TDP

Transformationen des Populären.
Working Paper Series des SFB 1472

27.06.2025

Working Paper 20

Trump, Populism, and Social Media

Niels Werber

Citation:

Werber, Niels (2025): “Trump, Populism, and Social Media”. *Working Paper SFB 1472*, no. 20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25819/ubsi/10732.

Abstract

This essay explores Donald Trump's political communication as a paradigmatic shift toward media-driven populism. Focusing on Twitter, it examines how Trump bypassed traditional institutional channels, using social media for direct and polarizing engagement. Drawing on thinkers like Habermas, Luhmann, and Schmitt, the article argues that Trump's strategy reflects a logic of "occasio" rather than "causa": seizing moments for maximum visibility rather than pursuing consistent policy. Popularity—measured through likes, retweets, and reactions—becomes the sole currency of political legitimacy. The study challenges conventional distinctions between supporters and critics, showing how both contribute to Trump's media presence. It concludes that Trump's approach marks a lasting transformation of the public sphere: from deliberative reason to disruption, affect, and spectacle.

Keywords: popularity, populism, Trump, Twitter, occasio

Dieser Essay untersucht Donald Trumps politische Kommunikation als Ausdruck eines mediengetriebenen Populismus. Im Mittelpunkt steht seine Nutzung von Twitter, über das er etablierte institutionelle Kanäle umgeht und stattdessen auf direkte, polarisierende Kommunikation setzt. In Auseinandersetzung mit Denkern wie Habermas, Luhmann und Schmitt zeigt der Beitrag, dass Trumps Strategie weniger auf konsistenter Sachpolitik („Causa") beruht, sondern vielmehr einer Logik der „Occasio" folgt – dem Ergreifen günstiger Gelegenheiten zur Maximierung öffentlicher Aufmerksamkeit. Politische Legitimität bemisst sich dabei allein an Popularität, gemessen in Likes, Retweets und Reaktionen. Der Beitrag hinterfragt die übliche Trennung zwischen Anhängern und Gegnern, indem er zeigt, wie beide Lager Trumps mediale Präsenz verstärken. Es wird deutlich: Trumps Kommunikationsstil steht für eine tiefgreifende Transformation der Öffentlichkeit – weg von rationaler Auseinandersetzung hin zu Disruption, Affekt und Spektakel.

Schlagwörter: Popularität, Populismus, Trump, Twitter, occasio

In the autumn of 2024, shortly before the much-feared re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Henk de Berg published his monograph *Trump and Hitler*. Among its chapters is one devoted to Trump's media strategy—how he captivated and energized the masses, manipulating and polarizing them. This chapter focuses on Twitter and, consequently, on Trump's first term as the 45th president.

De Berg is certainly correct when he writes that "Twitter … tends to unleash the worst in people" (de Berg 2024: 170). This observation may help explain the vulgar tone and aggressive content of the thousands of tweets Trump posted during his first term. Yet de Berg's central argument is that Twitter offered Trump a means of communication that allows him "to get his message across in a non-mediated way" (294)—thus bypassing his administration, his party, advisers, and all other intermediaries, including the mainstream media: newspapers, magazines, cable news, and TV shows.

De Berg calls this Trump's "disintermediation strategy" (295). Whether or not this was a conscious tactic, it had a twofold effect: First, Trump was able to project "an image of himself as authentic" (296), using this image to aggressively insult his competitors and rivals (297). Second, the platform *Twitter*'s format makes it nearly impossible to counter his politically "incorrect jokes and insults" (297), his lies, or so-called "alternative facts" with reasoned argument, factual rebuttals, or references to evidence, because Twitter offers no space—and no reward—for such responses. De Berg observes: "On Twitter, reasoned argument—the cornerstone of the enlightened public sphere on which philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas have pinned their political hopes—is a structural impossibility." (295)

I agree with de Berg, but I believe it is worthwhile to take a closer, more nuanced look at Trump's media ecology—particularly at the role played by the traditional, Habermasian public sphere within a broader transmedia network or *Medienverbund*, to use the term of German media theorist Friedrich Kittler. To analyze the political function of Trump's multimedia ecosystem, I adopt a historical perspective, turning back to the formative years of social media.

But let us begin at the beginning.



1. POTUS as a Twitterer

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. That same day, Barack Obama posted his final tweet from the official Twitter account of the President, @POTUS:

> I'm still asking you to believe—not in my ability to bring about change, but in yours. I believe in change because I believe in you.

On January 21, 2017, Twitter archived Obama's account under @POTUS44, making @POTUS available to the incoming president. Trump's first post from the official @POTUS account read:

> January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again!







That identical message had been tweeted moments earlier from his personal account, @realDonaldTrump. This established a brief pattern: the presidential @POTUS account began reposting messages identical, down to the last character, to tweets previously sent from @realDonaldTrump. It was, essentially, a case of copy and paste. From February 2017 onward, this practice evolved: while the exact duplication ceased, the @POTUS account began *retweeting* every tweet from @realDonaldTrump—functioning essentially as a retweet bot until the end of Trump's term.

These automatic retweets served one clear purpose: to amplify the digital reach of the billionaire president, who had launched his personal Twitter account in March 2009, posting his first tweet on May 4 of that year. His popularity on the platform grew rapidly. By October 29, 2009, he had nearly 500,000 followers. According to the analytics site TwitterCounter (https://twittercounter.com/realDonaldTrump), he was projected to surpass one million followers within 179 days. At the time, a public race was underway to determine who would be the first Twitter user to break that symbolic barrier.

Whether or not his was truly the "best account to follow on Twitter" (June 3, 2013), as Trump often claimed, one thing is certain: He is the Twitterer who became president! On the eve of his inauguration—January 19, 2017—@realDonaldTrump had 20,322,176 followers. This staggering number included human and non-human agents alike: individuals and bots, supporters and opponents.

More than anything, Trump's tweeting is chiefly directed at gaining popularity—and it is itself demonstrably popular. His tweets are undeniably noticed by many. @realDonaldTrump's popularity can be quantified very precisely in comparison to all other accounts, no matter who runs them. Popularity, in this context, is measured not by traditional standards of quality or content but by sheer quantity—by the reach, reactions, and metrics a post can generate. This kind of popularity undermines classical distinctions between high and low culture, between substantive argument and sensationalism, between truth and provocation (cf. Werber et al. 2023). This trend was visible from the very beginning, in 2009—the year Trump joined Twitter.

2. Trump's and Twitter's Popularity

Trump's very first tweet was exemplary in its strategy: he sought to popularize his account by referencing a well-known television personality—David Letterman—who had invited him onto his popular *Late Show*. The tweet also invoked the familiar format of the "Top Ten" list. This move generated engagement not only from Trump's own fans but also from the *Late Show*'s broad audience. One might call this *parasitic popularity*: the tweet attracted likes, replies, and followers not necessarily because of Trump, but due to the cultural capital of Letterman's brand: In 2009, his show averaged 3.8 million viewers.

A similar phenomenon occurred just two weeks earlier, when Twitter benefited from CNN's coverage of its "race" with Ashton Kutcher to become the first account to surpass one million followers. This interplay between television and Twitter showcases a broader media dynamic—each drawing attention from the other in a reciprocal loop.

Trump would continue to reference mass media heavily. From the start of his account through April 2019, Trump mentioned CNN in 510 tweets, CBS in 102, NBC in 953, FOX in 1,480, and both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* several hundred times each. While he repeatedly condemned these outlets as "fake news media" (a phrase he tweeted at least 119 times), their mutual hostility fueled reciprocal visibility. Trump's tweets were reported and dissected by the media; in turn, his tweets attacked those very outlets. The result? An escalating feedback loop in which both Trump and the mass media gained followers, ratings, and attention.

This dynamic has not abated. Trump's daily posts on his own platform *Truth Social* continue to be quoted and analyzed across print, digital, and broadcast media. Despite his open animosity toward the press, their relationship is symbiotic: both parties benefit from the popularity metrics generated by constant attention.

Trump repeatedly celebrated his own ratings success. After appearances on late-night television, for instance, he often tweeted things like:

> Ratings were great! A big win.
> (January 26, 2016, referring to a Miss Universe broadcast)

During the election campaign, he made similar claims:

> The media refuses to talk about the three new national polls that have me in first place. Biggest crowds ever—watch what happens!
> (October 21, 2016)
>
> @CNBC continues to report fictitious poll numbers. Number one, based on every statistic, is Trump (by a wide margin). They just can't say it.
> (October 28, 2015)

Trump has repeatedly made his own popularity the subject of his tweets. For example, on January 22, 2017, he tweeted, "Wow, ratings are just out," referring to the "best and largest" inauguration of all time. Beginning on April 29 of this year, Trump started celebrating what he called the most productive, successful, glorious, and greatest first hundred days of any presidency ever, this time on Truth Social. He claimed to be leading in all ratings and assessments.

These tweets are part of a larger pattern in which Trump does not just pursue popularity—he performs it. His posts assert, stage, amplify, and thus *popularize his popularity,* often by referencing rankings—an approach typical of methods that create and make visible distinctions which hierarchize "die Popularität von Politikern oder Popstars" (Mau 2017: 71; the popularity of politicians or pop stars). As Steffen Mau has noted, such "metric orders of worth" assign value through quantifiable means: likes, retweets, views, money, crowd size (cf. Mau 2017: 161–162). From the beginning, Trump's tweets positioned him as smarter, richer, more athletic, more popular than anyone else. He owns the best hotels, the best golf clubs, stars in the highest-rated TV shows, and commands the most followers on Twitter.







In one revealing tweet from September 14, 2014, Trump wrote:

> Money was never a big motivation for me, *except as a way to keep score*. The real excitement is playing the game!

As with Twitter metrics—likes, retweets, replies—money can be precisely counted. For Trump, quantification serves as proof of superiority. It is not Twitter's brevity that attracts him, but its instant scoreboard. It is a platform that lets him measure, compare, and proclaim that he is winning—it is his way of *keeping score*.

3. Populism and Popularity

On January 20, 2017, Trump tweeted:

> January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.

Drawing on Jan-Werner Müller's work, this tweet can be interpreted as a populist manifesto: it implies that prior to Trump, "the people" were deceived and ruled by a corrupt elite. Now, with his inauguration, the "true people" have regained power. In his influential and widely cited writings, Müller defines populism as both anti-elitist and anti-pluralist at the same time (Müller 2015: 30). The core of populist thinking, according to Müller, is the claim that only the populists truly represent the people: "Wir – und nur wir – repräsentieren das Volk" (Müller 2016: 19; 'We—and only we—represent the people'). This claim inherently delegitimizes all other actors—parties, elected officials, parliaments—by denying their capacity to authentically represent the public.

Müller's definition is useful—despite valid criticisms of its formalism (Manow 2018b: 27–28)—because it excludes politicians who may be coarse, oversimplifying, or demagogic without asserting exclusive representational authority. Müller's framework intentionally avoids substantive definitions, opting instead for a formal structure applicable across regions, systems, ideologies, and media practices.

Yet I would argue that Müller's formal definition is incomplete. Populisms, to be effective, must also be popular. They must capture and hold public attention—otherwise, it would fail to gain traction, both socially and academically. Popularity is not incidental to populism; it is a necessary condition (*conditio sine qua non*).

This leads me to a key question: How could Trump's Twitter account gain such extraordinary popularity? My hypothesis is that this popularity does *not* result from a growing base of like-minded supporters. Rather, it emerges from the fierce and often hostile conflicts among those who follow him. In other words, Trump's massive follower count includes not just adherents but also critics and antagonists. His Twitter popularity is driven by ongoing, visible, and platform-based conflict between supporters and detractors.







Consider, for example, the tweet "A great day at the White House!" posted on July 31, 2017. By December 2018, it had received 22,745 retweets and 113,293 likes. However, the sheer volume of comments reveals a far more complex picture. The replies include enthusiastic praise and equally intense condemnation. Supportive and abusive comments alternate rapidly. Trump's followers, far from constituting a cohesive community (in German, *Gefolgschaft*), are deeply divided—some cheer, others jeer. Many commenters are not fans at all, but trolls, advertisers, or critics seeking to profit from the account's reach and visibility.

There is no cohesive community of followers in the sense that the Twitter followers of the @realDonaldTrump account would uniformly support or always agree with their leader. Nor is there an explicit demonization of non-followers. Instead, the followers themselves are divided into friend and foe, as is immediately evident when examining the comments on Trump's tweets. Even the comments on an innocent Easter greeting posted by Trump as POTUS demonstrate that his Twitter followers should not be confused with a loyal presidential fanbase. Trump's political world is not simply split between followers and everyone else (Strohschneider 2018), as if followers were friends and all others were enemies. Instead, all of his followers—whether fans or detractors—contribute to Trump's popularity, while those outside this group, at least so far, do not. Everyone who does not tweet or subscribe to his account represents a potential follower who has yet to be enlisted in the service of Trump's popularity.

To better understand this media-political dynamic, we must contrast it with the assumptions of an earlier era: before the "popularization of the internet" and the widespread adoption of social media and their automatic counters (Werber et al. 2023: 4), when politics was filtered through the traditional mass media and the norms of the public sphere.

4. Old & New Media and the Public Sphere

In the sociological theories of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann, traditional mass media play a pivotal role in representative democracies. Public opinion functions as a "Medium der Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung" (Luhmann 2000: 285; medium for second-order observation), allowing politics to observe how it is being observed—not through face-to-face interactions, but via "Darstellungen abwesender Beobachter für abwesende Beobachter" (292; representations of absent observers for absent observers), disseminated through radio, print, and television (Luhmann 1996: 11). These pre-digital mass media facilitate what Luhmann calls the "Repräsen-

tation der Öffentlichkeit" (188; representation of the public), enabling political actors to reflect on their behavior in light of its mediated effects on public opinion.

In his books, Luhmann assumes that all politcians are aware of this framework and adapt accordingly and thus seek to control expression and information. More abstractly:

> Daß alle Äußerungen, die sich im Medium der öffentlichen Meinung präsentieren, sich eben damit selbst der Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung aussetzen, hat disziplinierende Effekte zur Folge.
>
> (Luhmann 2000: 288)

> The fact that all statements that present themselves in the medium of public opinion expose themselves to observation has disciplining effects.

Trump fundamentally disrupts this model.

First, he forces traditional mass media into a parasitic role as he subverts the notion of a public sphere that is structured by organizations (cf. Luhmann 2010: 434). Each of his 39,800 tweets (as of early 2021) bypassed institutional filters and reached tens of millions of users directly—his 55 million followers and the exponentially greater audience reached through likes, retweets, and replies. When traditional mass media reported on his tweets, they inevitably amplified his reach and visibility and thus further popularized his account.

Second, Trump's direct tweeting rendered him independent of the bureaucratic structures that had long filtered presidential communication. During the 20th century, access to the president has become increasingly restricted. Journalists once had direct conversations with presidents; by the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt's press secretary Stephen Early had institutionalized daily briefings mediated by official spokespeople (Nelson 2000: 21–22). Trump, however, circumvents this structure to a large degree, tweeting directly to the public and making the roles of spokesperson and communications director mostly irrelevant. He exposed himself to public scrutiny tweet by tweet, allowing for personal praise or condemnation but not mediated interpretation. He alone became the source, subject, and symbol of each message. He may be personally accused of lying and denial, of simulation and dissimulation, and even of either political genius or unpredictable madness.

Third, Trump's tweets broke with the very idea of "representation of the public" as conceived by both Luhmann and Habermas. His strategy of disintermediation, as de Berg calls it, eliminated traditional mediation and moderation. Instead of communication filtered through expert advisors, Trump allowed himself to be judged in real time, by anyone. The replies to his posts, numbering in the hundreds of thousands, directly addressed him as a person—not his office, not his policies. The actual content of the tweets often elicited less engagement than the polarized reactions they provoked. This logic persists even as he has shifted from Twitter to Truth Social, and Twitter itself has morphed into X.

A typical example of pro-Trump support is a tweet from a bot account, Evelyn McQuary, posted on October 4, 2017, which read:

> God bless President Trump, his family and his team who are faithfully and diligently MAKING AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

Trump replied the next day with a simple, "Thank you." That the original tweet came from a bot is not only unsurprising—it is entirely fitting. Trump is supported by thousands of fake accounts, but even without bots, messages of admiration like "Make America Great Again! #MAGA" flood his replies every hour.

Conversely, the hatred directed at Trump is equally intense. He is frequently called a "pathological liar" or a "fucking moron"—language far removed from the decorum of traditional editorials in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. On Twitter, the insult "fucking liar" appears thousands of times in his replies. Threats, profanity, and even calls for assassination coexist with expressions of love, adoration and loyalty. This polarized climate is further fueled by Trump's own combative style, as he relentlessly attacks individuals, institutions, and the media.

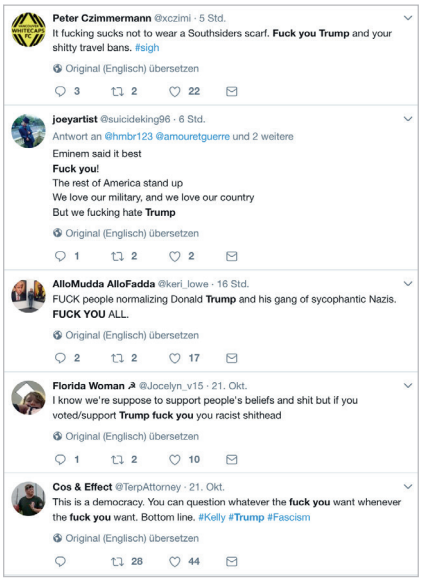
Fourth, Twitter escalates these dynamics because it is *personal*. Even the president is reduced—or elevated—to a persona, fully exposed. Devotion and hatred, human and bot-generated, converge to make Trump's account "super strong." The insult "fuck you" echoes across his comment threads, hurled both by his defenders and his critics. In many ways, it has become the unofficial motto of his presidency.

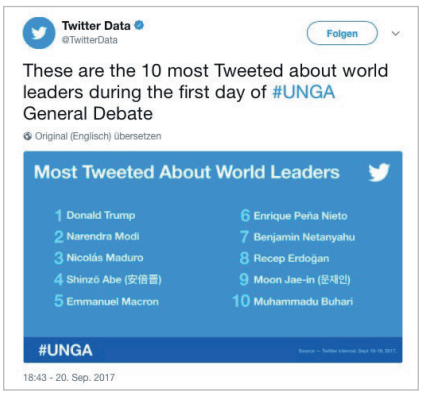
This invective also reflects Trump's characteristic political stance: disregard for norms, rules, federalism, judicial constraints, party discipline, media criticism, alliances, treaties, and institutional frameworks. His persona embodies the notion of being "above the fray"—he is presented, and presents himself, as "a sovereign entity." And crucially, this also signals a breakdown in public discourse: political arguments are no longer focused on content, but on personal defamation. Opposition becomes vilification.

This polarization produces what Trump values most: *popularity*—defined as being noticed by many (Werber et al. 2023). That priority is evident from his very first tweet and remains the organizing principle of his online presence. On September 21, 2017, @realDonaldTrump retweeted a Twitter ranking naming him the most tweeted-about world leader—not in terms of approval or policy, but sheer attention. The list includes "haters," "snoflakes" and other "losers." *Friends and foes alike contribute to his fame.* In this way, Trump has—ironically—united America: every tweet provokes millions to insult each other as "racists," "Nazis," "idiots," "liars," or "traitors."

At no point does this Twitter-based public resemble what Kant or Habermas envisioned—a rational, moral space of deliberation. According to Kant, the ability to publicly avow a political principle without inciting universal resistance is a sign of its moral legitimacy (Kant 1984: 49–50). Habermas, similarly, regarded the political public sphere as the "Organisationsprinzip des liberalen Rechtsstaates" (Habermas 1990: 180; organizational principle of the liberal constitutional state). Trump's Twitter feed offers the opposite: it incites resistance, which in turn fuels counter-resistance, leading to an escalating cycle of mutual malice and slander.







In this feedback loop, any substantive political agenda is drowned out by spectacle. Even Habermas's most recent reflections on the effects of social media on the public sphere (2023) do not fully capture the logic of Trump's popularity—a popularity sustained equally by his supporters and his critics.







Fifth, Trump openly bases political decisions on popularity and communicates this explicitly. Luhmann once noted that in politics "die Darstellung muß […] kalkuliert, aber die Kalkulation darf nicht dargestellt werden" (Luhmann 2010: 292; representation […] is calculated, but the calculation must not be represented). Trump reverses this norm. He does not seek validation through rational policy or long-term strategy. What matters is *attention*—especially measurable attention in the form of rankings, ratings, follower counts, or rally attendance. His political style might best be described as *occasionalist*: he rejects any obligation that might prevent him from seizing a moment of opportunity.

As he tweeted on December 18, 2012:

> I also protect myself by being flexible. I never get too attached to one deal or one approach. —The Art of the Deal.

5. The New Normal: *occasio & disruptio*

To regard Trump merely as a disruptive episode—a temporary anomaly that might vanish after the next election—is to misunderstand the profound media-cultural shift he represents. His communication style has not only survived but flourished; it has redefined expectations and reshaped the media-political landscape. In his second term, this shift is even more apparent: Trump's posts are no longer seen as exceptions but as part of a new normal. Incoherent tweets, contradictions, blatant falsehoods—none of this undermines his position. Instead, it reflects an *occasionalist* media practice: a mode of political communication driven solely by the pursuit of popularity, by maximizing attention in the moment, regardless of past statements or future consequences.

In this logic, laws, treaties, institutions, and norms—those structures designed to stabilize collective decisions over time—lose their binding force. These frameworks are founded on the principle of *causa*, on the notion that decisions are connected through time, that past commitments shape future actions. Trump rejects this outright. His approach obliterates temporal consistency and replaces it with opportunistic spontaneity.

This is why it is misguided to accuse Trump of lying in the traditional sense. The act of lying presupposes a connection between statements and reality across time—a commitment to truth that can be violated. But in Trump's world, the past is irrelevant. Every moment is its own opportunity. Thus, the *New York Times*'s meticulous documentation of his falsehoods fails to account for the logic of his communication. He is not playing by the rules of rational discourse or policy consistency. He is playing *the game*—as he calls it in *The Art of the Deal*—and the only score that matters is popularity.

The same applies to frequent accusations of mental instability, incompetence, or childishness. Such critiques rely on the assumption that character is consistent, that behavior stems from identifiable causes. But Trump's media logic does not operate within that frame. Each post, each tweet, each appearance is a standalone performance aimed at maximum resonance. It is not about cause and effect; it is about opportunity seized.

The concept of *occasio*—central to Trump's media practice—was developed by Carl Schmitt in his analysis of political romanticism. Schmitt contrasts *causa*, the rational basis of sovereign statehood, with an "occasionalist" attitude governed by the "magische Hand des Zufalls" (Schmitt 1991: 25; magic hand of chance). In this worldview, the subject encounters reality as a "Ereigniskonglomerat" (Stanitzek 1989: 50; conglomerate of events). The occasionalist "tastet Ereignisse daraufhin ab, ob ihnen Gelegenheitsqualität zukommt" (50; he scans events to see whether they have the quality of an opportunity).

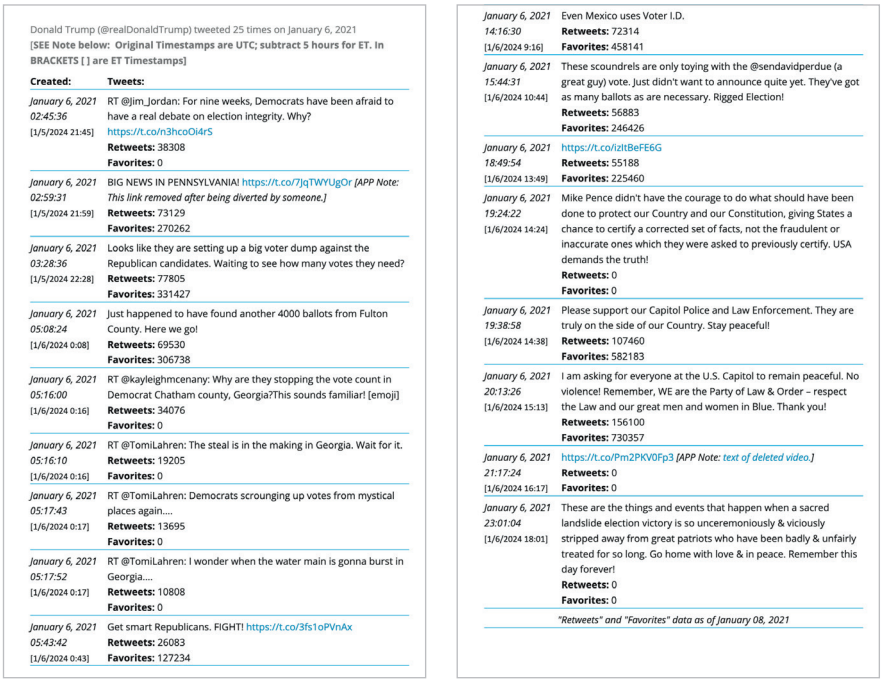
There is no strategic plan—only an opportunistic responsiveness to what *might* work *right now*. The occasion, once missed, is gone forever. Success depends on acting decisively in the moment:

> Die okkasionelle Situation kommt nicht wieder, und deshalb steht erfolgreiches Handeln auf Messers Schneide. Im nächsten Augenblick schon ist die Gelegenheit verpaßt, ist sie in die Ungreifbarkeit der Vergangenheit entwichen.
>
> (Stanitzek 1989: 52)

> The occasional situation does not come again, and therefore successful action is on a knife's edge. In the next moment, the opportunity is missed; it has slipped into the intangibility of the past).

Trump exemplifies this model. Every post is an opportunity for affect, resonance, reaction—whether praise or disgust, applause or outrage (Schmitt 1991: 150). His tweet on January 6, 2021, which helped incite the Capitol insurrection, is just one example of this logic's "explosive effect" (Balke 1996: 130). Trump's occasionalism is inherently polarizing, and through this polarization he enhances his popularity.

To borrow a contemporary term: Trump's media practice is fundamentally *disruptive*. Not merely in tone or policy, but in form. He disrupts causality. He decouples intention from consequence. *Ex disruptione sequitur quodlibet*—from disruption, anything follows. This is the foundation of Trump's new normal.



Donald Trump (@realDonaldTrump) tweeted 25 times on January 6, 2021
[SEE Note below: Original Timestamps are UTC; subtract 5 hours for ET. In BRACKETS [ ] are ET Timestamps]

Created:	Tweets:
January 6, 2021 02:45:36 [1/5/2024 21:45]	RT @Jim_Jordan: For nine weeks, Democrats have been afraid to have a real debate on election integrity. Why? https://t.co/n3hcoOi4rS **Retweets:** 38308 **Favorites:** 0
January 6, 2021 02:59:31 [1/5/2024 21:59]	BIG NEWS IN PENNSYLVANIA! https://t.co/7JqTWYUgOr *[APP Note: This link removed after being diverted by someone.]* **Retweets:** 73129 **Favorites:** 270262
January 6, 2021 03:28:36 [1/5/2024 22:28]	Looks like they are setting up a big voter dump against the Republican candidates. Waiting to see how many votes they need? **Retweets:** 77805 **Favorites:** 331427
January 6, 2021 05:08:24 [1/6/2024 0:08]	Just happened to have found another 4000 ballots from Fulton County. Here we go! **Retweets:** 69530 **Favorites:** 306738
January 6, 2021 05:16:00 [1/6/2024 0:16]	RT @kayleighmcenany: Why are they stopping the vote count in Democrat Chatham county, Georgia?This sounds familiar! [emoji] **Retweets:** 34076 **Favorites:** 0
January 6, 2021 05:16:10 [1/6/2024 0:16]	RT @TomiLahren: The steal is in the making in Georgia. Wait for it. **Retweets:** 19205 **Favorites:** 0
January 6, 2021 05:17:43 [1/6/2024 0:17]	RT @TomiLahren: Democrats scrounging up votes from mystical places again.... **Retweets:** 13695 **Favorites:** 0
January 6, 2021 05:17:52 [1/6/2024 0:17]	RT @TomiLahren: I wonder when the water main is gonna burst in Georgia.... **Retweets:** 10808 **Favorites:** 0
January 6, 2021 05:43:42 [1/6/2024 0:43]	Get smart Republicans. FIGHT! https://t.co/3fs1oPVnAx **Retweets:** 26083 **Favorites:** 127234

January 6, 2021 14:16:30 [1/6/2024 9:16]	Even Mexico uses Voter I.D. **Retweets:** 72314 **Favorites:** 458141
January 6, 2021 15:44:31 [1/6/2024 10:44]	These scoundrels are only toying with the @sendavidperdue (a great guy) vote. Just didn't want to announce quite yet. They've got as many ballots as are necessary. Rigged Election! **Retweets:** 56883 **Favorites:** 246426
January 6, 2021 18:49:54 [1/6/2024 13:49]	https://t.co/izItBeFE6G **Retweets:** 55188 **Favorites:** 225460
January 6, 2021 19:24:22 [1/6/2024 14:24]	Mike Pence didn't have the courage to do what should have been done to protect our Country and our Constitution, giving States a chance to certify a corrected set of facts, not the fraudulent or inaccurate ones which they were asked to previously certify. USA demands the truth! **Retweets:** 0 **Favorites:** 0
January 6, 2021 19:38:58 [1/6/2024 14:38]	Please support our Capitol Police and Law Enforcement. They are truly on the side of our Country. Stay peaceful! **Retweets:** 107460 **Favorites:** 582183
January 6, 2021 20:13:26 [1/6/2024 15:13]	I am asking for everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful. No violence! Remember, WE are the Party of Law & Order – respect the Law and our great men and women in Blue. Thank you! **Retweets:** 156100 **Favorites:** 730357
January 6, 2021 21:17:24 [1/6/2024 16:17]	https://t.co/Pm2PKV0Fp3 *[APP Note: text of deleted video.]* **Retweets:** 0 **Favorites:** 0
January 6, 2021 23:01:04 [1/6/2024 18:01]	These are the things and events that happen when a sacred landslide election victory is so unceremoniously & viciously stripped away from great patriots who have been badly & unfairly treated for so long. Go home with love & in peace. Remember this day forever! **Retweets:** 0 **Favorites:** 0

"Retweets" and "Favorites" data as of January 08, 2021

His guiding principle is clear: popularity enhancement supersedes all else—norms, arguments, facts, laws, even contracts. Any commitment that might bind him is rendered obsolete or actively discarded. There is no *causa,* but only *occasio!* What matters is whether something helps him gain popularity. That is the only criterion.

And he is entirely open about it. Long before his political career, Trump's *Art of the Deal* spelled out this strategy:

> The worst of times often creates the best opportunities to make good deals.
> (Trump 2015: 200)
>
> … the whole deal was a disaster. But from our perspective that was great, because it gave us a terrific opportunity.
> (Trump 2015: 82)
>
> … I felt the only chance …
> (Trump 2015: 342)
>
> I want to be more aggressive. "What worries me," I said to Harris, "is that no one is pushing hard enough on an appeal."
> (Trump 2015: 6)
>
> I pick up the phone and dial the guy in charge … "Steve," I say, "this is Donald Trump. Listen, you've got to get your ass moving and get finished … I want you to get personally involved in this."
> (Trump 2015: 38)

This occasionalism describes the essence of Trump's political style in his second term. It is the modus operandi of a president who governs through popularity—a presidency not of causes and commitments, but of occasions and disruptions.

References

Balke, Friedrich (1996): *Der Staat nach seinem Ende. Die Versuchung Carl Schmitts*. Munich.

Berke, Jon (2015): "A trip down Donald Trump's bankruptcy memory lane," in: *Forbes* (August 18). URL: https://www.forbes.com/sites/debtwire/2015/08/18/a-trip-down-donald-trumps-bankruptcy-memory-lane/#5923f214609e (accessed June 17, 2025).

Borchers, Callum (2017): "Sean Spicer basically admitted that he was willing to lie for Trump," in: *The Washington Post* (September 14). URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/09/14/sean-spicer-basically-admitted-that-he-was-willing-to-lie-for-trump/?utmterm=.2d81991ba0b4 (accessed June 17, 2025).

Cillizza, Chris (2017): "Donald Trump's explanation of his wire-tapping tweets will shock and amaze you," in: *The Washington Post* (March 16), URL: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/03/16/donald-trump-explained-twitter-the-universe-and-everything-to-tucker-carlson/?utmterm=.ca722bf1dc1b (accessed June 17, 2025).

de Berg, Henk (2024): *Trump and Hitler. A Comparative Study in Lying*. London.

Draper, Robert (2018): "The man behind the President's tweets," in: *The New York Times* (April 16), URL: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/16/magazine/dan-scavino-the-secretary-of-offense.html (accessed June 17, 2025).

Habermas, Jürgen (2023): *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, trans. by Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge/Hoboken, NJ.

Habermas, Jürgen (1990): *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* [1962]. Frankfurt am Main.

Hecken, Thomas (2017): "Der populäre Donald Trump," in: *Pop. Kultur und Kritik* 10, pp. 10–21.

Hecken, Thomas (2006): *Populäre Kultur. Mit einem Anhang 'Girl und Popkultur'*. Bochum.

Heintz, Bettina (2018): "Von der Allmacht der Zahlen und der Allgegenwart des Bewertens," in: *Soziologische Revue* 41 (4), pp. 629–642.

Kant, Immanuel (1984): *Zum ewigen Frieden* [1795]. Stuttgart.

Klein, Woody (2008): *All the Presidents' Spokesmen: Spinning the News, White House Press Secretaries from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush*. Westport, CT.

Leonhardt, David, and Stuart A. Thompson (2017): "Trump's lies," in: *The New York Times* (December 14), URL: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html?mcubz=3 (accessed June 17, 2025).

Luhmann, Niklas (2010): *Politische Soziologie*, ed. by André Kieserling. