

Political Communication of Donald Trump: An Analysis of the Factors Shaping Populist Communication

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Abstract

The style and content of political communication play a key role in the victory of populist leaders. The political communication of Trump illustrated the different aspects of populist communication. Understanding the economic, political, and social conditions of the US is necessary to understand the factors that shaped the political communication of Trump. Additionally, new changes in the media sector, like declining trust in traditional media and growing dependence on social media, also have facilitated the populist communication of Trump.

Keywords: Populism Political communication; Trump; US Politics; Media.

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The last decade has witnessed the electoral victory of many populist leaders. The victory of populist leaders is very much connected with the unique content and style of their political communication (Vreese et al. 2018, 425). Block and Negrine (2017, 179) note the distinctive style of political communication of populist leaders. Through savvy use of various communication channels, populists connect with the political aspirations, feelings, and needs of those who feel excluded, disenchanted, aggrieved, by conventional politics (Block & Negrine 2017, 179). The political communication of Trump is an example of populist communication. Although many studies, like KhosraviNik (2017) and Kreis (2017), pointed to the populist nature of Trump's political communication, they ignore why Trump adopt such a policy in the US. So, this essay will look at how the contemporary economic, political, and social condition of the US shapes the

style and content of the political communication of Trump. The study will analyse how the content and style of political communication of Trump contribute to his populist politics. The first part of the essay will discuss the nature of populism and the political communication of populist leaders. Then, it will look into the role of traditional and social media in populist political communication. The following part will point to the populist nature of Trump and the features of his political communication. Then, it will figure out the role of American social and traditional media in shaping the political communication of Trump. The last part will analyse the contemporary economic, political, and social conditions of the US and the nature of its citizens that created an environment for the growth of populism.

Nature of Populism and political communication

The last decade has witnessed the rise of populist leaders in the different parts of the world. The recent election results in Austria, Britain, France, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and the United States indicate that populism is a global phenomenon. Although the populism work in

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the name of people, it is a threat to democracy. Because democracy is not only about getting popularity (Khosravini (2017, 66); open debates and the existence of different perspectives are also essential aspects of democracy. Democracy also requires a well-established system of the check and balance among different centres of power and accountability and division of power. Populism, on the other hand, challenges the legitimacy of other institutions, including the judiciary, legislature, and media. Additionally, populism also challenges minority opinion, the search for consensus, the demand for transparency and accountability, and the division of powers, which are necessary conditions of democracy.

The populist leaders adopt a distinguished style and contents of political communication. Block and Negrine (2017, 182) discuss the identity, rhetoric, and use of the media in the political communication of the populist leaders. In terms of identity, populists create a binary between “people” and “other”. The rhetoric of populists is distinguished in its appeal to people to stand against the corrupted elites. Use of social media and gradual control over mass media to transmit their message to the public also contribute to populism.

The content of populist political communication is characterised by three central elements. First is a reference to “the people” who are presented as a homogenous community with the common interest. Second a fight against the corrupt elite who rule and exploit the people of the country for a long time. Third, populist leaders identify an outside group that poses a threat to the economy and culture of the state.

While the left populists present the capitalists as the outside threat, the right populists present the immigrants as the outside threat (Vreese et al. 2018, 427). The right-wing populism draws the dividing line in terms of race, nationality, religion, social position, legal status, and education. On the other hand, the left-wing populism draws the boundaries based on class, income, nation and ethnicity (Muller 2016). In short, dividing people into “we” and “others” is a feature of both right-wing and left-wing populism

Populism fundamentally opposes fact-based democratic communication. It also rejects the fundamental aspects of public communication like state protection of speech rights, watchdog journalism, and citizens’ access to public information (Waisbord 2018, 2). According to Waisbord (2018, 2), the populism adopts the way of post-truth communication. In the “post-truth”

world, personal belief and emotion, instead of objective facts, are more influential in shaping the public opinion. In the post-truth communication of the populist leaders, facts are less important, and they are subordinated to the narration. The post-truth communication emphasises on convincing the people.

