020 and identify how influencing his messages were as tools in the populist rhetoric.

I – A short history of the American presidential communication.

I.I – From Washington to McKinley, from the national press to silent cinema.

If the election of George Washington (1789-1797) as first President of the United States of America was a landmark event in the history of the young republic, one must understand that the main source of information, and therefore of communication for the American presidency with the people, was newspapers which mostly included 'eyewitness reports from battles, letters and breaking news, [and] people would either buy the paper or listen to it read aloud in

⁷ Waldman, P. *We came much closer to an election catastrophe than many realize.*

town⁸. And despite his overwhelming popularity during his terms, even he, as soon as a few months into his second term, had to deal with attacks⁹ from opposition papers of the Revolution era. And if there seems to be no records of any interview or letter he would have written to a newspaper at that time, it seems that the only way he addressed the American people, was through his two inaugural addresses as well as the President's Annual Message to Congress, defined by article II, Section 3, Clause 1 of the Constitution of the United States which states that "[the President] shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.". As he engaged the citizens of his young – and experimental – country, his first inaugural address, which later was printed and distributed worldwide, was not only, as the Constitution requires, an oath to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States”, but also set a humble yet powerfully solemn and optimistic tone to galvanize as well as reassure an anxious American people. Nine months later, on January 8 1790, he personally delivered his first Annual Message to Congress, which as all his speeches throughout his presidency, was covered by the national press. As became custom, his message was then debated in both houses of Congress and an answer was then returned to him by delegations of Senators and Representatives. It is interesting though to note that delivering the President's Annual Message *personally* to the Congress was changed by President Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) who felt it more appropriate, instead of attending the event, to send copies of his messages to clerks who would read them in the two houses, as it seemed he believed it would have been ‘an aristocratic imitation of the British monarch's "Speech from the Throne," and thus unsuitable to a republic.’¹⁰. And the ‘tradition of personal presidency appearances’ would only be revived (and actually reinvented) in 1913 by President Woodrow Wilson (1912-1916). From then on and throughout the nineteenth century, Washington's successors to the presidency of the United States indirectly used press coverage knowing full well newspapers, beyond providing the most direct way to communicate with the American people, could be used as a tool to influence public opinion and gain or lose its support.

But the presidency of the most populist American head of state of the nineteenth century, President Andrew Jackson (1829-1837), brought to light a brand new tool that was

⁸ The American Revolution Institute. *Discover the Collections*.

⁹ Holzer, H. *The Presidents Vs. the Press: The Endless Battle between the White House and the Media – from the Founding Fathers to Fake News*.

¹⁰ *Welcome To The White House*.

used on the verge of what we would probably consider today pure and simple propaganda: the biography. Historians David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler¹¹ pointed out that even though his ascension to the presidency was apparently the logical result of his military victory over the British in 1815, his success in the race for presidency actually was the result of the ‘carefully crafted story of his life’. And his biography, published in 1817 and written by politician – and later Secretary of War in the administration of President Jackson – John Henry Eaton, was, according to its author, ‘a simple [task that involved] enhancing Jackson’s established military reputation while solving the more difficult editorial puzzle of omitting dubious details about his marriage, his temper, and his occasional disregard for the law.’. And both historians acknowledge how, combined with the use of ‘extant newspapers and founding new ones to tailor messages for specific regional audiences, while keeping vibrant the idea of Jackson as virtuous, diligent, and always heroic.’, the publication of an “embellished” biography had a resounding success amongst the general population, and made of Andrew Jackson a national hero that the American people craved to elect. Such an innovative way of creating ‘an image’, turned Andrew Jackson’s biography into a powerful political communication tool that ‘became the model for presidential campaign biographies ever afterward.’.

By the time candidate for the presidency and ‘gifted debater’¹² Abraham Lincoln launched his campaign in 1860, biographies were well established and political parties were used to engage newspapers in a very definite political editorial line – either pro-Democratic or pro-Republican – in exchange, for example, for ‘government printing jobs’. Scholar of the political culture of the American Civil War era Harold Holder even goes as far as describing the relationship between politics and the press as ‘a mutual interdependence that grew up [and] made for a toxic brew’¹³. And not only was Abraham Lincoln a talented orator who was capable of communicating with people through sometimes six hours long debates whose reports were published afterwards in the newspapers he had ‘assiduously [been] courting [...] for years’, his outstanding speechwriting skills served him throughout his entire presidency to guide public opinion. And acknowledging that Lincoln acquired a German weekly journal – a language he had barely studied – thus becoming the publisher of a foreign newspaper, allows us to fully apprehend the intimate relationship he had with the press on the one hand, and the

¹¹ Admin, Z. *The Public Relations Strategy That Made Andrew Jackson President*.

¹² Roos, D. *How US Presidents Have Communicated with the Public—From the Telegraph to Twitter*.

¹³ Holzer, H. *Lincoln and the Power of the Press : The War for Public Opinion*

extent to which he understood how influential press was in his time on the other hand. But President Lincoln (1961-1965) remains most famous for his innovative use of telegraphy during the American Civil War. As he had installed a ‘dedicated telegraph office in the ward department, next to the White House’, he sent many messages to the Generals of the Union which, according to politician Tom Wheeler, allowed him ‘to win the Civil War’¹⁴, at a time when, since the nineteen-fifties, telegraphy was widely used by journalists to quickly communicate with their publishers.

In 1880, a new and unusual way of campaigning appeared when James A. Garfield (1881) started the very first Front Porch Campaign. Instead of delivering hundreds of speeches throughout the United States, Garfield stayed put in his home in Ohio, projecting ‘the dignified and earnest image of a family man and yeoman son of the soil, a Cincinnatus [i.e. ‘a model of simple virtue’] awaiting the call to serve’¹⁵. The Republican Party went as far as to pull the necessary ropes to have the end of a railroad constructed behind Garfield’s house in order for journalists as well as ordinary American citizens to come and visit him. His “immobile” race for the presidency and the concept of Front Porch Campaign and how it allowed the creation of a direct line of communication between candidates and their voter base had such a resounding success, that several other future candidates, such as President Benjamin Harrison (1881), President William McKinley (1897-1901) or even more than a century later President Joseph R. Biden (2021-) – although in his case for health-safety reasons – used the concept of Front Porch Campaign for their race for the presidency.

Finally, at the turn of the twentieth century, in 1895, a new medium that would forever change political communication appeared. And candidate and soon-to-become-President William McKinley, revolutionized political communication not only during his campaign, but also throughout his whole Presidency up until his own funerals. Thanks to the likely influence of his brother who was a stockholder in a film company, McKinley embraced silent cinema early in his campaign and not only did he reenact on film, in September 1896, the day he received the Republican nomination for President of the United States¹⁶ for potential voters to watch throughout the United States, but he also filmed his inauguration speech in order for it to be broadcasted. As he combined this cutting edge way of communicating to his fellow

¹⁴ Wheeler, T. *Mr. Lincoln’s T-Mails : How Abraham Lincoln Used the Telegraph to Win the Civil War*

¹⁵ Dolan, M., & Dolan, M. *Porch Politics : Candidates Stayed Home to Campaign.*

¹⁶ IMDB comment on the film *William McKinley at Canton, Ohio (1896).*

countrymen with his very own Front Porch Campaign, candidate McKinley easily reached the United States' Presidency, and architected the first milestone of a new way for Presidents of the United States to engage with the American people.

I.II – From Roosevelt to Roosevelt, from the bully pulpit to the fireside chats.

The end of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth century saw the advent of mass culture as the mass-publication of newspapers and magazines¹⁷ reached, beyond the nineteenth century “upper-class Victorian standards of taste”¹⁸, an exponentially broader range of American citizens. In this context of new means of communicating to the people, two Presidents of the United States revolutionized presidential rhetoric: the Republican Theodore ‘Teddy’ Roosevelt Jr. (1901-1909) and the Democrat Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) whose ‘mass rhetoric has [from then on] become a principal tool of presidential governance’ according to Professor Jeffrey K. Tulis of the University of Texas at Austin¹⁹.

The extremely close relationship between Theodore Roosevelt and journalists – as he almost considered himself one of them²⁰ –, his knack for bold and brilliant catchphrases that would come to him ‘by flashes or whims or sudden impulses’ and his largely recognized talent in writing ‘terse, luminous, logical [and] convincing’ speeches, were at the roots of a drastic reshaping of the American presidency communication, as he managed to convince, more than once and sometimes against all odds whereas for example his own party disapproved of his involvement in public policy-making, the American people to support him. President Roosevelt ushered a never-seen-before involvement of the executive power in the countries’ political decisions through the extensive use of what he called the ‘bully pulpit’ an expression ‘he himself coined to describe the national platform the presidency provides to shape public sentiment and mobilize action’.

As for President Woodrow Wilson, not only did he ‘revive the tradition of delivering the Annual Message to Congress as an in-person speech’²¹ and transformed it ‘from a report

¹⁷ Encyclopedia. *Mass Market Magazine Revolution*.

¹⁸ *The Rise of Mass Communication*.

¹⁹ Tulis, J. K., & Muirhead, R. *The Rhetorical Presidency*.

²⁰ Goodwin, D. K. *The Bully Pulpit : Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism*.

²¹ Congressional Research Service. *History, Evolution, and Practices of the President’s State of the Union Address: Frequently Asked Questions*.

on the activities of the executive departments into a tool to draw widespread attention to the policies he supported', but his pulling the United States into the war in Europe in 1917 – with a speech rhetoric such that it was acclaimed by the American daily newspapers and contributed, by logical extension, to winning the support of the population – and his very active involvement in the peace process, brought the country on the stage of international politics²². But since the very beginning of the involvement of the United States in World War I, his administration 'started one of the earliest uses of government propaganda'²³ and created 'the nation's first ministry of information' (i.e. The Committee on Public Information) in order to increase the control of the executive power over the press, exerting such a hold that it was and still is considered 'an unprecedented assault on press freedom' in the name of a 'crusade to make the world safe for democracy', therefore exhibiting a well-established knowledge of the influence of newspapers over the public opinion. And the Committee on Public Information had such a tremendous impact when it comes to communication, that over a century later, one of its most persisting pictures, James Montgomery Flagg's 'Uncle Sam declaring "I WANT YOU FOR THE U.S. ARMY!"', remains overly vivid in humanity's collective unconscious.

The next milestone in the communication of the American Presidency was the installation of a radio station at the White House in 1922 by President Warren G. Harding (1921-1923) who had had an extensive experience of the medium as State Senator of Ohio²⁴. But his premature death in office in July 1923, led to his thunder being stolen by President Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929) who, as he went as far as being coached to working 'at his speaking style and voice pitch', became the expert history dubbed 'the first Radio President'²⁵. As a 'skillful pioneer in the medium', not only was he the first President to broadcast a 'radio address'²⁶ thus reaching millions across the United States, but his administration 'put in place the regulatory philosophy that governs radio broadcasting' nowadays (i.e. 'public ownership of the airwaves [...] no censorship of programming [...] free programming to the public [etc.]'). By the end of his presidency and in the span of five years and seven months, President Coolidge had directly engaged the American people through radio more than forty times, showing, a little more than a century after the foundation

²² Stables, G. 1917: *Woodrow Wilson's call to war pulled America onto a global stage.*

²³ Daly, C. B. *How Woodrow Wilson's Propaganda Machine Changed American Journalism.*

²⁴ *The Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/>*

²⁵ Wallace, J. L. *Calvin Coolidge : Our First Radio President.*

²⁶ *President Harding's voice heard on radio, June 14, 1922.*

of the young republic, how Presidential communication and rhetoric in the United States had made their way to the very center of the executive power's concerns.

