Twittering away our deliberative capacity
Social media and the threat to democracy

Communication technologies lie at the heart of every society, and their structural biases contribute to many of our social biases. The use of social media, and especially Twitter, by former US president Trump offers a case study in how the rise of social media is driving populism, divisive rhetoric, and harm to our socio-political landscape. Dr Brian Ott at Missouri State University and Dr Greg Dickinson at Colorado State University have identified three fundamental biases of Twitter – simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility – each of which were leveraged by @realDonaldTrump.

THE RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA
We are currently living through one of the most dramatic changes in the dominant communication technology in all of human history. Just as oral culture gave way to print culture, the literate world has given way to a digital one. With that shift, we are witnessing an array of both opportunities and challenges. In terms of opportunities, the structural biases of digital media, namely connectivity, interactivity, affectivity, and virtuality, have driven unprecedented innovation in science, technology, and medicine. But those same biases often pose serious challenges to genuine human connection, reliable information, reasoned deliberation, and democratic ideals and institutions.

For over two decades, Dr Ott and Dr Dickinson have studied speeches, museums, memorials, television, film, and, more recently, social media platforms. In particular, they have focused on Twitter – a communication technology whose fundamental biases they have identified as simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility.

Twitter, they argue, favours simplicity because there is no significant barrier to entry; a person can tweet from virtually anywhere about anything at any time. It is here that the smoke signal analogy breaks down – smoke signals require effort to produce and as such are likely worthy of making. Tweeting requires almost no effort. Many tweets are composed from a place of emotion and knee-jerk reaction. Significance, critical thinking, nuance, and deeper reflection are rare.

Finally, Twitter favours incivility because negatively toned messages travel both further and faster. This partly owing to the informality of the platform; without the language structures imposed on longer written discourse, ‘politeness’ flies out the window. Moreover, it is much easier to be unpleasant when the subject of your ire is not in front of you, and in many cases is an abstract entity that you have not and likely never will meet in real life. To compound this issue, studies have shown that compulsive Twitter users yearn for attention, and controversy is by far the fastest route to that end.

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In short, the researchers argue that Twitter is a training ground for devaluing others; it simply makes it too easy to be malicious. The vast majority of Twitter discourse – 80% by some estimates – is harmless; its worst sin is to be vacuous and tite, providing an outlet for the petty narcissism of dull day-to-day life. This social mediation of our private lives is doubtless having an impact: our lives (and how we document them) are being curated for online audiences and for strangers. However, it is the other 20% of activity that gives rise to wider concerns, with Dr Ott likening Twitter to a ‘social cancer’ spreading across public discourse. In 2021, the active daily user base grew to 192 million, representing a 26% growth over the previous year, with much of the increase attributed to interest in the U.S. presidential election and the Covid-19 pandemic.

TRUMP-ETING OUT LOUD
For Twitter’s most infamous (and now banned) user, @realDonaldTrump, the platform offered the perfect medium to spread his message of hate widely and effectively. Based on the analysis of thousands of Trump tweets, both before and after his time in office, Dr Ott and Dr Dickinson have come to three main conclusions: (1) much of Trump’s Twitter behaviour remained consistent over time; (2) he leveraged effectively the biases of the platform (simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility) to tap into ‘white rage’, a pervasive sense of anger and resentment related to the decanting of white masculinity in our culture; and (3) the Twitter practices he normalised present a serious threat to the norms of a democratic society.

The central rhetoric of Trump tweets showed subtle changes over time. As a private citizen, his tweets generally entailed ‘branding’ (of Trump products), ‘boasting’ (of his own success), and/or ‘bullying’ (through abusive intimidation). As a presidential candidate, he moved on to ‘defining’ (his political vision), ‘disrupting’ (by promoting his anti-establishment credentials), and/or ‘demeaning’ (others through derogatory...
As his main form of communication while in office, perhaps the most notable feature of Trump's Twitter-based communication was how far it fell from normal presidential discourse. Presidents in the past have cultivated their image through diplomacy, big pictures, ideals, eloquence of language, and consistency of message. As a true embodiment of populism, Trump did none of these things. His strong affinity to right-wing political commentary, including Fox ‘News’, gave the green light to subjective opinion over informed journalism and typified an era where each individual can preach their own ‘truth’.

Trump was not the first and nor will he be the last to use social media to further his position of influence, but he was certainly the loudest (at least, to date). The wider ramifications for the future of society are unavoidable. Today, some 63% of Americans get their news primarily from social media, where there are no editorial standards, and ‘fact-checking’ is a Wild West free-for-all. The short-format style appeals to a public that has lost (or in terms of the young, may have never had the chance to develop) the ability to digest and analyse complex information or engage in reasonable and courteous debate. It has been over 40 years since Isaac Asimov wrote his now oft-repeated missive on the democratisation and acceptance of mediocrity, but never has it been so relevant: “Anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that ‘my ignorance is just as good as your knowledge’.”

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