

## 18 Trump on Twitter: How a Medium Designed for Democracy Became an Authoritarian's Mouthpiece

Fred Turner

On its face, Twitter appears to be a quintessentially democratic medium. It promotes individualized expression; helps build social networks; and, until recently, seemed to epitomize the decentralized, highly individualized public sphere long called for by liberal theorists and digital utopians alike. During Donald Trump's campaign for president, however, it became an engine of authoritarianism. Day after day, Trump spit out bits of fiction and hyperbole. They piled up like tiny bricks, slowly but surely walling off the landscape of reality. In its place, Trump hung billboards depicting his own imagined magnificence. The mass media pointed to Trump's tweets, ridiculed their lies, lampooned their tone—and spread them far and wide. Slowly but surely, Trump succeeded in doing what every fledgling totalitarian must. He made the world look chaotic and dangerous. And through Twitter, he put himself at the center of the storm.

But how did this happen? Only twenty years ago, many scholars and journalists agreed: the Internet and the World Wide Web were sure to bring about more democracy. Virtual communities would be hubs of collaborative intimacy. Blogs would give the average person a voice. The strangleholds of corporate media centralization and state censorship would finally be broken and a new, benevolent era of free expression would emerge. Now those hopes have now been well and truly dashed—not only by Donald Trump's use of Twitter, but by the failures of the Egyptian spring, the revelations of Edward Snowden, and the Russians' hacking of America's elections. All of these events have challenged our faith that the technologies of free expression necessarily bring democracy in their wake.

During his campaign, however, Trump went a critical step further. He successfully fused two elements that Americans have long regarded as implacably opposed: the authoritarian's will to centralize power and the

democrat's faith in decentralized communication. When Trump tweeted, he demonstrated that the faith of a generation of twentieth-century liberal theorists—as well as their digital descendants—was misplaced: decentralization does not necessarily increase democracy in the public sphere or in the state. On the contrary, the technologies of decentralized communication can be coupled very tightly to the charismatic, personality-centered modes of authoritarianism long associated with mass media and mass society. More frightening still, Trump's tweets have demonstrated that the technologies of individualized expression may not always stand as bulwarks against totalitarian power. They can, in fact, be made *cornerstones* of such power. In short, Trump has turned our understanding of the relationship between democracy and communication on its head. He has perhaps even ushered in a new era, an era of authoritarian individualism.

### World War II and the Roots of Social Media

If so, Trump has overturned the intellectual consensus that gave rise to our faith in social media in the first place. To see how, we need to return to the start of World War II. In the late 1930s, American intellectuals, politicians, and journalists marveled at the rise of fascism in Europe, and particularly in Germany. Many had long thought of Germany as the birthplace of Beethoven and Goethe and so as the epicenter of European high culture. How, they wondered, had this most sophisticated of nations fallen under the sway of a short, mustachioed former clerk, Adolf Hitler? Many worried too at the rise of fascism in America. Although we have largely forgotten the fact today, the racism and anti-Semitism that characterized Nazi doctrine were widespread in the United States at the same time. In 1938, for instance, the Catholic demagogue Father Coughlin broadcast his venomous anti-Semitism to a weekly radio audience of 3,500,000. In 1939, the *Amerikadeutscher Volksbund* drew 22,000 American fascists to a rally at Madison Square Garden in New York. An enormous banner reading "Stop Jewish Domination of Christian America" looked down on the stage. Later that year, after Hitler had marched into Poland, hundreds of American fascists marched down East 86th Street in New York behind American flags and Nazi swastikas as large crowds looked on without protest.

To observers at the time, the question was, why?

Today, most historians would probably look for an answer in the economic chaos of the era. But at the time, many Americans pointed to the power of the mass media. They made two distinct though often overlapping cases. The first was primarily structural and made by American journalists and German refugee intellectuals such as Shepard Stone and Theodor Adorno. The second was primarily psychological and made by anthropologists and psychologists such as Margaret Mead and Gordon Allport. Both groups noted that the leaders of Germany and America had taken hold of large, centralized media systems. The structuralists believed that the one-to-many design of mass media technologies in and of themselves forced audiences to tune their senses toward a single, powerful source. When they did, these analysts argued, they became vulnerable to whatever charisma the source might possess. Moreover, simply by turning together in a single direction, audiences rehearsed the one-to-many structure of fascism. In the process, the structuralists suggested that they ceased to reason and became members of an unthinking mass.

Figures such as Mead and Allport feared this process too. In 1940, they helped form the Committee for National Morale, a group of sixty scholars who aimed to advise President Roosevelt on the best ways to establish democratic unity as war loomed. Members of the Committee generally subscribed to the theories of Franz Boas and the culture and personality school of anthropology. That is, they believed that every society had a modal personality type. It was the role of the family to cultivate this type in their children and so help them to adjust to their culture. When children left the family, Committee members believed that media tended to sustain the socialization process begun at home. Most of them agreed with the structuralists that mass media tended to produce an authoritarian personality style. They also associated that style with German culture and with fascism more generally. How, they asked, could Americans produce a mode of media that would cultivate a democratic form of personality? And what would such a personality type look like anyway?

Their answers to these questions laid the cultural groundwork for social media. A democratic person, they argued, would be a psychologically whole individual, able to freely choose what to believe, with whom to associate, and where to turn their attention. A democratic personality would embrace others and celebrate their differences, while retaining their own sense of separateness. Members of the Committee believed that insofar

as mass media promoted undifferentiated experience, it also promoted an undifferentiated, mass society. They argued that if they were to defeat the Axis, media makers would have to develop a multi-source medium for propaganda. Only among an *array* of images and sounds could Americans cultivate the diversity of views that might sustain both unity and individuality.

In 1942, Bauhaus refugee Herbert Bayer and American photographer Edward Steichen brought the Committee's ideas to life in *Road to Victory*, a huge exhibition of pro-American images at New York's Museum of Modern Art. There they hung photographs above, below, and around museum-goers with the aim of democratizing their perceptions. As they moved among the pictures, viewers were meant to choose the ones they found most individually meaningful, but to do it together. If the structure of mass media modeled the one-to-many structure of fascist government, the many-to-many nature of the encounters promoted by *Road to Victory* modeled its egalitarian alternative.

*Road to Victory* was the first in a long line of such exhibitions that stretched across the Cold War. By the 1960s, these exhibitions had become models for the multimedia performances of the San Francisco counterculture. On the shores of California, audiences again surrounded themselves with media in order to liberate their minds. But now the critique of fascism and mass media had become something subtly different: a critique of bureaucracy and mass society. Before long, locals like Steve Jobs seized on this new critique, and on the idea that decentralized media technologies could democratize their users' perceptions, to promote computers as tools of democratic revolution. Today the founders of Bay-area social media firms from Facebook to Twitter make the same claims: social media will allow us to present our authentic selves to one another, they say, to "connect," and so by implication form an egalitarian, even potentially anti-authoritarian, solidarity.

### Authoritarian Individualism

Trump's capture of the presidency has visibly betrayed the anti-authoritarian promise of digital media. It has also revealed a critical flaw in the thinking that underlies it. Since World War II, many Americans have imagined that totalitarian societies are by definition regimented, hyper-bureaucratized,

hierarchical, and emotionally numb. The emblems of such societies are the gulag and the concentration camp. Particularly after the 1960s, we have tended to imagine free societies as just the opposite: unregimented, antibureaucratic, egalitarian, and suffused with feeling. The emblems of a free society today, at least on the left, are the open-air rock concert and the sit-in. We are free, we believe, when we speak our individual truths together.

Yet, anyone who sat in the mud at Woodstock knows how far from utopia a rock concert can be. And anyone who has ever had successful surgery at a hospital will respect the value of hierarchy, bureaucracy, and disinterested reason. The critique of mass society and mass media that so animated Americans during and after World War II has left us blind to the ways in which individualism itself can be summoned to serve authoritarian ends. The Committee for National Morale, for instance, saw authentic individuality and the interpersonal sphere of action as key sources of resistance to fascism. The commune builders of the 1960s did too. Today both the performance of individual authenticity and the interpersonal sphere have become weapons in Donald Trump's assault on the institutions of American democracy.

Consider the question of Donald Trump's character. During the election, Hillary Clinton criticized his tempestuous, bullying style, assuming that it would alienate voters. It didn't. To many voters, Trump's carefully cultivated ability to wear his feelings on his sleeve made him appear more authentically himself. Trump mastered the idiom of mediated authenticity on reality TV's *The Apprentice*. There he depicted himself not only as a masterful manager, but as a man flung here and there by his anger, his drive, his affections. Today on Twitter he repeats the performance. Trump's Twitter stream alternates between self-congratulatory announcements of his achievements and bombastic attacks on those he sees as enemies. Senator Charles Schumer is "Cryin' Chuck Schumer." Former FBI Director James Comey is a "phony." And of course, the mainstream media are "Fake News."