But the medium showed its full potential in the hands of charismatic President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1933-1945) who, according to Harold Holzer²⁷, was particularly 'gifted, or better prepared [than his predecessors], in the art of public persuasion and press relations'. If, before him, President Herbert Hoover (1929-1933) encouraged the development of radio through its extensive use as a communication tool for the United States' Presidency, President Roosevelt remains, with his series of Fireside Chats with the American people, the architect of a 'revolutionary'²⁸ way of communicating. From his New Deals (1933-1934 and 1935-1936) to the end of World War II, Roosevelt 'exploited broadcast technology to join families in their living rooms'²⁹, not only reassuring the 'nation, but [also launching] a revolution in presidential communication'. And the impact of his "chats", his use of print media, and of course his appearances on national television from 1939 on, were such that he even was (although arguably according to Jeffrey K. Tulis who gives the honors to Presidents Theodore Roosevelt Jr. and Woodrow Wilson), 'credited [by scholars] with founding the "modern" Presidency'. Despite the debated character of this assertion, there is little to no doubt that Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency had, beyond the very close relationship he established with the American people (confirmed by his unique four terms presidency), a resounding impact on a global scale. And as the film documentary of the Yalta Conference directed and produced by the U.S. War Department³⁰ in which President Roosevelt sits next to Prime Minister Churchill and Premier Stalin in February 1945 is still, as of today, in the minds of people worldwide demonstrating, if need be, that under his presidency the American presidential communication renewed and reinforced, on an international level, an image of the United States as (almost³¹) unquestionable saviors of Europe, and impacted American diplomacy from the second half of the twentieth century up to this day.

I.III – From Truman to Trump, from television to Twitter.

²⁷ Holzer, H. *The Presidents Vs. the Press: The Endless Battle between the White House and the Media – from the Founding Fathers to Fake News*.

²⁸ LaFrance, A. *Donald Trump Is Testing Twitter's Harassment Policy*.

²⁹ Tulis, J. K., & Muirhead, R. *The Rhetorical Presidency*.

³⁰ *The Yalta Conference* on film.

³¹ Stone, O. *The Untold History of the United States*.

If the democratization of what had been coined, since the 1920s, the “mass media” such as the radio, newspapers or even cinema had assuredly improved the access American people had to information and therefore allowed a well-established and organized Presidential communication to increasingly influence it (for better or for worse), nothing compares to how television transformed the American political communication landscape. From his first broadcasted presidential address in 1947 and throughout his entire presidency, President Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) repeatedly used the medium – invented in 1927 – as a means to address the American people³². But although Truman communicated ‘with admirable forthrightness [...], something had died with Roosevelt.’³³.

By 1955, under half of all homes in the United States owned a black and white television set³⁴ and so began the advent of the Golden Age of television, one year after ‘the live-on-TV downfall of [the] era-defining [Senator] Joseph McCarthy’³⁵, under the presidency of Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961). Unfortunately, despite holding ‘the first-ever live, televised presidential news conference’, Eisenhower’s ‘disdain for self-promotion’ implied he didn’t like television much, nor did television like him as it broadcasted an ‘aging general [who] came across as tired and timorous’³⁶. But in 1960, President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s legacy found a successor in the hearts of the American people with the arrival of a ‘young’ and ‘energetic’ John F. Kennedy, whose popularity and tragic destiny would later consecrate his dynasty as “American Royalty”.

The most memorable event – aside from his traumatizing assassination – when it comes to then Senator and candidate to the presidency Kennedy, was the very first ever broadcasted presidential debate he agreed upon to face Vice-President Richard Nixon in September 1960, which was watched by more than sixty-six million Americans³⁷, as Richard Nixon was wearing a grey suit – unlike Kennedy who was dressed in black – which made him look, on black and white television, as if he was fading into the studio set’s background. Although Nixon’s communication mistake was corrected in the three following debates, Kennedy’s ‘perfect appearance in TV’ largely contributed to his ascent to the presidency (along with attributes such as ‘discreet friends in the press, a dedicated staff prepared to say

³² Shisia, M. *Who Was the First US President to Appear on Television?*

³³ Holzer, H. *The Presidents Vs. the Press*

³⁴ Stephens, M. *History of Television.*

³⁵ The Associated Press. *50 years ago today, television turned tide against McCarthy.*

³⁶ Holzer, H. *The Presidents Vs. the Press*

³⁷ CPD : *1960 Debates.*

anything to protect him, and a fabulously wealthy and ruthlessly ambitious father'³⁸ combined with a pale-looking Richard Nixon who had barely recovered from a recent infection). After a crushingly successful campaign, 'eloquent' and 'attractive'³⁹ President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) became the first President to 'effectively use [...] television to speak directly to the American people'⁴⁰ and 'helped to significantly enlarge the role of television as a news medium' as, beyond the debated superficiality of his looks, he managed to convey the 'image [of] profound realities' and was 'conscious of how his legacy would be preserved' through filmmaking as well as documentaries.

But if President John F. Kennedy paved the way for his successors to make proper use of television as an increasingly efficient tool in presidential communication, no other President mastered the medium as well as he did until the presidency of charismatic former actor Ronald Reagan at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties. Throughout his two terms, President Reagan's (1981-1989) rhetoric abilities and ease on screen, further anchored the influence of the communication of the American presidency through television on the global political and economic stage. It is interesting though to note that the relationship between the media and the presidency had radically changed since President Kennedy's ascension to power. As Professor Tulis underlines⁴¹ the 'ambivalence' of mass media President Ronald Reagan experienced at a time when 'television [spoke] to the president in metaphors expressive of the "opinions" of an active people, and the president [responded] to the demands and moods created by the media with rhetoric designed to [more or less successfully] manipulate popular passions rather than to engage citizens in political debate.'. Despite ups and downs in his relationship with the press (e.g. When the press – to Reagan's dismay – gave the appellation of "Star Wars" to his Strategic Defense Initiative), President Reagan, who saw himself as the 'chief marketer' of the policies his administration engaged rather than 'an originator' of said policies, managed to skillfully use his 'love of the movie line' to reinforce the American people's conviction of the righteous legitimacy of their country in global diplomacy, which it may likely have perceived as the prime reason for the downfall of the Communist bloc when, from Berlin in 1987, the President encouraged the final leader of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev to 'tear down this wall!'.

³⁸ Holzer, H. *The Presidents Vs. the Press*

³⁹ Simon, R. *See How JFK Created a Presidency for the Television Age.*

⁴⁰ JFK Library. *John F. Kennedy and the Press.*

⁴¹ Tulis, J. K., & Muirhead, R. *The Rhetorical Presidency.*

Even though he was repeatedly attacked by the press who most notably referred to him as a ‘wimp’, George H. W. Bush’s presidency (1989-1993) – who was also dubbed ‘un-rhetorical’ – was a difficult one to assume in Reagan’s footsteps, and he seemed to not understand what to say and how to say it⁴² and even contradicted the very promises he made to the American people to avoid new budgetary proposals, contrary to his successor, President Bill Clinton (1993-2001), who ‘imported the skills and talents of his campaign into the core leadership of the White House’. Clinton’s leadership and communication style – despite the affairs that angered the (more or less) conservative population of the country and eventually led him to be impeached – allowed the President who sent the first e-mail at the dawn of the Internet era to end his presidency with unusually high approval ratings.

If President George W. Bush made a rather (at best) unremarkable use of his “bully pulpit” except maybe for (easily) convincing the American people of a just and almost holy revenge war on terrorism, ending up in targeting Iraq, like his own father did, to actually secure oil reserves in the Middle East throughout his ‘Fox News Presidency’⁴³, President Barack Obama proved himself to be more innovative when it came to presidential communication. Even though television was and still remains as of today ‘a highly influential source of news’, President Obama inaugurated the first official presidential Twitter account (@POTUS44 until May 2015 and then @POTUS (for short)) and the most direct line of communication ever created with the American people and opened a window into the White House for the rest of the world. Throughout his presidency, Obama has allegedly used over fifteen social network and microblogging websites and made extensive use of his proficiency in social media communication during his own presidential campaigns. At the end of his second term in 2017, the doors were opened for an overly active Twitter aficionado: President Donald J. Trump.

⁴² Holzer, H. *The Presidents Vs. the Press*

⁴³ Farnsworth, S. J. *Presidential Communication and Character : White House News Management from Clinton and Cable to Twitter and Trump.*

II – Twitter, populism and Trumpism.

II.I – Communicating in 2020 on social medium Twitter.

Apart from the ‘series of short, high sounds’ birds make, or when someone talks ‘quickly in a high excited voice, especially about something that is is not very important’, the online Oxford Learner’s Dictionary defines Twitter as such:

‘twitter *verb*

3. (*also more frequent tweet*) [intransitive, transitive] **twitter (something)** to send a message or picture using the Twitter social media service

- *Some members of Congress twittered through the President’s big speech.’.*

This recognition by an established dictionary, used worldwide and everyday by millions of people, of the meaning of the verb ‘to twitter’, reflects how much of an institution the social medium has become since its launch in July 2006. Professor Dhiraj Murthy of the University of Texas Austin School of Journalism and Media explains how it is recognized as ‘one of the largest and most popular’ ‘microblogging’⁴⁴ websites ‘which is specifically designed to broadcast short but regular bursts of content to particularly large audiences well beyond a user’s direct social network’. It ‘allows [its] users to maintain a public web-based asynchronous “conversation” through the use of [originally] 140-character messages”, up to 250-character messages since 2017. Known as “tweets”, these short messages, once posted, ‘are publicly accessible on the user’s profile page on the Twitter website’ and allows users to interact with them (e.g. “like”, comment or retweet (i.e. repost) them etc). The “at” sign (i.e. @) in front of a name, defines the user’s alias (e.g. @POTUS or @realDonaldTrump) and allows dialogue to occur between two (or more) accounts (i.e. users). And a user does not need to know another user to communicate, nor do they need ‘their permission to direct a tweet at them’. One joins the network by creating a free account, defining a user name, and from then on can send tweets as frequently as one likes.

Professor Murthy also underlines how difficult it may be to distinguish microblogging (such as Twitter or Instagram) from social networks (such as Facebook or Whatsapp) as both

⁴⁴ Murthy, D. *Twitter (Digital Media and Society)*

belong to the social media category, and points out that although the ‘boundaries’ between them may indeed seem ‘blurry’, microblogging can be defined in the following way:

1. ‘Users have a public profile where they broadcast short public messages/updates whether they are directed to specific user(s) or not;
2. Messages become publicly aggregated across users;
3. Users can decide whose message they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages.’

Murthy sums up social networks are mostly aimed at private exchanges while microblogs mostly aim at public communication, and ‘like blogs, microblog [messages] can be on anything of interest to the author [and] depend on the regularity of content distribution’. He concludes by explaining that ‘ultimately, if an individual tweet is perceived as important to other users, it can travel far and wide, crossing many networks in the process.’

