

On informational autocrats: analyzing President Trump's Twitter strategies

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This response paper will discuss how ideology and social media are a key factor for today's informational autocrats. In opposition to Treisman, I argue that ideology is having an increased role in providing autocrat's popular support. Particularly, President Trump exemplifies how nationalism and patriotism are the core of an informational strategy driven by ideology. Strategy whose main effect makes him appear less susceptible to criticism and steers public opinion toward convenient directions. Informational autocrats like Trump are assertive in choosing the type of messages that maximize their supporter's base. Similar to Han [9], I argue that Trump, as an informational autocrat, used specific tactics like creating collective ridicule of his enemies (crosstalk) or using shared experiences or emotions to mobilize constituents (positive mobilization). For the mentioned reasons, this paper focuses on explaining the connection between Trump's social media strategies targeting, first, a collective emotion and, second, deciding what type of tactic was more powerful in social media in terms of viral messages.

Ideology for an informational autocrat like Trump

President Trump's power is sustained by ideology that combines nationalism, patriotism, and religious beliefs. Trump was able to sell himself as a patriotic warrior whose mission is to bring back the great America by fighting against wicked elites. In this sense, Q-Anon represents an important piece of evidence of how an informational autocrat can create a base of loyal constituency, but also a whole political agenda. Particularly, Trump's Q-Anon endorsement and recent Twitter analytics evidence suggest that he had intentionally sought to elevate his interests [1]. Furthermore, superstitious ideology has created a beneficial platform to capture voters, but also to make him immune against scrutiny.

The key element of ideology in the case of an informational autocrat like Trump is the mechanism of discrediting by which institutions, evidence, and opposition are eliminated and considered enemies of the “truth”. This sense of collective discrediting could be understood from a political analysis perspective particularly using discursive tools for discerning the relationship between emotions and the autocrat’s perceived benefit. Understanding the role of emotions as a channel of communication and loyalty between the informational leader and his constituents is a key element to explaining the mechanisms of informational manipulation.

Emotions and inequality as a collective experience in the US

Victoria de Grazia [1] in her book “the Irresistible Empire” recalled President Wilson’s speech in the world’s salesmanship congress of 1916: “The great barrier in this world is not the barrier of principles, but the barrier of taste,” he went on to say. Given that “certain classes of society” find “certain other classes of society distasteful to them” because of their poor dress, uncleanliness, and other unpleasant habits, “they do not like to consort with them...and therefore, they stand at a distance from them, and it is impossible for them to serve them”. For President Wilson, the role of the American seller was essential to reducing the harmful class struggle: the seller allows to the poor those goods that allow them to gain acceptance and not be discriminated against. A hundred years later, the economist Rajan Raghuram [2] in his book, *Fault Lines* shows that the American promise of making the poor more presentable in front of the rich is broken given an immense income disparity and a weak safety net. According to Raghuram, the structural conditions behind the subprime crisis, were intrinsically related to a shared reality of millions of Americans facing the difficulties of being integrated to a global labor market that is continuously upskilling the available jobs, but, at the same time, setting onerous prices to education, making skills a pervasive matter, and confronting the American dream with stagnated wages and deep indebtedness.

This shared experience of inequality by an important segment of the American population was key for an informational autocrat like President Trump because it provided him with a particular set of negative emotions to appeal to his constituency. These negative emotions matter not only because of their power in setting an emotional connection between Trump as a candidate and his followers, but also because they provide an information proxy to identify messages, discourses and narratives to speak and cultivate the loyalty of millions of Americans.

Followers first, voters afterwards

The internet constitutes the most important territory for warfare because it defines the relationship between constituents, global opinion, and government [2]. Furthermore, the case of 50c digital movement in China shows how social media matters for autocratic leaders because of its ambivalence as a threat in enabling challenger coordination, but also in its stability as a tool for deviating the attention of the public opinion or neutralizing criticism.