Disintermediation is another feature of populist political communication. In political communication, disintermediation refers to a process in which the political leaders communicate directly with people through social media without depending on traditional media channels (Chadwick 2017, 284). So, social media facilitates the disintermediation of populist political communication.

Role of Social media and traditional media

Social media, like Facebook and Twitter, is a platform for populist leaders to bypass traditional gatekeeping practices of the mass media. Due to development in technology and change in lifestyle, social media has emerged as a part of everyday life. The role of social media to facilitate political communication and debate has increased in the last decade (Newman et al. 2017). According to Kreis (2017), the top-down use of twitter normalises the populist discourses of the right-wing populism. Morini (2020, 5) identifies two features of Twitter that allows creating an uncivil political discourse which is useful for populist politics.

First, its informal nature and lack of concern with proper language undermine norms that enforce civility. Second, it “depersonalises interactions” by promoting people to share their perspectives without considering their impacts on others. It is easy to say something nasty about others when they are not physically present. So, social media platforms are the primary way of political communication of contemporary populist leaders (Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan 2016). Vreese et al. (2018) also suggest social media as a successful platform for populist politics (p. 427). In the words of Keane (2013), populism is suitable for the “contours of the new media galaxy”. In short, social media is the primary vehicle for populist communication.

However, populist leaders need coverage in the traditional mass media also. While they get favourable coverage in the popular media, they often receive critical coverage in the “elite” media (Mazzoleni et al. 2003). As part of the anti-elitist rhetoric of the populist leaders, populists present such media also as anti-people. For example, Trump tweeted that “The Fake News media (failing @

nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!" (@realDonaldTrump, 17 February 2017). As a result of the pressure from the populist leaders, social media, and pro-populist traditional media, the mainstream traditional mass media also gradually turn to support populist politics.

The continuity of populism depends upon the lessening of media criticism and countering against it. It can be achieved either through direct control and censorship of government on media or through capitalist colonisation of the public sphere (Khosravini 2017, 60). The capitalist colonisation of the public sphere happens when few capitalists control the large section of media and cooperate with the populist government for getting benefits to each other.

Trump and Populist Political Communication

The political communication of Trump during the election campaign and after his victory reflected the populism. From his childhood, Trump was very aggressive and showed competitive behaviour. To gain more discipline in life, his parents sent him to a military academy. The competitive environment at the New York Military Academy enhanced his ability to compete (Kranish & Fisher 2016). McAdams (2016) observes Trump as a narcissist, who tries to win at any cost. Unlike his previous presidents, Trump had no experience as a governor of any region. Moreover, he did not express even respect for those who served in the post. Even before the final electoral victory of Trump, but after he defeated other Republican candidates, Maddalena (2016) had noted a distinguished political communication of Trump.

According to Maddalena, while Trump uses a high number of icons, traditional political communication was primarily based on indexes. The icons, such as images, represent objects by their similarity, whereas indexes, like tags, labels, and proper names, indicate their object by contiguity. Maddalena (2016) suggests political communication with icons as the most effective form of political communication in the coming years.

In campaign and after that, Trump eschewed professionalisation and preferred attributed comments, provocative pronouncements, an off-the-cuff ("politically incorrect") speaking style (Wells et al. 2016, 670). Due to both positive and negative reasons, Trump was successful in getting media attention from the campaign's beginning itself. During the election campaign, Trump distinguished from other candidates by his "shoot-

from-the-hip" style (Silvestri 2018, 995). Within two hours of debates, he made it clear that he was against Obamacare since it costs job in America, against the political correctness, and for building walls to prevent the "illegal immigrants". Since Trump was a businessman, not a politician, he was not careful about his words. So, he called politicians as stupid (Silvestri 2018, 996).

Conway et al. (2017) suggest that the emphasis on political correctness limits negative communication in the short term. However, according to them, it produces more support to negative communication as a revolt against the communication restriction. Conway et al. (2017) opine the electoral victory of Trump as the outcome of the revolt. McDevitt and Ferrucci (2017, 512) state that the populism and anti-intellectualism in the election campaign is a threat to the reason-based media reporting.