It is also important to understand that one of the social medium's key features is the categorization of tweets by “hashtags” (i.e. #) which allows discussions between strangers to be connected together and ‘by including a hashtag in one’s tweet, it becomes included into a larger “conversation” consisting of all tweets with the hashtag.’ (e.g. #BLM – acronym for “Black Lives Matter” – #FakeNews, #MAGA – acronym for “Make America Great Again” – #Obamacare etc.).

Now that we’ve had some insight on the basics of Twitter from it users’ point of view it is interesting to look at its communication potential by trying and analyze the medium’s numbers in 2020. At the beginning of the year, Twitter was estimated to have an average of 36 million daily active users⁴⁵ in the United States out of a worldwide total of almost 192 million⁴⁶. By the end of the year, and it is more than relevant to acknowledge the context of the numerous major events in 2020 (including but not limited to Covid-19 lockdowns, Presidential elections, social movements etc.), the number of American daily active users had grown by 21 percent compared to 2019. Since its launch, the average number of daily active Twitter users has kept growing year after year, even though Twitter only was the second most used microblogging platform after Instagram (owned by the Facebook/Meta company since 2012).

⁴⁵ Jay, A. *How many Twitter users are there?*

⁴⁶ Lin, Y. *10 Twitter Statistics Every Marketer Should Know in 2021*

But who are the platform's users in the United States in 2020? According to several sources:

- '81 percent of U.S. adults do not *regularly* use Twitter'⁴⁷
- More than 80 percent of users are under the age of fifty and 44 percent of adults age 18-24 use Twitter.
- The gender breakdown in the country is roughly 50-50⁴⁸ but 65 percent of Twitter's most active users are women.
- When it comes to income, Twitter users earn 9 percent more than the average American.
- 'A small majority' (about 10 percent) 'create a vast majority of tweets' (about 80 percent)⁴⁹.
- '69 percent of these highly prolific tweeters' (i.e. Twitter users) politically identify as 'Democrats'.⁵⁰

As interesting as these numbers – gathered by various apparently legitimate companies and organizations – may seem, we must acknowledge several things when we try to understand them. First of all, depending on the source, these numbers may vary, mostly because they are not always analyzed in the same way, and more importantly they change quickly and constantly. We must also understand that the anonymity a medium such as Twitter offers to its users, and how secret (like most social media) it keeps its own statistics, the statistics mentioned here can only be gathered through surveys and may not mean that the average 2020 American Twitter active user was a middle class Democrat woman under the age of fifty. Survey companies and organizations gathered these numbers with obvious professionalism, but don't seem, in the end, to clearly be able establish a typical, 100 percent reliable profile of the average Twitter user.

Nonetheless, throughout the research, a few numbers stood out in the endless flow of statistics: in 2020, nearly 70 million Americans had a Twitter account (whether they were regularly active on the platform or not), 18 percent Americans declared they mainly got their news from social media⁵¹ (Twitter included), 83 percent of the world's leaders were on Twitter, and in May 2020, the top ten Twitter accounts with the most followers (worldwide)

⁴⁷ Marks, G. *81 Percent Of U.S. Adults Do Not Regularly Use Twitter*.

⁴⁸ Sehl, K. *Top Twitter Demographics That Matter to Social Media Marketers*.

⁴⁹ Brandwatch. *60 Incredible and Interesting Twitter Stats and Statistics*.

⁵⁰ *Differences in How Democrats and Republicans Behave on Twitter*.

⁵¹ Mitchell, A., Jurkowitz, M., Oliphant, B. J., & Shearer, E. *Americans Who Mainly Get Their News on Social Media Are Less Engaged, Less Knowledgeable*.

included @barackobama with 118.09 million followers and @realDonaldTrump with 80.46 million followers (compared to the 33.2 million followers of the @POTUS account⁵²).

One last interesting point is the one Dhiraj Murthy underlines when he states that the medium has ‘fostered an ambient news environment’ and also that journalism (in general) has been changed by ‘the emergence of viral fake news’; and not only by the ‘volume of fake news’ within the last years but also their ‘noticeable influence’ and how stories they generate can cross to other social media platforms, although (an impossible to estimate number of) bots (i.e. non-human Twitter accounts, programs) play an important part in the circulation of fake news. But he also analyzes that ‘ultimately, Twitter is not shaping a turn toward fake news or the rise of non-fact-checked information, but is echoing our current relationship with the need for speed in terms of information flow and the acceptability (or perhaps expectation) of erroneous information.’.

There is little to no doubt that when President Obama created the first official account of the United States presidency on Twitter, although he probably didn’t foresee the huge impact the medium would have on presidential communication on a national as well as global scale, he was probably very aware that being active on social media was vital for the American executive power to address the American people as much as the rest of the world. And even though President Trump used Twitter at first because as he allegedly felt he was “covered so dishonestly by the press”⁵³, his intense use of his personal account, @realDonaldTrump, along with the @POTUS one he took over when he became the United States’ leader, would soon make him the most scrutinized American President of all times.

II.II – Defining populism in general & the specificities of Donald J. Trump’s populism.

One thing scholars in political science seem to all agree on is that defining the concept of populism is no simple task since it has become ‘one of the main buzzwords of the 21st century’⁵⁴ and the term is so ‘appealing to journalists’ and readers alike, and in the end, so ‘vague’, that it has been – sometimes wrongfully – associated with political speeches and practices throughout the whole left-/right-wing spectrum of ideologies and bears many different meanings depending on where it is used, by and about whom it is used. And to some

⁵² Oxner, R. *Twitter Will Reset @POTUS Account To Zero Followers After Biden Transition*.

⁵³ Collins, T. *First Trump administration tweets come from @realDonaldTrump*.

⁵⁴ Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, R. C. *Populism : A Very Short Introduction* p1

scholars, it could be summed up as a ‘set of demagogic ideas and as a political communicational strategy’, a ‘synonym for anti-establishment narrative’⁵⁵.

That said, Professor Mudde of the University of Georgia and Professor Kaltwasser of the Diego Portales University identify three ‘core concepts’ to define populism⁵⁶:

- ‘The people’. Firstly as ‘sovereign’ and a ‘reminder of the fact that the ultimate source of power in a democracy derives from a collective body’. Secondly as ‘the common people’, which is a concept that aims at uniting ‘a silent and angry majority against a defined enemy (e.g. “the establishment”) [and] institutions such as political parties, big organizations, and bureaucracies which are accused of distorting the “truthful” links between populist leaders and “the common people”.’. And lastly as ‘the nation’, a term in which ““the people”” [is defined as a] national community [...] either in civic or ethnic terms’.
- ‘The elite’, which combines different interpretations (along with the concept of “the people”), depending on ‘class, ethnicity, and morality’.
- And the ‘general will’, which opposes the people to a ‘representative government’ which is ‘seen as an aristocratic form of power, in which citizens are treated as passive entities, mobilized periodically by elections’. The ‘populist notion of the general will is based on the notion of “common sense” [and] means it is framed in a particular way, which is useful for both aggregating different demands and identifying a common enemy.’. But the concept of “general will”, the scholars underline, ‘implies [that it] is not only transparent but also absolute [and] can legitimize authoritarianism and illiberal attacks on anyone who (allegedly) threatens the homogeneity of the people’.

Mudde and Kaltwasser also define populism as a ‘thin centered ideology’⁵⁷ – although the legitimacy of this concept is still being debated amongst political scholars – which combines it with (amongst other characteristics) ‘other thin- and thick-centered ideologies, including agrarianism (‘a social or political movement designed to bring about land reforms or to improve the economic status of the farmer’⁵⁸), nationalism (‘the loyalty and devotion to a nation’), neoliberalism (which ‘de-emphasizes traditional liberal doctrines in order to seek progress by more pragmatic methods’) and socialism (which aggregates ‘various economic

⁵⁵ Gil De Zúñiga, H., Koc Michalska, K., & Römmele, A. Populism in the era of Twitter.p586

⁵⁶ *Populism : A Very Short Introduction* p5

⁵⁷ *Populism : A Very Short Introduction* p6

⁵⁸ *Merriam-Webster dictionary*

and political theories advocating collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods’), along with ‘a carefully crafted image of the Vox Populi’ (i.e. ‘The voice of the people’).

Finally, and although this thesis aims at understanding the means of influence of President Donald J. Trump’s populist rhetoric on Twitter, it is also interesting to understand that populism is not always linked to the emergence of a ‘charismatic (male) leader whose charismatic personal appeal, rather than ideological program, is the basis of *his* support.’⁵⁹ but can also be at the roots of popular or political movements such as the left-wing Occupy Wall Street or the right-wing Tea Party movements during the first decade of the twenty-first century in the United States.

When it comes to President Trump’s populism, sociologist and social theorist Jeremiah Morelock of the Boston College defines it as an ‘authoritarian populism’⁶⁰, by opposition, for example, to Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders’ ‘progressive’ populism⁶¹. According to the scholar Donald J. Trump is ‘often driven by sheer aggression, narcissism, and rage.’⁶² and the American President ‘has what we might call a highly developed Social Ego that has fully appropriated capitalist drives for success, money, power, ambition, and domination’, thus “checking all the boxes” of ‘authoritarian populism’, echoing the plethora of newspaper articles and scientific publications on the topic one can find when one associates the words “Trump” and “populism” when doing a search on most web search engines.

Morelock also points out (with sometimes harsh words) the ‘idolatry’ Trump benefits from his followers who see him as a ‘magic helper who will solve their problems by building a giant wall to keep out the threatening Other’⁶³. And even though the author compares Trump’s approach to populism to a ‘violent’ and ‘sadistic’ ‘neofacist’⁶⁴ type of political communication and even governance⁶⁵, and may thus seem (to some) to exhibit a lack of scientific objectivity, he analyses quite justly the dichotomy between the outrageous elitism Donald J. Trump embodies and the same elitism he denounces (and that he, himself,

⁵⁹ *Populism : A Very Short Introduction* p42

⁶⁰ Morelock, J. *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*.

⁶¹ *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* p53

⁶² *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* p71

⁶³ *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* p73

⁶⁴ According to the Merriam Webster dictionary: ‘a political movement arising in Europe after World War II and characterized by policies designed to incorporate the basic principles of fascism (as nationalism and opposition to democracy) into existing political systems’.

⁶⁵ *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism* p208

acknowledges⁶⁶), and raises the rightful question of the authenticity and the true motives behind the – now former – President’s ‘authoritarian populism’.

Finally, in order to better understand President Trump’s rhetorical strategy not only as a candidate for the presidency but also as the leader of the United States, we need to also try and understand, in concrete terms, how his authoritarian populism managed to harness and retain the support of a strong voter base, beyond the traditional conservative one of the Grand Old Party, as we now know that his victory in 2016 happened thanks to ‘voters switching their support from one party to’ the other⁶⁷ in the swing-vote states.

During his second race for the presidency in 2020, and despite dissident movements within the Republican party such as The Lincoln Project⁶⁸, Donald J. Trump ‘was supported by 94 percent of Republicans’ (along with the support of two-thirds of whites without college degrees) and, more surprisingly, his tough policies on the southern border of the United States unexpectedly increased his support by Hispanic voters⁶⁹. But as Professor of Sociology Bart Bonikowski of the Harvard University points out, the ‘common pattern of widespread dissatisfaction with political institutions, the globalized elites who control them, and the various minority groups that ostensibly benefit from the elite’s patronage and threaten the status of native-born white majorities’⁷⁰, the ‘grievances’ they fueled, and the general feeling of the American population of a lack of economic justice, more than obviously generated the fertile foundations in which Donald J. Trump planted the seeds of his extreme far right ‘authoritarian populism’ which became commonly known as “Trumpism”⁷¹.