Democracies display even more of the importance of internet and social media in defining a relationship between candidates, elected official, and constituents. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed how powerful media messages are in inducing a specific emotion that benefits a candidate or punishes an adversary. Treisman's framework has an important omitted variable: social media is increasingly becoming a relevant factor for democratic leaders to capture voters, but also for autocrats to protect their regime's stability. Being a successful informational autocrat in 2021 requires being relevant in social media by delivering messages to the maximum number of people, but also constantly increasing the number of people engaged. In this sense, both autocrats and democrats are subjected to be influencers first for guaranteeing political survival.

In this sense, any politician aims to be an informational autocrat by competing with others to attract public attention on social platforms. As a result, an autocrat works first in being well known by enough followers. However, what is a critical mass of followers? An important

benchmark for an autocratic leader is the audience of a democratic leader. In this case, considering that a voter can follow both President Biden and Trump, the competition in terms of recognition should not be only measured by who has more followers, but also by who has a more representative base of followers from different socioeconomic groups and ideologies. This follower's heterogeneity increases the reach of the informational autocrat's messages, but also the probability of convincing a wider audience.

As a result of this competition for followers and influence between autocratic and democratic leaders in social media, an informational autocratic leader must not only have a broad base of followers, but also specific tactics to appeal to emotions over arguments. An example such tactics are explained by King Pan [2] when he studied how the Chinese government influences the public opinion: taunting foreign countries, argumentative praise or criticism, non-argumentative praise or suggestions, factual reporting, and cheerleading.

Image 1: Content of Leaked and Inferred 50c Posts, by substantive category (with details in Appendix A) and analysis

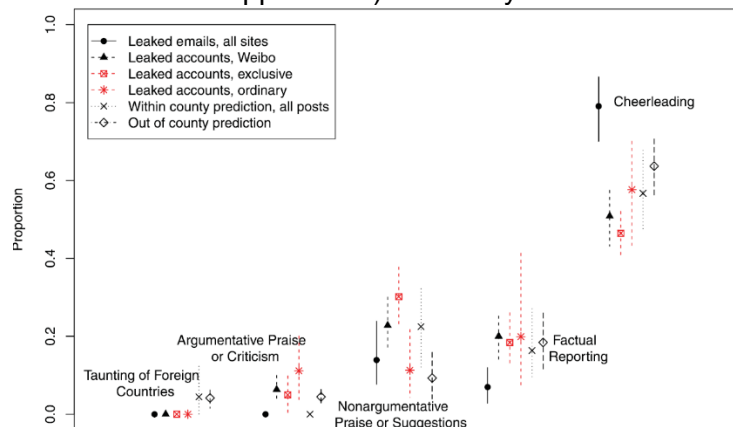


Image 1 suggests that the expressions of patriotism and encouragement (cheerleading) occupy a prominent proportion of Chinese authorities' efforts to manipulate information in social media and other formats. Instilling patriotism requires not only using social media, but also being able to understand what are the reasons that make an average constituent feel optimistic, proud or loyal towards the regime or a particular leader. As it was explained before, understanding those

collective drivers of emotion is an essential part of a successful information autocrat: the work of making the autocrat's messages, post or Tweets viral and "louder" than the possible sources of criticism.

Emotions, ideology, and information manipulation

Han [1] describes two parameters that define the type of rhetorical tools used by the Chinese cyber nationalists. The voluntary army of the 50c primarily uses both factual/rational rhetorical tools over normative/emotions of engaging with informational opponents. For the particular interest of this paper, the emotions that matter the most are those who are part of a collective experience or that represent a significant part of potential voters. An important difference between the US and China's informational autocracies' strategies is that in the US, the emotions and nationalism are the main tools to mobilize online masses. Q-Anon shows Trump followers as having an emotional relationship with what Trump represents and what irrational theories characterize him as defender of America.