The political campaign of Trump was different from other candidates in different aspects. Silvestri (2018, 996) identifies five features of the political campaign of Trump: 1) Start an attack on other side and try not to be a victim; 2) make the rivals off-balance; 3) ignore tough questions; 4) provide a straightforward answer without details and 5) survive until next episode or debate. Jeffrey Tobin (2017) has observed the character of Trump to dominate and humiliate the adversaries.

In contrast to the traditional presidential campaigns, Trump used harsh and demeaning comments during the campaign. Although many Americans criticised the behaviour of Trump, a large number of Americans ignored or found excuses for it (Silvestri 2018, 997). Since his presentation on the Apprentice, Trump adopted a style of direct short sentences. He used an assertive language without giving much attention to the evidence. Rather than justifying his position or citing proof for it, Trump preferred generalised language and repeated the same arguments (Silvestri 2018, 996). In his Twitter messages also, Trump preferred direct and short sentences.

Disintermediation is another feature of the political communication of Trump. According to Morini (2020, 2), Trump is the first disintermediating American president. He avoids solo press conferences to avoid the confrontation with the reporters. Unlike previous presidents, Trump did not allow reporters to establish the subjects of discussion to answer to the American public. So, Trump preferred Twitter as a medium to communicate directly with the people on topics of his preference. Figure-1 shows that the presidential press briefing of Trump was far less than previous

presidents. Similarly, the figure 2 shows that the number of solo press conferences of Trump is the lowest among presidents after 1976.

Table 1: The average number of press briefings per year by presidents between 1993 and 2018.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	To tal	Yearly aver age
Bill Clinton (1993-2000)	241	168	313	311	314	337	301	241	2378	297.25
George W Bush (2001- 2008)	180	109	119	95	146	156	192	179	1179	147.37
Barak Obama (2009-2016)	191	145	145	96	157	148	155	145	1280	160
Donald Trump (2017-2018)	131	48							179	89.5

Source: Morini (2020, 4).

Table 2: The number of solo press conferences of presidents in the first two years in office between 1976 and 2018.

	First Year	Second Year	Total
Carter	22	18	40
Reagan	6	3	9
George H W Bush	27	29	56
Clinton	11	16	27
George W Bush	4	3	7
Obama	7	10	17
Trump	1	2	3

Source: Morini (2020, 4).

Populism constructs a dichotomy between homogenous people and corrupted elites. Accordingly, Trump tweeted after his election that “January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again” (@realDonaldTrump 20 January 2017). It shows his opposition to the results of the previous elections. Words like “people” and “nation” indicate the construction of America as a homogenous entity. On the same day, 20th January, Trump again tweeted a xenophobic message suggesting two rules: “Buy American & Hire American!” (@realDonaldTrump 20 January 2017). It implied that the Americans had been excluded, and immigrants had been preferred in the job market.

Through his online and offline communication, Trump constructed the enemy of the US. He presented China as an “other,” and its rise as a threat to the US. Trump also criticised migrants from other countries and presented it as the cause of unemployment and the economic crisis in the US. He proposed constructing a wall in the US-Mexico

border. Similarly, Trump reinforced Islamophobia in the US through a travel ban for the citizens of six Muslim majority countries.

The populist politics constructs a narration that “we” are threatened by “them” (Wodak 2015, 66). Whoever opposes the populist narration, including opposite parties, media, and others, are treated anti-national or anti-people. Populists present themselves as the real representatives of the people. In 2013, Trump talked against the “unprecedented media protection” of Obama and the “illegal immigrants”. He also supported a group that argued Obama was not born in the US. He continued this argument against Obama even after Obama showed his birth certificate to the public (Kranish & Fisher 2016).

Trump’s comments were often outside of the accepted social norms and “American value” system. Many scholars described Trump’s communication as “dangerous speech” (Morini 2020, 72). According to Vandermaas-Peeler et al. (2018), the political communication of Trump has encouraged white supremacist groups. Trump’s communication encouraged hostility against immigrants, Latinos, African-Americans, Muslim-Americans, and other marginalised groups (America’s Voice 2019). Since Trump describes Mexicans, for example, as a threat, his messages can lead to violence.

Political Communication of Trump on Social Media

American democracy has witnessed a change in the media technology used for political communication from newspapers to radio to television to online news to social media. The recent social media communication is dramatically different from previous technologies. Even an individual user without reputation or track record can reach as many audiences as Fox News or New York Times have. The campaign on Social Media like Facebook and Twitter is the most effective tool for populist politics. Twitter was the main strategic instrument of Trump for his political campaign (Kreis 2017, 1). Even before declaring his candidacy, Trump was avid of twitter.

His followers were more than all his opponents except Hillary Clinton (Tsur, Ognyanova, & Lazer 2016). During his election campaign, something about Trump was always trending on Twitter. Even the employees of Facebook themselves expressed their anxiety over their role in the election campaign (Watts & Rothschild 2017). Trump used social media for his political campaign not only for bypassing

the mainstream media, but also to determine their agenda (Karpf 2017). Kreis (2017) identifies that Trump used social media to construct and reinforce the identity of a homogeneous people threatened by the dangerous other.

For that, Trump preferred a direct, informal, and provoking communication style from the beginning of the election campaign. The Data shows that Trump tweeted 13,714 times and gained more than 61 million followers between the announcement of his candidacy and the 2018 midterm elections (Morini 2020, 7). It means Trump tweeted 11 times a day. There were only five days out of 1237 without his tweet. The language of Trump on social media favoured the emotional dimension than the rational one (Morini 2020, 22). Such a language was useful in getting social influence.

Nevertheless, social media produced and spread a large number of fake news. Since the friendship networks on Facebook are primarily determined by political ideology, the fake news is shared among friend circle without having many counter voices. Adamic (2015) points out that the average of friends with opposite ideology is only 18% for conservatives while it is 20% for liberals. The figure-3 shows that Social Media is the source for 41.8% of fake news, whereas it accounts for only 10.1% for getting the news from the top 690 US news channels.

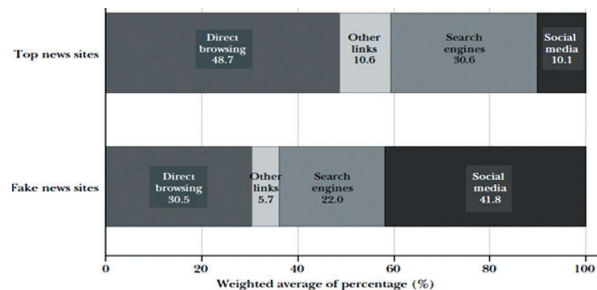


Fig. 3: Share of visits to US news websites by source.

Source: Allcott & Gentzkow (2017, 222).

According to the studies in the context of the US election of 2016, Trump benefitted from the fake news due to many related factors. First, 62% of Americans use social media as a source of news (Gottfried & Shearer 2016). Second, compared to the real news, fake news is the most shared news on Facebook. During the final three months of the election campaign, the twenty most shared fake news on Facebook had outperformed the twenty most shared real news (Silverman 2016).

Third, many of those who see the fake news believe them as real news (Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016). Forth, most of the fake news was in favour of Trump over Clinton (Silverman 2016).

Referring to these reports, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, 212) state that Trump would not be elected without the influence of fake news. The fake news during the election campaign of Trump includes "Pope Francis endorses Trump for president", "WikiLeaks confirms Hillary sold weapons to ISIS", and "ISIS leader calls to support Hillary Clinton" (Ritchie 2016). According to Watts and Rothschild (2017), the "Alt-right" news sites like The Daily Caller and Breitbart manufactured information to make misleading coverage presenting Hillary Clinton as untrustworthiness and criminal.

Since the fake news focus on specific segments of the population, they have disproportionate impacts on the outcome of the election. According to Watts and Rothschild (2017), fake news is more effective than campaign advertisements. Because of false news, 29% of Americans and 43% of Republicans think that Obama is a Muslim, though he is a Christian (Agiesta 2015). Such propaganda helps the right-wing populist politics of Trump to create an "other" and illustrate the political opponents as the security challenge to the country.

Political Communication through Traditional Media

According to Silvestri (2018, 985), the ascendancy of Trump as a television celebrity begun when he was a real estate developer in Manhattan. From 1988 to 2004, Trump appeared in 12 short movie scenes. In about all of them, Trump appeared as a successful businessman and as a billionaire (Kranish & Fisher 2016). When Trump stood for the president's post, he got an unprecedented amount of media coverage due to his celebrity image on television and his self-promotion efforts (Silvestri 2018, 987). The Apprentice of NBC had projected a positive image of Trump from 2004 to 2014. The television image and repetition of selected characters can shape the perspectives of the millions of viewers.

On the Apprentice, Trump appeared saying that "My name is Donald Trump, and I'm the largest real estate developer in New York" (Silvestri 2018, 988). Negating this claim, Bagli (2004) has identified three other real estate developers who have very larger estates than Trump. Trump's properties in a different part of the US and different countries were also presented from time to time. In short, Trump had been appearing on television for fourteen years before he stood as a presidential candidate.

According to Parks (2019, 512), Trump's controversial statements like against Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and the US as "a dumping ground for everybody else's problems" were the

main factors which invited media attention to him. His frequent appearance in the news for his controversial statements and his growing populist image increased his chance of election and changed the traditional media towards him (Parks 2019, 513). According to Tyndal Report (2016), Trump got 327 minutes of nightly broadcast network news coverage in 2015, while Clinton received only 121 minutes. For Trump, any publicity, be it good or bad, was useful. Trump's connection with Rupert Murdoch and his Fox News channel was beneficial for getting popularity. For example, Chozick (2017) has pointed out the nexus between Rupert Murdoch and President Trump. Since Murdoch launched Fox News in 1996, the conservative Republican Party has been keeping a close connection with it (Lenn & Alexander 2017, 3). The appointment of Roger Ailes, who was the advisor to Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush, to run the channel paved the base for the connection between the channel and Republican Party.

When Ailes was ousted due to sexual harassment allegations, Murdoch became the CEO of Fox News. Murdoch used the Fox News for political purpose. The coverage of Fox News was biased in favour of Trump. Trump benefitted from the coverage of Fox News for his election campaign, and the relationship between two became deeper after he won the election. Initially, Trump was not in support of Fox News. On 10th March 2016, Trump tweeted that Fox News as "totally biased and disgusting reporting".

Later, the relationship between Trump and Fox News became good. On 2nd June 2018, Trump tweeted that "Real @FoxNews is doing great, Fake News CNN is dead!". Since the announcement of candidacy, CNN was Trump's main enemy among media. He tweeted 243 times about CNN, and most of them were in a negative way (Morini 2020, 11). Trump used social media to attack the mainstream media, which criticised him.

Lenn and Alexander (2017, 3) identify six unique steps of the "Fox effect" in America. First, right-wing bloggers and other conservative radio hosts and media outlets focused on stories suitable to their political agenda and presented a distorted story. Second, Fox News selectively picked up one side story and presented the right-wing groups as expert informants. Third, Fox News and similar right-wing media attacked the liberal news channels for not covering the distorted story of the Fox channel. Fourth, eventually, the mainstream media channels also cover the distorted stories of Fox News.

Fifth, as its result, Fox News gets the credit for starting and promoting the story, which was ignored by other media until Fox News reports it. Six, after a long time, the story is proved as false, but by that time, it would have made damage.

At the same time, many mainstream media continued their opposition to the populist politics of Trump. The Washington Post, for example, raised a new motto, "Democracy Dies in Darkness" (Farhi 2017). According to McDevitt and Ferrucci (2017, 514), Trump in his later stage of election campaign got the media coverage not only by Fox News but also by "elite media" like Washington Post and New York Times.

However, for Trump, the criticism of the mainstream media was an honour. The falling confidence of the public on traditional media helped Trump to counter the attack of mainstream media (Wells et al. 2016, 670). Figure 4 shows the level of trust in mainstream media. It indicates that the Republicans were always sceptics about the mainstream media than Democrats. The level of trust was at the lowest position in 2016. Additionally, Trump was more accessible to the press than his rival candidates.