II.III - Populism in the Twitter era: how populism builds voting engagement through the social platform.

If populism ‘as a thin ideology, core strategy to influence the public, and as an extreme left-/right-wing leadership-dependent phenomenon has remained constant and

⁶⁶ Hjelmggaard, K. U. T. *Steve Bannon: Fired architect of Trump’s campaign insists he’s still relevant. Others aren’t so sure.*

⁶⁷ *Swing vote ‘trumped’ turnout in 2016 election.*

⁶⁸ <https://lincolnproject.us/>

⁶⁹ Galston, W. A. *New 2020 voter data: How Biden won, how Trump kept the race close, and what it tells us about the future.*

⁷⁰ Bonikowski, B. *When Democracy Trumps Populism : European and Latin American Lessons for the United States.*

⁷¹ Aguirre, M. *Trumpism, an ideology for the extreme far-right globally.*

unaltered'⁷², it is of the essence to understand that social media such as Twitter, have radically changed how 'political actors communicate and directly engage with their electorate', and by extension and in our present study, how American leaders engage with the American people. Moreover, social media such as Twitter 'provide "low-cost" communication opportunities and potential for broad and rapid dissemination of messages' as Professors in Political Science Homero Gil de Zúñiga of the University of Salamanca and Karolina Koc-Michalska of the Audencia School in Nantes underline⁷³.

Engagement on Twitter, whether political or not, is measured through the effectiveness of a tweet, meaning how many times it is read and how far and efficiently it spreads to other users, and more specifically when someone performs an action on a message such as (but not limited to) "like" (i.e. clicking the "heart" button to generally express one's agreement with the content of a message), "retweet" (i.e. sharing a message emitted by someone else with one's own followers), "quote" (i.e. just like a "retweet" but adding one's own comment on top of it) or "reply" (i.e. writing a comment in the dedicated thread attached to a specific message)⁷⁴.

Research become particularly interesting when it comes to analyzing the political engagement (in the quite reduced sense of "how votes can be influenced") Twitter creates. It seems that if 'being active on social media metrics (i.e. Twitter followers) does not claim electoral success, [...] sharing [a] user's posts and subsequently linking is an important tool for raising engagement rate.'⁷⁵. And 'Twitter messages commenting on parties and candidates showed little, if any, systematic relationship with subsequent votes on the day of the election'.

Moreover, according to a 2020 study from the Princeton University⁷⁶, it seems that, in the United States, Twitter has indeed affected the election outcomes of the 2016 presidential election and may seem, at first, to confirm what President Donald J. 'Trump declared: "I think I wouldn't be here if I didn't have social media."'. The study also underlines that prior to the 2016 election, Twitter didn't seem to have an influence on the outcome of elections, leading scholars to conclude that President 'Trump's role as an outsider candidate may have played a

⁷² Gil De Zúñiga, H., Koc Michalska, K., & Römmele, A. *Populism in the era of Twitter: How social media contextualized new insights into an old phenomenon*. p587

⁷³ *Populism in the era of Twitter: How social media contextualized new insights into an old phenomenon*.

⁷⁴ *Twitter Engagement Metrics*.

⁷⁵ Safiullah, M., Pathak, P., Singh, S., & Anshul, A. *Social media as an upcoming tool for political marketing effectiveness*.

⁷⁶ Fujiwara, T., Müller, K., & Schwarz, C. *How Twitter affected the 2016 presidential election*.

particular role'. Yet, the same study points out it is very likely that if Twitter didn't contribute to pushing 'moderate Republicans' to turn their back on the Republican Party and maintained 'their votes for congressional races in the same election'⁷⁷, Twitter decreased Trump's approval ratings and increased Clinton's'. And their conclusion is that, in the end, Hillary Clinton was the one who benefited the most from her presence on Twitter, not Donald J. Trump.

Can we therefore conclude that Twitter didn't build voting engagements for candidate Donald J. Trump? As American showman, businessman and politician Phineas Taylor Barnum allegedly said 'There is no such thing as bad publicity.'. And what seems to actually matter according to observers when it comes to political communication on a microblogging platform such as Twitter, is the branding one creates of an individual⁷⁸. Cecilia S. Dakers in the *Inquires Journal*⁷⁹ goes even further and explains that 'politicians and candidates commonly utilize Twitter as a way to shape their persona [...] and use their accounts to script the platform and influence the press by creating more "news"'. Moreover, in order to create this persona, as political reporter Seth A. Richardson explains⁸⁰, Donald J. Trump crafted an 'alternate reality that didn't rely on empirical evidence', and the 'rhetorical framework' of his tweets 'created [the] false reality that propelled him to political success and amassed supporters who take his word as dogma.'.

Therefore, when President Trump used his own personal account (@realDonaldTrump instead of @POTUS) to tweet 'like there was no tomorrow' during his presidency, not only did he blur 'the lines between personal and professional life', but as 'he spouted [...] his plans and opinions to the world' and spread reshaped information more often than not, we can conclude that he created the online image of the outrageous persona we know which contributed, as his 'alternate reality' tweets spread as "news" in other media such as television or newspapers, to reinforcing his relationship with a strong conservative voter base. Moreover these electors were comforted in their feeling oppressed and frustrated

⁷⁷ Fujiwara, T., Müller, K., & Schwarz, C. *The Effect of Social Media on Elections: Evidence from the United States*.

⁷⁸ Malev, M. *Social media in political communication*.

⁷⁹ Dakers, C. S. *The Power of Right-Wing Populism in the Twitter Age: Analysis of Donald Trump's Tweets During the 2016 Election*.

⁸⁰ Richardson, S. A. *New study examines how Donald Trump used Twitter to craft an alternate reality for his followers*.

(particularly under the Obama administration), because of the never-ending and often violent reactions of Democrat Twitter users to Donald J. Trump's tweets.

Therefore, it doesn't seem farfetched to conclude that the more revolting or obnoxious the messages he tweeted, the more violent the reactions were in Democratic media, and – even though Twitter didn't directly influence American voters in a positive way like it did for Hillary Clinton – the more it contributed to creating the Trump persona. The image of a conservative “martyr”, whose ‘Superego’⁸¹ and resilience when it came to maintaining his polarizing thoughts and opinions against all odds, as well as the numerous populist promises he made, were a key factor in the building of the successful image that led him to becoming President of the United States in 2016, and strengthened his supporter base throughout his whole presidency.

Finally, in her article, Dakers sums up how powerful a tool such as Twitter can be in the hands of a right-wing populist' such as Donald J. Trump: it allows the ‘circumventing of traditional media’ (in appearance at least), and encourages the ‘disrupting of the public sphere of discussion’ and by extent – as the events of January 6 2021 showed – the ‘undermining of Democracy’.

III – Analyzing the relationship between Donald J. Trump, his voter base, and Twitter

III.I – Donald J. Trump's use of Twitter as his main tool to communication.

Professor of American Studies at the University of Graz Stefan L. Brandt describes how Donald J. Trump's experience as a Reality-TV host contributed in the shaping of his populist rhetoric⁸², but when it comes to understanding the former President's relationship to Twitter, it is interesting to acknowledge the role of some of the key characters in his close entourage, including his communication advisor Justin McConney who introduced him to

⁸¹ Morelock, J. *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*. P72

⁸² Brandt, S. L. *Donald Trump, the Reality Show: Populism as Performance and Spectacle*.

Twitter⁸³ and his campaign director Dan Scavino Jr. who allegedly was the only person who President Trump would trust with tweeting in his name on his @realDonaldTrump account⁸⁴.

Thanks to their guidance, Donald J. Trump quickly understood the potential of the free political tribune Twitter is and how he could engage directly with his “fan base”, allowing it to rapidly grow from three million followers at the beginning of his campaign in 2015, up to thirty million followers in May 2018. Among which 51 percent were fake accounts⁸⁵ (and to some extent, “bots”⁸⁶). Which raises the legitimate question: did ‘Trump actually [buy] new followers’? Buying followers not only is a perfectly legal practice but it was and still is extremely cheap (e.g. 5000 followers for a mere \$100), and *a lot* of websites offer such a service. And even for a major public figure such as Trump, reaching an engagement (i.e. followers in this case) on one’s Twitter account takes ‘time, effort and patience’⁸⁷ which may not be the former President’s strong suit, especially when one needs to rapidly “impress the crowds” and legitimate one’s popularity. It is even more interesting to understand this statement when we know that former President Obama – Donald J. Trump’s political “nemesis” – had, in May 2018, eighty-nine million followers among which an estimated 79 percent were “real” ones. Even though it is impossible to confirm that President Trump wanted to exhibit as much popularity as former President Obama or understand his true motives (Flatter his ego? Enforce his online legitimacy?), but even without being able to provide a reliable answer, such a question deserves to be raised.

At the very beginning of his “Twitter career” in 2009, Donald J. Trump ‘set up his account [like many public figures] for marketing purposes [and to] promote his TV show, *The Apprentice*’⁸⁸. But the reason why he kept using the medium from 2015 on, according to technology, business and culture writer Nicholas G. Carr, is that Twitter is a ‘technology perfectly suited to [Trump’s] need for attention and, more ominously, his recklessness. [...] Twitter allows [him] to turn locker-room talk, his favored idiom, into presidential speech. And it enables him to manhandle the public’s attention, constantly yanking the media spotlight back on himself whenever it starts to wander.’. Trump first tweeted his famous

⁸³ Schreckinger, B. *Oh, no’: The day Trump learned to tweet.*

⁸⁴ Chute, N. U. T. *He writes Trump’s tweets and has been with Trump’s campaign since day one.*

⁸⁵ Bort, R. *Nearly Half of Donald Trump’s Twitter Followers Are Fake Accounts and Bots.*

⁸⁶ Johnson, T. *That pro-Trump tweet that made your blood boil? It probably came from a bot.*

⁸⁷ *39 Best Sites to Buy Twitter Followers (Real & Active).*

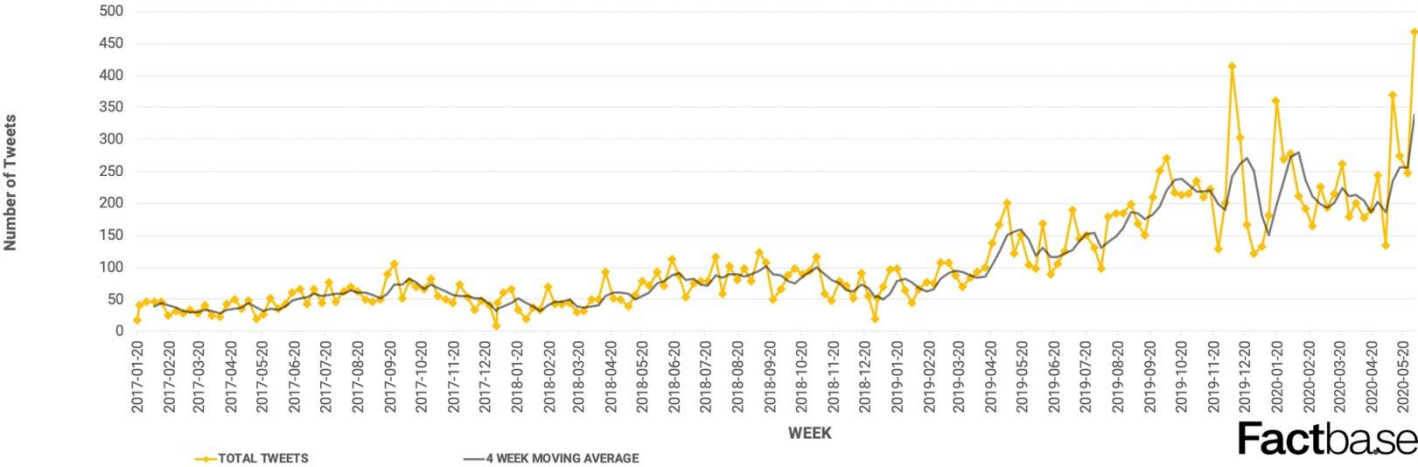
⁸⁸ Carr, N. *Why Trump Tweets (And Why We Listen).*

“Make America Great Again” in January 2012 but only got public attention when he launched his presidential campaign. And ‘by early 2016, his tweets were generating some 10.000 likes and 5.000 retweets each’. Moreover, after he entered the White House, ‘his tweets [averaged] more than 18.000 retweets and 74.000 likes each’.