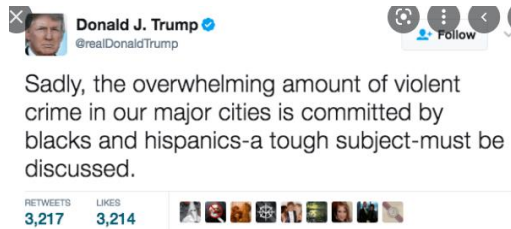
In the case of Twitter, these emotions are represented by using discursive tools. Simon Koshut [4] defines a discourse as "framings of meaning and lenses of interpretation". This is relevant because by identifying the right set of collective emotions, and by choosing a coherent discourse to represent them, the informational autocrat converts simple followers into effective voters. Furthermore, discursive analysis shows the relationship of power and discourse, or, what Koshut denominates as "discursive power":

"The notion of discursive power highlights the social and contextual dimension of power, exercised through discourse, in the construction of emotional intersubjectivity. As Bleiker and Hutchison (2014, 501) note, 'emotions become intersubjective when they relate to something social that people care about, whether it is power, status, or justice'" [4].

This intersubjectivity is what initially in this paper was named as *collective emotion*.

Furthermore, by using the categories created Koshut [4], the analysis of discursive power has concrete mechanisms by which an informational autocrat might convert a simple social media follower into a voter. These mechanisms are:

- **emotional othering**: refers to all the mechanisms used to polarize the selectorate, and



in particular, to define why the autocrat distinguishes himself in defending a particular side of the polarized population. A clear example of emotional othering can be seen in Trump's "America first" slogan: the people outside of the American category are outside of the

representation of the autocrat and this reason establishes a channel of empathy between autocrat and voter.

- **stigmatization and naming**: similar to Han's [9] tactic of labeling employed by the voluntary of 50c, Trump as an informational autocrat establishes a particular relationship with the white part of his electorate by categorizing his opponents as opponents of the people. A possible rationale for implementing this mechanism of voter attraction can be found in Alexandre's book, *The New Jim Crow*: historically, American politicians have gained popularity by enticing the need for unity against the danger represented by Latinos and Blacks.

The stigmatization and naming mechanism imply not only the creation of a category within the selectorate with affinity to the informational autocrat, but also imply the dehumanization of the competitors and their followers. The stigmatization and naming strategy require that the informational autocrat successfully reinforces "the strong belief in an actor's inability to correct itself without outside pressure" [4]. As a result, violence and repression can be legitimized by the angry masses and the informational autocrat as is the case with violent repression of minorities operationalized from the police.

- **emotional narratives:** an emotional narrative allows the connection of a series of informational mechanisms to manipulate the selectorate or attack a challenger. By using storytelling, an informational autocrat can connect, for example, an othering mechanism with a stigmatization mechanism.
- **non-verbal/nonlinguistic forms of emotion:** these categories include imagery, sounds, gestures, and ideologies that might produce “persisting and shifting meanings and ideologies that underpin power structures”. Particularly, the rising power of memes and images show the rising role of power discourses based on non-verbal forms of emotion.

These four mechanisms to attract voters can be better understood in the context of Twitter considering that social platforms have a predefined set of incentives for politicians. These incentives were even more relevant for an informational authoritarian like Trump.

Twitter and Trump ex-ante being POTUS

Ross and Caldwell [5] provide an important characterization of Twitter as a platform that, first, allows an engagement of one message producer and many audiences. In comparison to Facebook, Twitter was a pioneering social media by allowing a message to arrive to an audience that is not limited by the user’s immediate network of contacts. Furthermore, the coordination of the Arab uprisings among other political events made Twitter the social platform frequently used in the politics and diplomacy arena. Secondly, Twitter pays-off more to those users whose writing style uses a negative emotion [6]. This strategy of “going negative” in social media is described by Chester [7] as a common tactic in China media outlets known as *negative legitimation*. This strategy implies to use a rhetoric that exacerbates the failures of antagonistic regimes or challengers.

For an informational autocrat like Trump, Twitter offered the possibility of using particularly the *emotional othering, stigmatization* mechanism or what Chester recognizes as *negative legitimation* to gain voter's favor and control informational opponents. In this sense, Table 1 offers an insight into the type of Trump's viral Tweets during his presidential campaign, a relevant moment where his personal account grew in the number of followers:

- His most important tweet: "make America great again" is part of a narrative that justifies his two main topics of personal enemies and friends and nationalism. This narrative justifies why immigration, international cooperation ("globalists") is an enemy of those who belong to the autocrat's constituency.
- Six out of ten Tweets discriminated between two categories of "friends and enemies". This illustrates how the othering mechanism was relevant to attract attention in that social media, but also to possibly attract voters. Furthermore, five out ten Tweets appeal to nationalism showing in anticipation the importance of the stigmatization mechanism or the labeling of "those who are not Americans".

Table 1

Coding of Donald Trump's postings that achieved the highest number of retweets

	<i>Tweet</i>	<i>Retweets</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Leadership</i>	<i>Nationalism</i>	<i>Friend/ enemy</i>	<i>Patriarchy, militarism</i>
1	"TODAY WE MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!"	347,979	8 November 2016	No	Yes	No	No
2	'Such a beautiful and important evening! The forgotten man and woman will never be forgotten again. We will all come together as never before'	223,083	9 November 2016	No	Yes	No	No
3	'Happy New Year to all, including to my many enemies and those who have fought me and lost so badly they just don't know what to do. Love!'	143,546	31 December 2016	No	No	Yes	No
4	"The media is spending more time doing a forensic analysis of Melania's speech than the FBI spent on Hillary's emails"	119,239	20 July 2016	No	No	Yes	No
5	'Fidel Castro is dead!'	100,739	26 November 2016	No	No	Yes	No
6	'Nobody should be allowed to burn the American flag – if they do, there must be consequences – perhaps loss of citizenship or year in jail!'	73,419	29 November 2016	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	'It all begins today! I will see you at 11:00 A.M. for the swearing-in. THE MOVEMENT CONTINUES – THE WORK BEGINS!'	72,556	20 January 2017	Yes	No	No	No
8	'Just had a very open and successful presidential election. Now professional protesters, incited by the media, are protesting. Very unfair!'	70,265	11 November 2016	Yes	No	Yes	No
9	'January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again'	60,232	20 January 2017	No	Yes	Yes	No
10	'We did it! Thank you to all of my great supporters, we just officially won the election (despite all of the distorted and inaccurate media)'	59,953	19 December 2016	No	Yes	No	Yes

Source [6]

Twitter and Trump ex-post being POTUS

Data provided by Ross and Caldwell provide further details of Trump as an informational autocrat in Twitter. Table 2 analyzed 55,512 of Trump's Twitter words. This analysis provides an insight into the stigmatization mechanism through messages around “crooked” and “Hillary” were a key mechanism to delegitimize a political contender. It is useful to recall that the stigmatization mechanism aims to make a moral judgment that calls into question the character of the contender.

The fourth rank reveals that the second priority for Trump as an informational autocrat was to use the othering mechanism that appeals to the fragmented selectorate; he provided the narrative of “MAGA”, “America first”, and “make America great again”.

In the case of the fifth rank, the term “fake” portrays a narrative mechanism that transcends the Twitter message. Under the fake news logic, most of the media critics and negative results divulged by social media lack credibility. With a similar meaning, the key word “drain the swamp” reveals that in top of the previous priorities, a part of the informational manipulation consisted in delegitimizing the Congress; this strategy makes sense given that the Congress is the check and balance mechanism for POTUS.

Table 2

Results of the comparative keyword analysis: 9 June 2016 and 21 August 2017

Rank	Frequency	Keyness	Keyword
1	153	1220.131	Crooked
2	307	1142.600	Hillary
3	224	901.115	Clinton
4	133	766.931	Maga
5	108	724.488	Fake
6	83	705.502	Americafirst
7	88	698.220	Draintheswamp
8	61	518.501	Imwithyou
9	142	486.628	Media
10	64	467.638	makeamericagreatagain

Note: Statistical significance is determined by chi-square and is termed 'keyness' in corpus studies.

Source: [5]

In conclusion, the informational autocrats allocate their efforts in manipulating information by maximizing their audiences through emotions that are created by the collective experiences of a

significant part of the voters. It is possible to qualify the mechanisms used by the informational autocrat to acquire relevance within social media and capture voters. This process of capturing voters by exploiting a negative emotion has a specific mechanism aimed to create a special relationship between the autocrat and a segment of the electorate. In the American case, the major effect of Trump as an informational autocrat has been to create a conspiracy theory that blocks any kind of public scrutiny, but, at the same time, sets an emotional relationship with his voters.

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