Since the news on Trump got wide popularity and sharing, the commercial news channels concentrated on him for the news production (Karpf 2016). For example, during the election season, Cable news organisations made a record-breaking collection of \$2.5 billion (Gold & Weprin 2016). It shows that the decline of the trust in the traditional media and hyper commercialisation of the media sector in the US contributed to the political communication of Trump.

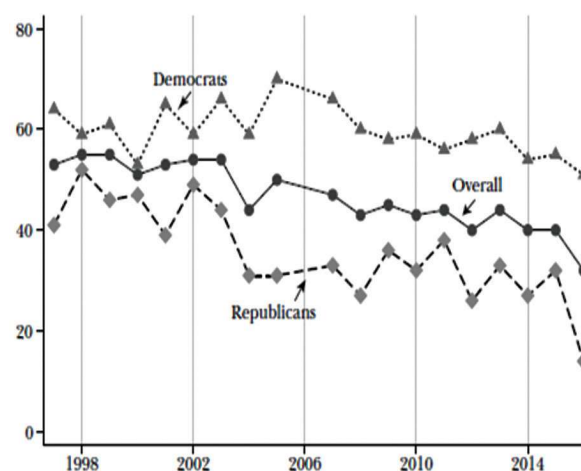


Fig. 4: Trust in Mainstream Media.

Source: Allcott & Gentzkow (2017, 216).

The Nature American Society and Reasons for the Success of the Populist communication

The discussion in the previous sections has pointed into many attributes of the American economic, political and social system which contributed to the populist communication of Trump. First, the increasing number of unemployment creates antagonism against immigrants and foreigners. The last decade witnessed the most prolonged economic crisis in a century. The increasing number of international immigrants was viewed as the reason for economic insecurity.

The immigrants were also seen a threat to national and cultural security of the US. The populism in the US and Europe has produced racism, xenophobia, anti-liberalism, and anti-cosmopolitanism. It helps populist leaders to create a binary between "people" and "others". Vreese et al. (2018, 424) identify economic insecurity and cultural backlash as the significant reasons for the recent rise of populism.

Second, people lose trust in the mainstream media. So, they depend on commercial channels and social media for information. It increases the number of fake news. Third, since people shift from traditional media to social media, traditional media lost a large number of subscribers and income. Since the readers and advertisers are shifting to the digital world, American newspaper journalism has been going through a crisis in the last decade.

The circulation and revenue of the newspapers are also declining. Since 2006, the newspaper sector has lost over a third of the staff (Pickard 2016, 119). Due to the declining number of reporters, many local news and impacts of policies on the ground level are not reported. Fourth, due to the hyper commercialisation of the media sector, they prefer news that can reach a large audience. It helps the populist leaders to get maximum coverage. The CEO of NBC admitted that although Trump might not be good for the US, he was good for the Channel (Pickard 2016, 119).

It shows the impact of hyper-commercialism in the media sector. Fifth, since the majority of people use social media, it is easy for Trump to disintermediate the criticism of the traditional media. According to Pickard (2016), the election of Trump indicates three structural pathologies in the media system of America: first, the extreme commercialism of news media; second, the proliferation of misinformation of Facebook; and third, the crisis of newspaper journalism.

Conclusion

The style and contents of the political communication of Trump are characterised by populism. In terms of style, Trump eschews professionalisation and uses an aggressive and emotional language. He disintermediates the traditional media and reaches directly to people using social media. In its content, the political communication of Trump creates a binary between "people" and "others" and creates an anti-elite feeling. The increasing number of social media users in the US facilitates the populist communication of Trump.

The growing dependence of American society on social for getting information increases the spread of fake news. In addition to social media, traditional media also contributes to populism through a wide coverage either as support or as criticism.

The declining trust of people on traditional media and hyper commercialization of the media sector helped Trump to overcome the criticism of the mainstream media and to get wide coverage in commercial channels. The economic, political and social conditions of the US facilitate populism. Unemployment, antagonism against foreigners, anti-elitism and growing feeling against political correctness are some factors that shaped the political communication of Trump.

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