Knowing the number of “likes” a tweet generates may seem anecdotic, but Carr underlines quite an interesting fact in his analysis: ‘like other social networks, Twitter promotes compulsive, even addictive patterns of use. The service taps into primordial information-gathering and status-seeking human instincts, which scientists suggest are amplified by the release of pleasure-producing brain chemicals like dopamine. The temptation to check whether a tweet has earned likes and retweets is hard to resist, and once such ego-messaging tokens have been collected, it’s even harder to forgo pursuing them again with yet more tweets.’. He even goes as far as pointing out that ‘because his tweets [commanded] the authority of the presidency, they [were] guaranteed to get noticed and discussed’, and were often relayed ‘within minutes of being posted, in high-definition blowups on "Fox & Friends" and "Morning Joe" and "Good Morning America."’.

Furthermore Carr’s analysis becomes even more relevant when it is correlated with the always growing number of tweets Donald J. Trump generated every day throughout his presidency as website Factbase⁸⁹ shows:

@realDonaldTrump Tweet Volume - By Week Inauguration - June 5, 2020



⁸⁹ <https://factba.se/>

To sum Carr’s thoughts up: Donald J. Trump is nothing more than a human being – even though he was (and still is) a very influential one –, and Twitter’s addictive patterns may be one of the reasons why he tweeted so much during his presidency, at very least, since it seems he was the one tweeting from the @realDonaldTrump account most of the time⁹⁰, he seemed to be displaying the patterns of and addictive behavior.

Finally, if, as Doctor of Philosophy Brian L. Ott points out, that Twitter ‘demands simplicity’⁹¹ and explains that ‘a Tweet may be clever or witty, but it cannot be complex.’, it also ‘promotes impulsivity’ and ‘fosters incivility’. Such characteristics, Ott demonstrates, can be found in Donald J. Trump’s rhetoric: ‘Trump’s public discourse [showed] speech patterns correspond closely to what [he (Ott)] identified as Twitter’s three defining features’: simplicity’, ‘impulsivity’ and ‘incivility’. Ott also identified in Trump’s tweets that, firstly, his ‘lexicon is simple and repetitious, relying heavily on monosyllabic words such as “good,” “bad,” and “sad,”’; secondly that his tweets ‘are overwhelmingly “negative in connotation—and the majority of them are out right insults.”’; and thirdly that ‘he makes frequent use of exclamation points and all caps’, and ‘these stylistic practices reinforce the negative sentiment of his Tweets and heighten their emotional impact, which is, in turn, [reflected] in the intense emotion of his followers, a phenomenon scholars refer to as “emotional contagion”’ (i.e. ‘the toxic effect Twitter [...] has had on public discourse). And Doctor Ott concludes with these strong words: ‘Trump’s simple, impulsive, and uncivil Tweets do more than merely reflect sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia; they spread those ideologies like a social cancer.’

In conclusion and to put it in a nutshell, the reason why Donald J. Trump used Twitter as his main tool for political and, by extent, presidential communication seems, according to journalists and scholars, because he was, at first, encouraged by devoted advisors to personally use Twitter for political strategy reasons, he probably liked it because it encouraged and fitted his rhetorical habitus well and flattered his ego, and he may, over time, have developed an addiction to the social medium, which, at least partly, could explain why he tweeted around twelve-thousand times in 2020.

⁹⁰ Chute, N. U. T. *He writes Trump’s tweets and has been with Trump’s campaign since day one.*

⁹¹ Ott, B. L. *The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement.*

III.II – President Donald J. Trump’s populist rhetoric in tweets throughout 2020.

The exact number of messages President Trump tweeted from January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020 was 12.239. His daily average number of tweets ranged from 33 to more than 34 throughout the year. His most prolific day, 200 tweets in a single day, occurred on July 3rd, 2020, amid nationwide Black Lives Matter protests⁹², a new record in the number of daily coronavirus cases, the official announcement of record 4.8 million new jobs in June etc⁹³.

In order to understand how President Trump spread a populist political ideology through Twitter, it was necessary to clearly define and identify the criteria (i.e. specific words President Trump used) I would use for this research. At this stage, it is important to understand that since the permanent suspension of President Trump’s Twitter account on January 8, 2021, data are much more complicated to gather and efficient tools one can use when a Twitter account is active are now useless. Nonetheless, I could use an extensive and reliable online archive which is freely accessible to the public⁹⁴, and manage to extract interesting information. Moreover, I voluntarily chose to not include Donald Trump’s “retweets” which meant the deletion of roughly half of his 12.000 tweets in the study. But even if these retweets would have been considered relevant in his spreading a populist ideology and somehow contributed in the voting engagement of some of his Twitter followers, what really mattered to me in this study was to work on the authentic rhetoric of the President of the United States himself, and not what the ideas and rhetoric of others that he liked to relay were. Besides, including the messages he retweeted, written by someone other than himself, would assuredly have interfered with the objective results of the study.

In order to define President Trump’s populist Twitter rhetoric criteria, I started with the words that define the basic concepts of populism: “elite”, “people”, and “general will”. The first search returned the following results:

- “elite” returned 2 occurrences

⁹² Perrett, C. *Trump broke his all-time tweeting record amid nationwide protests, sending more tweets in a single day than he did during his impeachment trial.*

⁹³ Maass, H. *10 things you need to know today: July 3, 2020.*

⁹⁴ <https://www.thetrumparchive.com/>

- “people” returned 533 occurrences
- “general will” returned, unsurprisingly, 0 occurrences.

From then on, I understood I needed to broaden and extrapolate these criteria. Before digging into the linguistic characteristics of Donald J. Trump and explore the journalistic and scientific literature I had studied so far, I followed Trump’s own tweets to understand his own logic. For example, I understood that “elite” could be replaced with “establishment” and as the latter returned 15 occurrences, some tweets such as “The establishment failed us. The media, congressional leaders, the Democrat Party?” helped me define more astutely what he meant by “the elite”. Following this logic of observation, I came up with twenty-four criteria, and identified the terms or expressions that had the most occurrences in his tweets (e.g. when it comes to one of the most obvious elites in Trump’s paradigm, “journalists” only returned 7 occurrences, while “fake news media” returned 54, and the latter was therefore more relevant to include in my research). Crossing Donald Trump’s tweets and observing and analyzing their content and occurrences finally led me to the following criteria in the three populism categories (i.e. Elite, People, General will):

| Elite | People | General will |
|------------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| Establishment | The people | We will |
| The media | Americans | I will |
| Lamestream media | American people | I want |
| Fake news media | Great people | We must |
| Congress | Citizens | We are |
| Politicians | United States | I am |
| Democrats | USA | |
| Dems | Our country | |

Although I removed several words and expressions from the criteria since the number of their occurrences in Donald J. Trump's tweets was insignificant, this final list reflects not only what I identified in many publications, but also the words and expressions that had a significant number of occurrences in Trump's tweets. The results are the following ones:

Populist concepts in Donald J. Trump's tweets

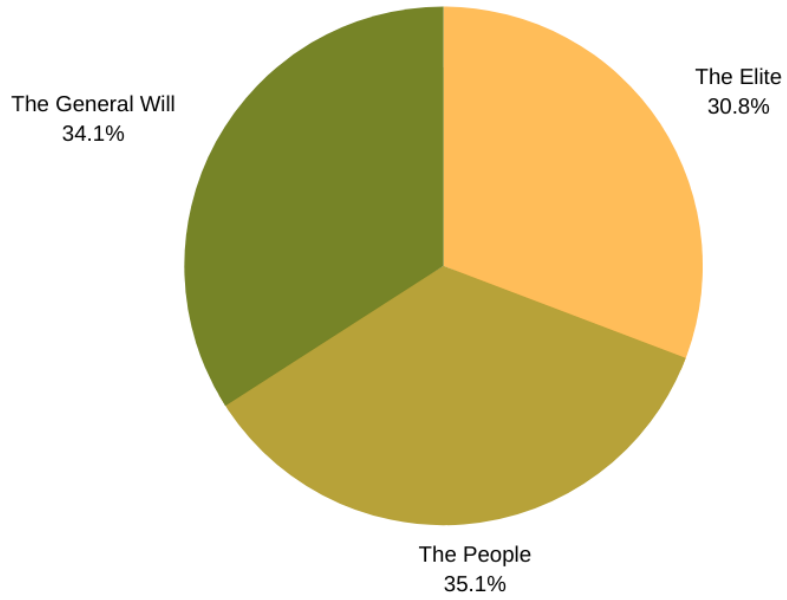


Fig. 1

Populist concepts in Donald J. Trump's tweets

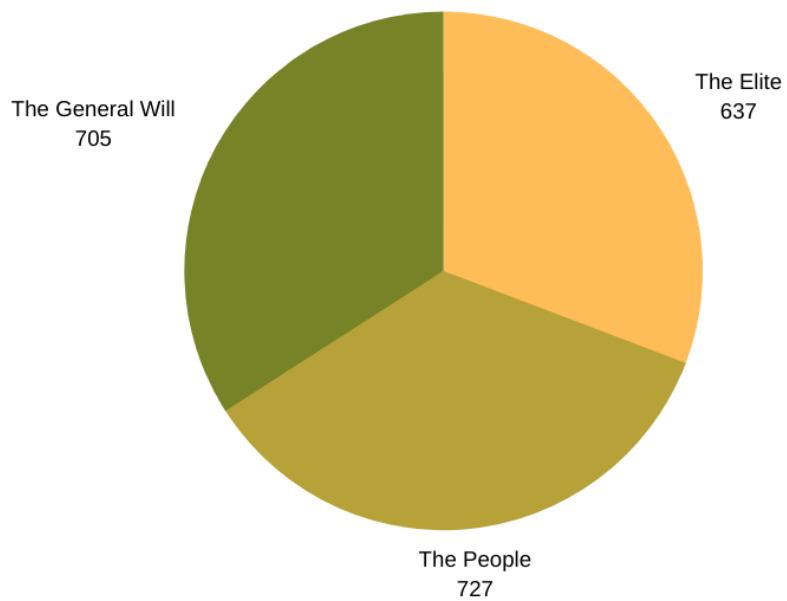


Fig. 2

The "Elite" in Trump's Twitter rhetoric

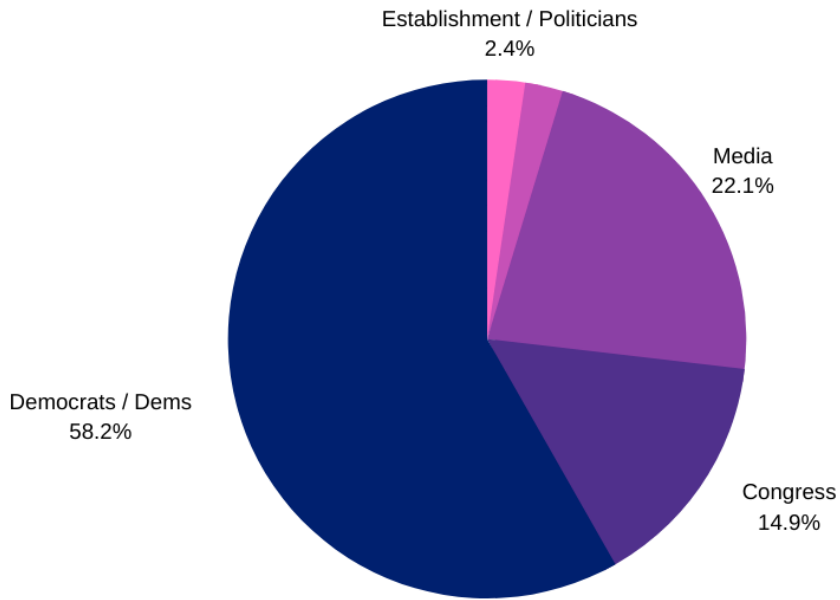


Fig. 3

The "Elite" in Trump's Twitter rhetoric

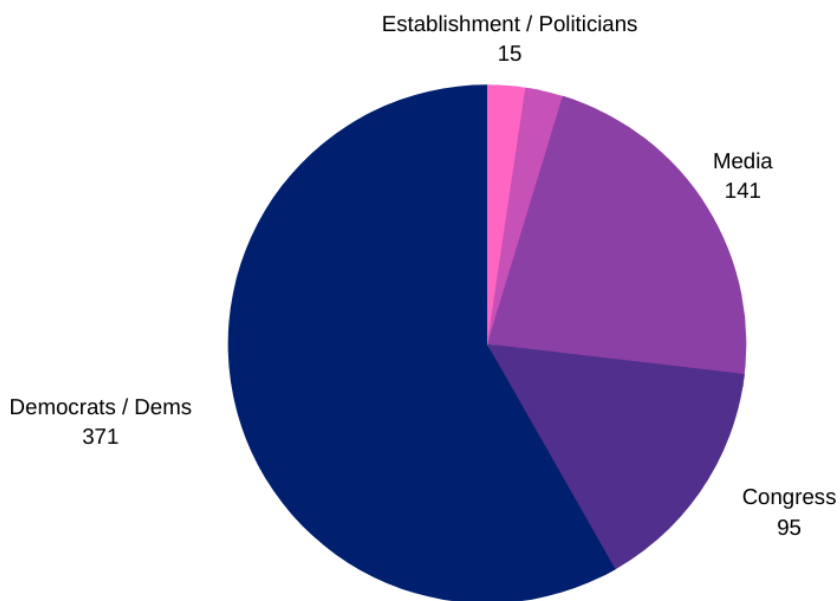


Fig. 4

The "People" in Trump's Twitter rhetoric

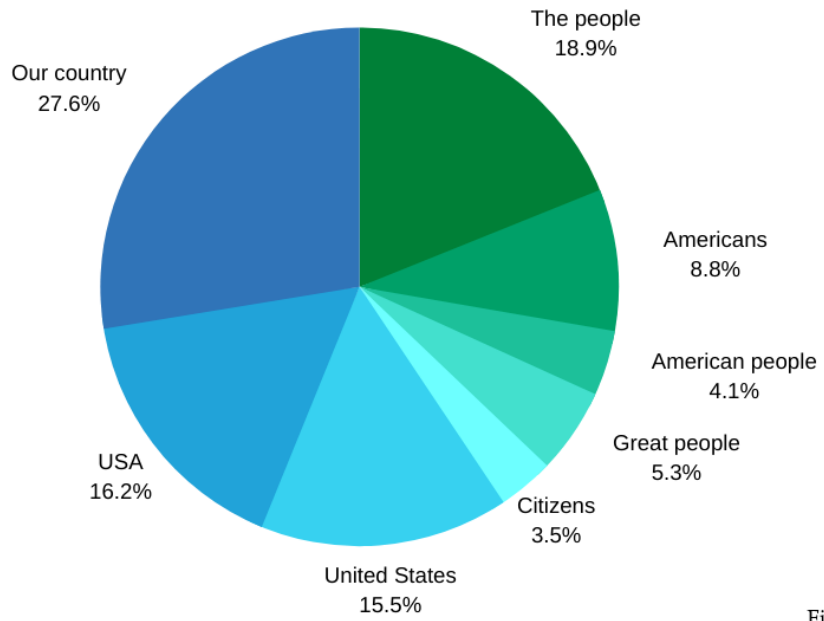


Fig. 5

The "People" in Trump's Twitter rhetoric

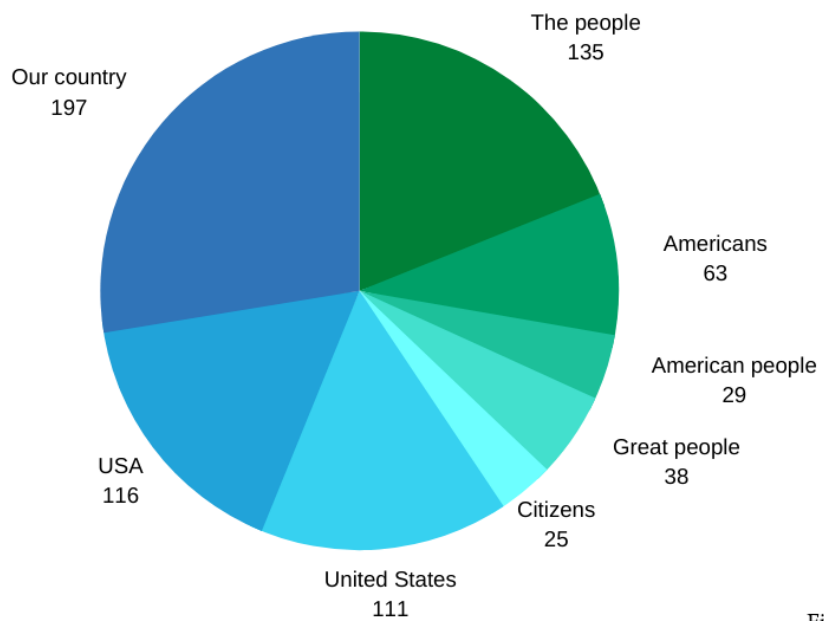


Fig. 6

The "General Will" in Trump's Twitter rhetoric

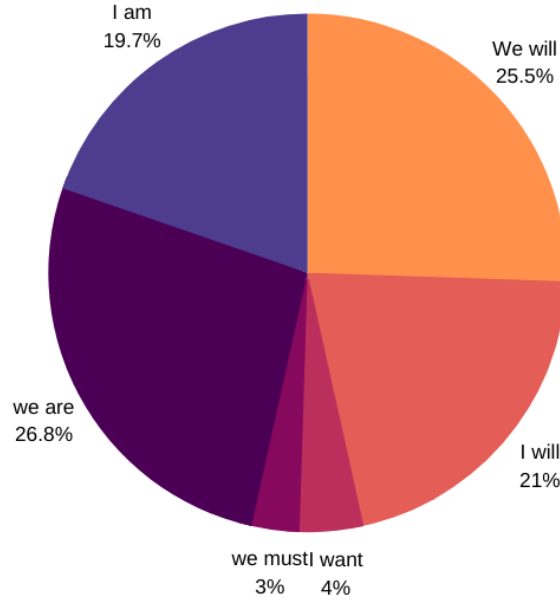


Fig. 7

The "General Will" in Trump's Twitter rhetoric

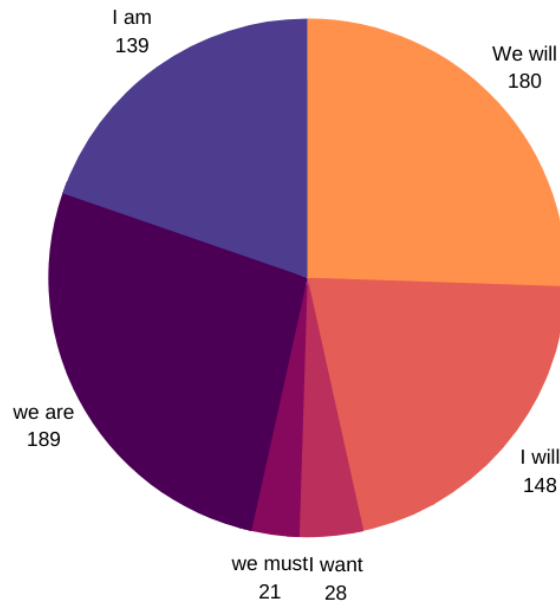


Fig. 8

III.III – Analyze of Donald J. Trump’s Twitter rhetoric

The total of occurrences when it comes to words and expressions identified as populist markers is 2,069 out of a total of 6,281 tweets, almost one out of three tweets. Many (not taken into account) of those tweets included pictures or videos posted without comment, or simply tweets that were not relevant in our current study. Finally, the method used to identify populist markers in Donald Trump’s Twitter rhetoric doesn’t include, as it was not possible, the possible typos the President was known to do now and then; but these typos likely affected only a few of his tweets.

When we look at figure 1 and 2, the three concepts “elite” (30.8% for 637 occurrences), “people” (35.1% for 727 occurrences) and “general will” (34.1% for 705 occurrences) are themes that are, overall, rather equally mentioned in President Trump’s tweets. Although, surprisingly, he doesn’t seem to have attacked “the elites” as much as he engaged with “the people” or embodied “the general will”. We could argue that themes such as protesters (28 occurrences), or anarchists (54 occurrences) would probably have changed the results as they were some important themes in his rhetoric in 2020, but these groups, as much as he denounced them in order to strengthen his voter base were groups that were *not* part of what he called “the elites”; they could have been included in the concepts of nationalism, conservatism or the far-right, but not in one of the basic concepts of populism.

Moreover, when it comes to “the elites” he mentioned by name, such as “Biden” (411 occurrences), “Obama” (87 occurrences), “crooked Hillary” (25 occurrences) or other allegedly elite figures (mostly Democrats), it was impossible to determine whether he attacked them because they were political opponents, or because he wanted to denounce them as “elites” of the country, especially since searches such as “biden + elite” returned no occurrence whatsoever. Interestingly enough, the only times he mentioned “Biden” and “Hillary” in the same tweets (5 occurrences) was to humiliate his former opponent in the 2016 race for the presidency with messages such as “Corrupt politician Joe Biden makes Crooked Hillary look like an amateur!” or “This makes Crooked Hillary Clinton look like amateur hour!”

Figures 3 and 4 enlighten us when he obviously refers to Democrats and throws them altogether in “the bag of elites” or “politicians who are enemies of the people” and not simply

as political opponents, especially when he calls them “Dems” (104 occurrences) as a rhetorical figure which aims at expressing his contempt. The Congress and its members (especially in 2020 when Democrats had the majority of seats in the House of Representatives) clearly embody the elite in his tweets and he repeatedly pretends he has no leverage on them (which is only partly true since the Senate still “belongs” to the Republicans) and often rants that the “Congress must/should do/doesn’t/act/approve” etc. Although when it comes to the occurrences of the word “congress” it is important to acknowledge that the total number of occurrences (95) may be biased since he also expressed his support to several political allies who ran for a seat at the institution. But attacking congress is likely, nonetheless, a way for him to justify the lack of action of the legislative branch even before he lost the House in the 2018 midterms.

In these figures, the media are of course one of his favorite targets with a total of 141 occurrences (including 25 for “the media”, 62 for “lamestream media” and 54 for “fake news media”) and the adjectives “lamestream” (a pun with the words “mainstream” and “lame”) or “fake news” attached to the word “media” obviously aim at reinforcing and intensifying his voter base’s hatred of all the media “elite” (except for a few of them such as the Fox News channel).

Figures 6 and 7 tackle the populist concept of “the people”. As we can see, the expression with the highest number of occurrences is “our country” (197). With “our country” he expresses at the same time what he shares with his fellow Americans and emphasizes how he is one of them and belongs to the people: together they share the same country, and by extension the “United States” (111 occurrences) and of course the “USA” (116 occurrences). As for “the people”, “Americans”, “American people”, “citizens” or even “Great people”, he directly addresses and tries to rally the whole American people and not just his voter base, and exhibits then a typically populist rhetoric.

Finally, one of the most difficult concepts to identify was the “general will” one. As columnist for the Washington Post Michael Gerson writes⁹⁵, ‘The only thing that Trump asks of citizens is to support him. So this really leaves only one actor who actually acts — a leader who claims to embody the general will. When Trump asserts, “We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth,” who is the “we”? It is the “forgotten men and women” and the single leader who has not forgotten them.’ For this

⁹⁵ Williams, D. L. *Would Jean-Jacques Rousseau actually approve of Trump? Not exactly.*

reason, I decided to analyze the number of occurrences of the “I” and “We” pronouns along with the verbs “want” and “be” and the modals “will” and “must”.

Expressions starting with “we” generated a total of 390 occurrences and those starting with “I” 315. And even though there is only a difference of 75 occurrences between both pronouns, it is interesting to see that he gave more room in his rhetoric for the “we” pronoun. On a side, it would have been interesting to compare these results with those of the previous years of his presidency since these rhetorical choices may have been influenced by the upcoming elections of the end of the year, as well as the results of said elections.

CONCLUSION

As we saw, President Donald J. Trump’s Twitter rhetoric included for a very large part (at the very least one third of his tweets in 2020) an obviously populist message. And history has shown that, as he could have won his second race for the American presidency with only 45,000 more votes, he spent at least a whole year (if not four!) zealously practicing his populist rhetoric on Twitter and it very likely contributed to not only strengthen the bonds between his electoral base and himself, but may well have convinced some voters to join his devoted “herd” of followers.

In the span of a few years, Donald J. Trump has developed such a social media charisma that he has become a pioneer in a new kind of presidential rhetoric, joining the few American presidents before him who architected the history of presidential rhetoric; a talent his successor, President Joseph R. Biden, doesn’t seem to exhibit so far. The incredibly high number of publications about him, his politics, his persona, his rhetoric, or his voters, is evidence of how deep he left his mark in his time and truly was in tune with the first quarter of the twenty-first century’s social media dynamic. And the events known as the United States Capitol Attack on January 6, 2021, also demonstrate the passion and devotion his populist rhetoric generated to the point of leading the most fanatical of his followers to believe they could overthrow the elites their leader had accustomed them to hate so much, and a large part of the American people to wonder if they were about to see the day their cherished democracy would collapse.

After he was banned from Twitter following these tragic events, Donald J. Trump launched his own “uncensored” social media network, Truth Social, on February 21, 2022 which, since then, attracted public conservative figures such as Fox News anchor Sean Hannity or Kyle Rittenhouse who was acquitted after he fatally shot two people during the Black Lives Matter protests. On April 2, 2020, Trump had 823.000 followers, Hannity 372.000 and Rittenhouse 269.000⁹⁶.

Twitter’s lifetime ban of Donald J. Trump’s account may or may not be revoked in the future, and even if he claims he will not return to Twitter⁹⁷, former President Trump also claimed he would stop tweeting once he would become President of the United States. And whether we like it or not, whether we admire him or not, it is difficult to not foresee that President Donald J. Trump’s social media populist rhetoric already belongs in history books.

⁹⁶ Bradbury, R. *I spent a week on Trump’s new social media app Truth Social. I felt like I was exploring a ghost town.*

⁹⁷ Malik, A. *Trump says he won’t return to Twitter if his account is reinstated.*

PART 2 - DIDACTICS

Présentation de la séquence

Pour cette partie didactique, j'ai choisi d'aborder la question de notre responsabilité en tant que société face aux pratiques dérégulées des réseaux sociaux, thème qui découlait assez naturellement du sujet abordé dans ce mémoire. En ayant à cœur d'aborder cette question en profondeur et avec recul, j'ai fait le choix de la construire à destination d'élèves de terminale générale qui, je crois, auront la maturité suffisante pour appréhender certains concepts complexes et contribuer non seulement de manière riche à la vie du cours, mais sauront aussi construire des réflexions élaborées en vue de la tâche finale.

Par ailleurs, je me suis servi pour cette séquence de plusieurs documents provenant de l'ouvrage *English Sparks, Anglais Terminale* aux éditions Belin, qui contient une séquence qui propose plusieurs contenus pertinents à exploiter dans la séquence que j'ai imaginé.

Terminales, Niveau B1 → B2 (utilisateur indépendant)

Sequence : Responsibility in the age of social media

Entrée thématique dominante de la séquence: Gestes fondateurs & mondes en mouvements → Citoyenneté & mondes virtuels

Cette séquence vise à sensibiliser les élèves quant à la réalité des risques que posent les réseaux sociaux, et par extension à partager leurs propres visions et expériences de ceux-ci.

Problématique : The economic models of social media push them to become more and more creative in order to get users addicted. What can we do, as a society, to restrain their influence and the damage they sometimes cause?

Une tâche finale évaluée sur 20 d'expression orale en interaction (EOI) conclut cette séquence.

Cette séquence travaille la compréhension écrite (CE), l'expression écrite (EE), l'expression orale en interaction (EOI)

Tâche finale - E.O.I.

“As a social media specialist, you are invited to an online show in which you will debate on whether social media should be more regulated, how and why”.

Pour réaliser la tâche finale, voici les outils dont les élèves ont besoin :

| <i>LEXICAUX</i> | <i>GRAMMATICaux</i> | <i>PHONOLOGIQUES</i> | <i>METHODOLOGIQUES</i> | <i>CULTURELS</i> |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Internet et son lexique (digital, deep fakes, data...) - Lexique de la manipulation (misinformation, motivations, controversy...) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Les différentes formes d'expression de la négation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Les contours intonatifs de la phrase (notamment interrogatif et affirmatif) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Extraire d'un texte les éléments de débats - S'exprimer en terme adaptés sur un lieu virtuel d'expression publique - S'organiser en groupe et en autonomie | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>La place des réseaux sociaux dans la société américaine</i> |

MISE EN ŒUVRE DE LA SEQUENCE

| Étapes | Supports | A.L | Activités d'apprentissage |
|---|---|------------------|---|
| <p><u>2 séances ou +</u></p> <p>1. Entrée dans la séquence, découverte de la problématique, première approche de celle-ci</p> <p>Objectif : comprendre les enjeux que posent aujourd'hui les réseaux sociaux et l'influence qu'ils peuvent avoir sur leur propre consommation de ces réseaux.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documents 1 et 2 • Worksheet du document 2 | CE EOC EOI | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rituel d'accueil : "How are you / sit down" qui vise à mettre les élèves en confiance, baliser le début du cours et mettre en place une ambiance de travail. • Anticipation de la séquence : Projection au tableau de l'illustration de Edel Rodriguez. La grenade sur le dos de l'oiseau symbole de Twitter est cachée mais les stries rouges sont visibles. Les élèves sont invités à commenter : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "Describe the picture and formulate hypothesis." - <i>"It's the the symbol of Twitter: a white bird / The background of the picture is red / There are red marks on it"</i> - "I hid part of the picture because the bird is carrying something on his back, can you guess what it is?" - <i>"A backpack / a person etc."</i> ➔ Les guider et les orienter et lorsqu'ils sont sur la bonne piste ou ont formulé des hypothèses proches, révéler l'image entière. - "Can you guess what we're going to talk about?" - <i>"Twitter / Social media / the war between social media etc."</i> • Exploitation du Doc 2 et de sa worksheet. • Devoir à la maison éventuel: terminer la worksheet |
| <p><u>1 séance</u></p> <p>2. Rédaction d'un tweet fictif</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doc 3 "The powerful words of the powerful people" | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rituel d'accueil : "How are you / sit down" • Correction du Homework • Exploitation du doc 3 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Anticipation active : Wordcloud pour chaque personnalité à partir de leur photo + Twitter - Work in pairs [speak English]: match each tweet with their original author - Work in pairs [speak English]: create a hash tag (#) for each tweet |

| | | |
|---|--|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work in pairs [speak English]: create a hash tag (#) that, in your opinion, connects all tweets together - Correction, en explicitant les choix - Solo work + DM [speak English]: Réflexions guidées sur le modèle “Look closely at these tweets: describe how the sentences are organized and the style in which they are written (are they short or long, which tense and aspects are used, do the authors use a formal or informal language? Justify your choices) / Do you think these tweets are objective facts or personal opinions? Explain why. - Correction. - Devoirs à la maison: questions éventuelles type: In your opinion, is it better to use short messages such as tweets or to write a detailed speech to express an idea or an opinion? Explain why. (max 100 words) |
| <p><u>2 séances ou +</u></p> <p>3. Rédaction d’un tweet fictif</p> <p>Objectif : Identifier la rhétorique de célébrités ou organisations présentes sur Twitter / Comprendre les limites de la rédaction d’un message en moins de 250 caractères / S’entraîner à la rédaction d’un tweet</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • En salle informatique, les élèves disposent d’un ordinateur en binôme. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rituel d’accueil : “How are you / sit down” • Correction du Homework • En solo : répondre au questionnaire de la worksheet du Doc 3. • En classe complète : correction de celle-ci et élaboration : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Explain why you thought President Obama wrote this tweet?” - <i>“He talks about global warming / about the United States / It’s a serious tone etc.”</i> • En binôme sur ordinateur: chaque élève rédige à tour de rôle un tweet factice à destination d’une célébrité (sur https://fakeinfo.net). Ils s’entraident et s’expliquent entre eux les choix qu’ils font dans leur rédaction. • En classe complète : les élèves sont invités à l’oral, à décrire et commenter leur tweet et les raisons pour lesquelles ils ont choisi de l’adresser à la célébrité qu’ils ont choisi. → Inciter les élèves à poser des questions à leurs camarades. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>“I chose to write a message to Lady Gaga because she’s a singer I love very much / I wanted to tell her that I admire her / That’s why I used words such as “amazing” or because I thank her for sharing her</i> |

| | | | |
|---|---|-----|--|
| | | | <i>music etc.”</i> |
| <u>1-2 séances</u> 4. Tâche intermédiaire | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> En salle informatique avec 1 ordinateur par élève pour la première étape, puis salle traditionnelle pour l'étape suivante | | <p>Intitulé: “You will post a real and meaningful message on social media Twitter to a public figure of your choice. The message should be at least 200 characters long. You will then explain why you chose this figure, as well as the content of your message (why you wrote it, which words you carefully chose and why, what you wanted your message to express).”</p> <p>Modalités:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You will create a Twitter account or use the one you already own if you so wish. You will post a message and send the link to your teacher. Your message may be funny, relevant, controversial or event provocative, but it has to be polite and respectful! <p>In class, your message will be projected on the board and you will describe and explain it to the class.</p> |
| <u>2 séances ou +</u> 5. Poursuite de l'étude de la problématique et de ses implications Objectif : | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doc 4 et sa worksheet Worksheet du point de Grammaire Doc 5 | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rituel d'accueil : “How are you / sit down” Exploitation du Doc 4 et sa worksheet. Création d'une grille d'évaluation : les élèves composeront leurs groupes de 3 en vue de la tâche finale et élaboreront une grille d'évaluation pour s'entre-évaluer au cours de la TF (cf Doc 5). Préparation à la TF: themes/questions à préparer etc |
| 6. Tâche finale en classe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grille d'évaluation construite en séance 4 et synthétisée par l'enseignant | EOI | <p>Intitulé: As a social media specialist, you are invited to an online show in which you will debate on whether social media should be more regulated, how and why.</p> |

Modalités pour les élèves:

- In groups of three you will organize a 5 to 10mn debate.
- One of you will act as a show host and animate the debate.
- One of you will defend the idea that social media *should* be regulated.

One of you will defend the opposite point of view.

Autres Modalités:

- Les élèves seront libres de la composition de leur groupe, mais leur rôle (débateur ou animateur) sera déterminé au hasard le jour de la TF afin de les inciter à comprendre les deux points de vues et d'être capables d'adapter le rôle d'animateur.

Documents

Doc 1



Doc 2

Why can't we agree on what's true any more?

It is tempting to blame the internet, populists or foreign trolls for flooding our otherwise rational society with lies. But this underestimates the scale of the technological and philosophical transformations that are under way. The single biggest change in our public sphere is that we now have an [unimaginable excess](#) of news and content, where once we had scarcity. Suddenly, the analogue channels and professions we depended on for our knowledge of the world have come to seem partial, slow and dispensable.

And yet, contrary to initial hype surrounding big data, the explosion of information available to us is making it harder, not easier, to achieve consensus on truth. As the quantity of information increases, the need to pick out bite-size pieces of content rises accordingly. In this radically sceptical age, questions of where to look, what to focus on and who to trust are ones that we increasingly seek to answer for ourselves, without the help of intermediaries. This is a liberation of sorts, but it is also at the heart of our deteriorating confidence in public institutions.

The current threat to democracy is often seen to emanate from new forms of propaganda, with the implication that lies are being deliberately fed to a naive and over-emotional public. The

simultaneous rise of populist parties and digital platforms has triggered well-known anxieties regarding the fate of truth in democratic societies. Fake news and internet echo chambers are believed to manipulate and ghettoise certain communities, for shadowy ends. Key groups – millennials or the white working-class, say – are accused of being easily persuadable, thanks to their excessive sentimentality.

This diagnosis exaggerates old-fashioned threats while overlooking new phenomena. Over-reliant on analogies to 20th century totalitarianism, it paints the present moment as a moral conflict between truth and lies, with an unthinking public passively consuming the results. But our relationship to information and news is now entirely different: it has become an active and critical one, that is deeply suspicious of the official line. Nowadays, everyone is engaged in spotting and rebutting propaganda of one kind or another, curating our news feeds, attacking the framing of the other side and consciously resisting manipulation. In some ways, we have become *too* concerned with truth, to the point where we can no longer agree on it. The very institutions that might once have brought controversies to an end are under constant fire for their compromises and biases.

The threat of misinformation and propaganda should not be denied. This is a situation where simple misinformation poses a serious threat to society. But the majority of people in northern Europe still regularly encounter mainstream news and information. Britain is a long way from the US experience, thanks principally to the presence of the BBC, which, for all its faults, still performs a basic function in providing a common informational experience. It is treated as a primary source of news by 60% of people in the UK. Even 42% of Brexit party and Ukip voters get their news from the BBC.

Why can't we agree on what's true any more? – Worksheet

1. Link the following words to their actual definitions:

| | |
|------------|--|
| Scarcity | To make something happen suddenly |
| To trigger | To prove that a statement or criticism is false |
| Shadowy | Not plentiful or abundant |
| To rebut | A strong feeling in favor or against one side of an argument |
| A bias | That not much is known about |

2. Explain how has online news changed our relationship to news in general?

3. Name two changes and explain them.

4. According to the author, are both changes bad for society?

5. Does he see any reason to be optimistic?

Doc 3 - The Powerful Words of the Powerful People

Who wrote these tweets ? Match each message with their author :

Greenpeace, Elon Musk, Barack Obama, Donald J. Trump and Kanye West.

Mystery Figure n°1
@Potus

Gravity exists. The Earth is round. Climate change is happening.

12:00 PM · Jun 1, 2021

4.3K Retweets 3 Quote Tweets 1.7K Likes

Mystery figure n°2
@Starman

About half my money is intended to help problems on Earth & half to help establish a self-sustaining city on Mars to ensure continuation of life (of all species) in case Earth gets hit by a meteor like the dinosaurs or WW3 happens and we destroy ourselves

12:00 PM · Jun 1, 2021

763 Retweets 1.9K Quote Tweets 10.5K Likes

Mystery figure n°3 @Starman · Jun 1

I really enjoy my Tesla. I'm in the future. Thank you Elon.

940 16K 120K

Mystery figure n°3 @Starman · Jun 1

I heard these are really good for the environment 🙌

250 2.3K 22K

Mystery figure n°3 @Starman · Jun 1

I'm super chaaaaaaarged. Bout to take this whole thing to mars

644 8.8K 46K

Mystery figure n°3 @Starman · Jun 1

This is the funnest car I've ever driven

691 3.3K 34K

Mystery Figure n°4
@Humanity

Dear fossil fuel industry.

We'll see you in court.

12:00 PM · Jun 1, 2021

536 Retweets 33 Quote Tweets 1.6K Likes

Answers

Mystery figure n°1

Mystery figure n°2

Mystery figure n°3

Mystery figure n°4

Mystery figure n°5

Mystery figure n°5
@Potus

The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive.

7:15 AM · Nov 6, 2012

12K Retweets 105K Quote Tweets 67K Likes

Doc 4

Twitter to ban all political advertising, raising pressure on Facebook

By Julia Carrie Wong for The Guardian (2019)

Twitter will ban all political advertising, the company's CEO has announced, in a move that will increase pressure on Facebook over its controversial stance to allow politicians to advertise false statements.

The new policy, announced via Jack Dorsey's Twitter account on Wednesday, will come into effect on 22 November and will apply globally to all electioneering ads, as well as ads related to political issues. The timing means the ban will be in place in time for the UK snap election.

Twitter had previously implemented rules and restrictions for political advertising.

The announcement comes as Facebook is embroiled in a controversy over its decision to exempt ads by politicians from third-party factchecking and from a policy that bans false statements from paid advertisements.

CEO of Twitter Jack Dorsey explained the motivations behind the change in a lengthy Twitter thread that appeared to include several references and responses to the convoluted arguments that Facebook has put forward in recent weeks.

The organic spread of political messages online "should not be compromised by money", he wrote. The advanced state of digital advertising technology, including deepfakes – fake or manipulated videos that appear real – combined with the pollution of the online information ecosystem with misinformation, "present entirely new challenges to civic discourse".

"This isn't about free expression," he added, in a seeming riposte to the Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's recent defense of online political advertising in a speech billed as a "stand for voice and free expression". "This is about paying for reach. And paying to increase the reach of political speech has significant ramifications that today's democratic infrastructure may not be prepared to handle. It's worth stepping back in order to address."

Dorsey tweeted another counter-argument to Facebook with an accompanying winking emoji, writing: "It's not credible for us to say: 'We're working hard to stop people from gaming our systems to spread misleading info, buuut if someone pays us to target and force people to see their political ad...well...they can say whatever they want!'"

That argument appears to mock Facebook's recent attempts to justify its decisions to exempt posts by politicians from its third-party factchecking program, and ads by politicians from a policy that bans false statements from paid advertisements.

Together, the policies have created a situation in which Facebook is simultaneously asserting its commitment to reducing misinformation while allowing incumbent politicians and political candidates to lie in paid campaign ads.

Dorsey called for “forward-looking political ad regulation”, noting that transparency requirements that have been proposed by US lawmakers are “progress but not enough.”

“The internet provides entirely new capabilities, and regulators need to think past the present day to ensure a level playing field,” he said.

Daniel Kreiss, an associate professor of journalism and media at the University of North Carolina, argued that companies should focus on restricting the use of personal data in ad targeting rather than banning all political ads, which he said “favors incumbents and media appointed elites vis-a-vis challengers”.

J Nathan Matias, an assistant professor of communication at Cornell University, said that the ban could have a number of unintended consequences, including pushing campaigns to use more bots and “hybrid human-software coordination on Twitter”.

“It’s very hard to define ‘political’ things from non-political discourse,” he added. “If their policies are too loose or their enforcement too clumsy, Twitter could do real damage to public health, the uptake of government services and civic life.”

Twitter to ban all political advertising, raising pressure on Facebook

Worksheet

1. Explain how can social media platforms be used for political advertising?

2. Explain how Facebook does to treat political advertising and why?

3. Does Twitter do the same thing? Explain why or why not.

4. How did people react to Twitter position? Explain why.

Doc 5

Responsibility in the age of social media

Let's create an evaluation grid

Your group along with another one of your choice (for a total of 3 students) will work together to create the ideal evaluation grid for the final task. Write down, in French, what you expect to be evaluated on and what you want to grade others on. You will create 3 to 7 categories, and each will be graded from 0 to a maximum of 5 points for a total of 20. Here is an example you may choose to add or adapt to your grid: "Je m'exprime de manière claire et fluide / 0-1-2-3-4-5".

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| Prénoms / Noms : | |
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| Note finale | /20 |

Doc 6

Responsibility in the age of social media

Prepare for the final task!

- Step 1: form a group of three students with whoever you want.
- Step 2: write down 10 questions or themes you will debate for the Final Task. Organize them chronologically and logically.
- Step 3: for each question/theme, list 10 pros and 10 cons in order to have basic elements for a living and interesting debate. Remember, on the day of the Final Task, only the host will be allowed to have the questions as a reminder, but she/he will not be allowed to read them!

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SUMMARY

This thesis aims at better understanding the relationship between President Donald J. Trump and social media Twitter, and how he used it as a tool to influence American citizens through a digital populist rhetoric throughout year 2020.

KEY WORDS

Trump, president, presidency, politics, rhetoric, communication, populism, social media, followers, Twitter, didactics, citizenship, virtual worlds.