Many see these outbursts as signs of a president who can't control his emotions and thus, of Trump's unsteadiness. But to many of his supporters, the outbursts are signs of his just being himself. On Twitter, Trump's tempestuousness is a sign of his authenticity as a person. Displaying that authenticity is one of the ways he claims the right to our attention and,

with it, our political support. The historical irony is almost overwhelming: Trump has taken the logic of individual authenticity that animated the New Left in 1968 and American liberalism for thirty years before that and put it to work as a new mode of authoritarian charisma. Thirty years ago, anti-Vietnam War protestors presented themselves to those in Washington as authentic individuals bent on challenging a state gone off the rails. Today, their place has been taken by Donald Trump.

To be clear, I'm not trying to equate Trump's name-calling with mass marches on the Capitol. What I'm trying to do is make visible the consequences of an intellectual logic left over from the fight against fascism. The performance of authentic individuality does not necessarily free us from authoritarianism. Nor does authoritarianism always stalk us in the uniforms of German troops. On the contrary, the performance of individuality can help make the case that a particular individual represents a set of political interests *in their bodies*. In the 1960s, the notion that the personal is political drove any number of social movements. But the notion of an embodied, personalized politics is also central to authoritarianism. In settings ranging from Franco's Spain to Putin's Russia, authoritarian leaders have claimed to uniquely manifest the will of the people in their facial expressions, the strength of the people in their own muscles, the anger of the people in their voices. In fact, they have often offered this ability to personalize the political as a justification for seizing power.

Trump has done the same thing on Twitter. In the twentieth century, mass media theorists often believed that charismatic authoritarian leaders had to first bring the bodies or minds of their audiences together in one place before they could work their hypnotic magic. That place might be a Nuremberg-style rally, or a one-to-many, geographically dispersed radio listening experience. Today however, when Trump tweets, he presents himself as if he were part of a conversation among friends. Part of that presentation is a function of the medium's structure. Individual tweets arrive on a feed that almost certainly contains a wide array of sources. Depending on how users configure their Twitter streams, those sources may very well include friends, family, and colleagues. Much as mid-century authoritarians could use radio to broadcast their voices into the intimacy of the family living room, so now Trump can use Twitter to insert himself into the company of a user's chosen conversation partners. Trump also works hard to suggest to that his intimate circle—and through Twitter, yours—includes the rich and

powerful. "Great meeting with a wonderful woman today, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice!" he tweets.

Here Trump's performance of individual authenticity, his raw emotionalism, make perfect sense. Trump tweets like a teenaged girl—not just in frequency, but in genre and diction. On July 25, 2016, for instance, he tweeted "I was @FoxNews and met Juan Williams in passing. He asked if he could have pictures taken with me. I said fine. He then trashes on air!" The blend of name dropping ("Juan Williams") and the "He-wanted-to-be-with-me-but-then-he-dissed-me" framing is straight from the High School Mean Girl Power Play Handbook. In the mass media era, few presidential candidates would have spoken in such a casual, petulant idiom, at least not in public. To do so would have been to diminish their power. Like a mid-century authoritarian, Trump builds his claims to power on constructing the sense that he feels the pain of his audience. Trump has married the rostrum-pounding emotionalism of the twentieth century dictator to the interpersonal intimacy of our new media era. On Twitter, his petulance is par for the course. By showing it, he demonstrates that he is a human being like his readers and like the friends whose tweets surround his in their feeds. He is a person like them.

Except of course, he isn't. That's the tyrant's trick: to pretend to act on behalf of the people while leading them down a dark alley and robbing them blind. The trick is as old as time. And it was a trick that twentieth-century scholars, journalists, and media makers hoped to prevent by breaking up one-to-many media and replacing them with multi-source media surrounds. As he speaks on Twitter, a descendant of those surrounds, Trump undermines the assumptions at the heart of their work. Authoritarian charisma is not medium-dependent. Nor are authentic individuality, the intimate social sphere, or flexible, collaborative networks necessarily enemies of totalitarianism. Today, it is only key bureaucracies—the courts, the press, and even the FBI—who stand in the way of Trump's becoming a charismatic autocrat in the mold of Vladimir Putin. These bulwarks remind us that in an era of authoritarian individualism, what democracy needs first and foremost is not more personalized modes of mediated expression. It is a renewed engagement with the rule of law and with the institutions that embody it.

# **Trump and the Media**

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