

THE EMERGENCE OF THE **OUTRAGE** PRESIDENCY

By Jennifer Mercieca, Ph.D.

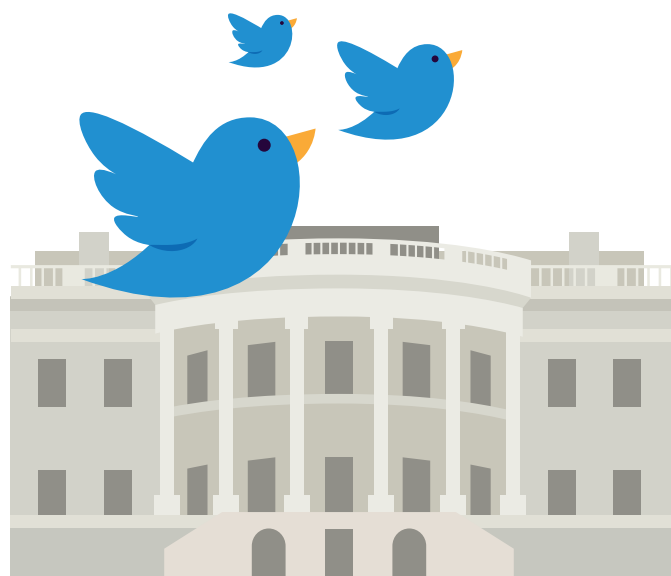


During the 2016 campaign, Trump explained that being “presidential” was boring. He didn’t plan to be boring, he told his rally crowds, though he could be as presidential as anyone, he said—if he *wanted* to be. It turned out that he did not want to be presidential, though he did want to be president. Nearly halfway through the first year of his presidency, Trump declared on Twitter that his presidency was better than *merely* presidential. It was “MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL.”

That tweet was an apology in response to criticism about how Trump conducted himself in office. Earlier that day, Trump’s account had tweeted “The FAKE & FRAUDULENT NEWS MEDIA is working hard to convince Republicans and others I should not use social media—but remember, I won the 2016 election with interviews, speeches and social media. I had to beat #FakeNews, and did. We will continue to WIN!” Trump thought that his use of Twitter was a source of great power and he wasn’t about to give it up without a fight. The “fake” media had been criticizing Trump’s use of Twitter (and calling him “unpresidential”) because of disparaging tweets he had sent earlier that week complaining about how “Morning Joe” hosts Joe Scarborough and Mika Kelly—“low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe”—treated him on their show.

Trump’s apology strategy was to use differentiation—his presidency wasn’t boring and “presidential,” but was exciting and “modern day presidential.” Trump’s self-defense didn’t stop media criticism about his tweets; it added to the criticism. In response, early the next morning, Trump’s account tweeted a doctored video of Trump’s 2007 World Wrestling Entertainment appearance in which Trump appears to tackle and severely beat a person whose head has been replaced with the CNN logo. Even more controversy over whether or not Trump’s use of social media was appropriately “presidential” ensued, of course. “Instead of preparing for his overseas trip, his first meeting with Vladimir Putin, dealing with North Korea and working on his health care bill,” wrote CNN in a statement, “he is instead involved in juvenile behavior far below the dignity of his office. We will keep doing our jobs,” promised CNN; “He should start doing his.”

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TRUMP'S COMMUNICATION STYLE IS A LOGICAL EVOLUTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE PRESS AND THE PRESIDENCY, REPRESENTING THE SHIFT FROM THE "RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY" TO THE "POST-RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY."

Trump did not change his behavior, nor did he quit using social media to try to set the nation's agenda, frame the nation's understanding of controversial events, and defend himself from what he perceived as vicious and disingenuous attacks. "On the 1,001st day of his tenure," wrote Peter Baker in the *New York Times*, "all pretense of normalcy went out the window." On that day, Trump told a rally crowd in Dallas, Texas that he could "be more presidential than any president in history, except for Honest Abe Lincoln." Who could compete with "the hat?" Trump joked. He said that it was actually "*much easier being presidential,*" before impersonating an officious-sounding president as he explained, "all you have to do is act like a stiff!" Trump's rally crowd laughed at his version of a "presidential" president. "The media would love it," said Trump, because "everybody would be outta here so fast. You wouldn't have come in the first place."

As Trump told his rally crowd in Dallas, his "modern day presidential" communication style kept his crowds entertained and attentive. What he didn't say—but is obvious from the way that Trump defends himself on Twitter—is that he keeps us entertained and attentive with communication strategies that are designed to stoke outrage in his base, his opposition, and the mainstream media gatekeepers. Donald Trump is the outrage president. His communication style is calibrated perfectly for the metrics that dominate our public sphere: attention and engagement. Trump's communication style is a logical evolution of the relationship between the press and the presidency, representing the shift from the "rhetorical presidency" to the "post-rhetorical presidency."

FROM THE RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY TO THE POST-RHETORICAL PRESIDENCY

Scholars of presidential leadership have traditionally worked within the paradigm of the "rhetorical presidency," which is an institutional argument about the way that 20th century presidents went over the heads of Congress

to speak directly to the people in the hope that the people would pressure Congress to enact the president's agenda. According to the rhetorical presidency model, the press and the presidency once cooperated to distribute news to the public, which upset the balance of powers between the branches of government, making the Executive Branch more powerful than Congress.

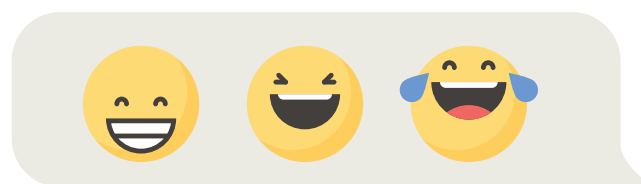
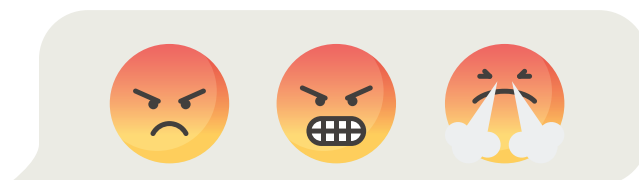
In *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Jeffery Tulis explained that "the modern mass media...facilitated the development of the rhetorical presidency by giving the president the means to communicate directly and instantaneously to a large national audience, and by reinforcing the shift from written message to verbal dramatic performance." In return for its cooperation, the press gained access to the president and content for its news reports. But the relationship between the press and the president was threatened in the post-Watergate era. By the turn of the century, presidents could no longer count on the press to carry their message to the people. Shanto Iyengar writes in *Media Politics* that the average sound bite on network news broadcasts in 1968 was more than 60 seconds long; by 2004 the average sound bite was just 7.7 seconds. Presidents and candidates found that it was hard to communicate with the public effectively; the media filtered out their message. New and social media gave candidates and presidents new opportunities for leverage over the press, changing the relationship between the press and the presidency.

In 2007, Stephen Hartnett and I described in *Presidential Studies Quarterly* the "post-rhetorical presidency" of George W. Bush. We thought that Bush's presidential communication was characterized less by the rhetorical presidency's model of "eloquence, logic, pathos, or narrative storytelling," and more by the public relations techniques of "ubiquitous public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection." It made sense that with soundbites as short as they were and audiences fractured into smaller and smaller bits, presidents would communicate more often in the hope of getting their

messages through the news filter. We didn't know, however, whether Bush was an anomaly, or if the way that he communicated represented the new normal.

It became clear with Barack Obama's presidency that the older notion of the "rhetorical presidency" just didn't make sense anymore and that we were now firmly in the era of the post-rhetorical presidency. The fracturing of media and the rise of social media had fundamentally changed the relationship between the press and the presidency. If "the era of the rhetorical presidency was characterized by a relationship between the presidency and the press that was reciprocal, mutually beneficial, and stable," then "the era of the post-rhetorical presidency is characterized by a relationship between the presidency and the press that is independent, competitive, and unstable," I explained in "Ignoring the President," a chapter in the 2017 book, *From Columns to Characters: The Presidency and the Press Enter the Digital Age*. As George W. Bush had done, Obama also used "post-rhetorical" communication strategies to "go over the heads of Congress and around the news filter to speak directly to supporters."

Obama's post-rhetorical presidency relied upon three communication strategies: 1) strict message control; 2) going around the news filter by speaking directly to supporters; and, 3) using social media to create intimacy between the president and his followers. Obama's 2008 campaign built a massive phone and email database and used it to communicate directly with his supporters, avoiding the media filter whenever possible. The *Electing the President* election post-mortems of 2008 and 2012 explain why Obama's campaign adopted these strategies. "One of the things that we did," explained Chief Communications Officer Anita Dunn, "was communicate, by and large, most of our news [directly] to our supporters." By the 2012 campaign, Obama's team had expanded his online network so that he was connected to "90 percent of Facebook users in the United States," according to Deputy Campaign Manager Stephanie Cutter. Cutter explained that Obama's



campaign used Facebook to run a vertical (top-down) and horizontal (friend-to-friend) campaign because "people trust their information when it's coming from a Facebook friend much more than if it's me on TV saying something." In communicating directly with supporters, Obama's campaign was able to both control the candidate's message and develop intimacy between him and his supporters. According to Democratic National Committee Director of Communications Karen Finney, "people really want to feel like they're part of a community. Engaging people, and making them feel like they're getting a little bit of an inside look into the campaign or they're really a part of something bigger will make you far more successful." Avoiding the news filter and taking his message directly to supporters won elections for Obama. Other campaigns adopted his strategies.

In his 2016 campaign and throughout his presidency, Donald Trump has used the same three general communication strategies that Obama used: message control, going around the media filter, and using social media to cultivate intimacy between Trump and his supporters. Trump acts as his own communications director, and his Twitter account acts as his unofficial press secretary, which allows him to control and disseminate his messages and to use para-social interaction to create intimacy between himself and his supporters. Yet, while Obama and Trump are both post-rhetorical presidents—

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both have used their communication strategies to go over the heads of Congress and around the news filter—they communicate very differently. Obama was post-rhetorical and “presidential,” while Trump is post-rhetorical and “modern day presidential.”

TRUMP, THE OUTRAGE PRESIDENT

Trump's “modern day presidential” communication strategy relies upon outrage for its effectiveness, which makes it very different from any previous president, including the two previous “post-rhetorical” presidents, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. As he explained to his Dallas rally crowd, Trump uses outrage to drive attention and engagement to his messages. By the standards of eloquence, presidential rhetoric, or democratic deliberation, Trump's outrage presidency is abhorrent. Outrage is effective at one thing: it gains attention, which allows Trump to dominate our public sphere.

Michael Goldhaber explained in *Wired* in 1997 that the “information age” had made information so accessible and ubiquitous that it had little value. What was valuable within the information age was what was scarce, he argued—our ability to give attention to information. “We are drowning in information, yet constantly increasing our generation of it,” wrote Goldhaber; therefore, attention was the “natural economy of cyberspace.” As a scarce and finite resource, “the attention economy” was “a zero-sum game. What one person gets, someone else is denied.” Getting attention was rewarding because along with it came the powers of agenda setting, priming, and framing. “If you get attention,” he wrote, “that means you have some control over both the thoughts and actions of those paying it to you.” Goldhaber predicted that the new logics of the information age would eventually divide the world into “audiences, entourages, and what could be called attention communities”—communities “centered on some topic [that] includes a number of stars, along with their fans.” He also predicted that people and

institutions would go to great lengths to attract attention within the attention economy, because “as many a disobedient child knows, negative attention can be better than none at all. On the Web, if you're adept,” explained Goldhaber, “you can use notoriety to bring more notice to yourself.” In the zero-sum game of the attention economy, the “modern day presidential” strategies that Trump uses—attacking, threatening, name calling—make good sense.

There is no doubt that the mandates of the new attention economy shaped political communication and created a new kind of political spectacle, one that prizes entertainment values to attract and keep our attention and polarizing emotions like outrage to drive engagement. In *Outrage Industry*, Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj wrote that “outrage discourse involves efforts to provoke emotional responses (anger, fear, moral indignation) from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism, misleading or patently inaccurate information, *ad hominem* attacks, and belittling ridicule of opponents.” They explained that the growth of outrage media is a “practical and savvy response to political, technological, and economic shifts that have transformed the media landscape since the 1980s.” Prior to the dominance of the attention economy, media programmers sought to offend the fewest number of people in order to keep an audience, but now programmers “produce content aimed at smaller, more homogeneous audiences.” This niche programming allows “cable television programs, radio shows, and blogs [to] deliver niche audiences to advertisers specifically through the use of *objectionable* programming, which is dramatic, entertaining, and shocking enough to “break through the clutter in a crowded field of cable choices.” They report that outrage entertainment is incredibly popular, with “an audience of up to 47 million people daily.” Not only is there a huge audience for outrage, but that audience is politically engaged, which is desirable for advertisers and political candidates. Outrageous content drives news coverage, which Trump has used to his benefit.

As a presidential candidate, Trump dominated our public sphere by relying upon outrage to gain and keep the nation's attention, earning approximately \$5 billion of free media attention over the course of his 2016 campaign. Trump's outrageousness was good for the media's bottom line. "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS," CBS CEO Leslie Moonves revealed in 2016. "I've never seen anything like this, and this going to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It's a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going."

The outrage president uses traditional and nontraditional media to provoke daily (and sometimes hourly) outrages, which keeps both his base and his opposition attentive and engaged. Within the attention economy, being outrageous is the most efficient way to set the nation's news agenda, frame issues, and persuade (some) citizens. Outrage has the added benefit of unifying audiences against whatever is named as the target of outrage, which is good for solidifying Trump's political base. Trump uses outrage to keep the nation on edge, which is terrible for democratic stability, but good for Trump's political career. That outrage, rewarded with our attention, has allowed him to control our public sphere.

The relationship between the press and the presidency asymmetrically favors Trump, which is why Trump can call

media he doesn't like "fake news" while still enjoying free media airtime. He has used the mainstream media's platform to undermine the mainstream media's platform. Trust in media has plummeted: Just 15 percent of Republicans reported a "great deal or fair amount" of trust in the 2019 Gallup poll. That suits Trump just fine. Trump has continued in the tradition of rightwing media figures such as Rush Limbaugh, *Drudge*, and *Fox News* commentators—those who have used outrage on talk radio, cable news, and the internet to wrest the agenda-setting power away from mainstream media. As Trump has explained, his "modern day presidential" communication strategies won him the presidency and he would be unwise to give them up.

On July 2, 2017, in response to criticisms throughout the mainstream media about Trump's use of social media, Trump's Twitter account tweeted a video of Trump at a speech event in which he stood behind the Presidential Seal while promising his audience that he would never stop communicating the way that he does. "The fake media is trying to silence us," Trump explained, "But we will not let them. Because the people know the truth. The fake media tried to stop us from going to the White House, but I'm president and they're not." His audience cheered enthusiastically for their "modern day presidential" president. ■



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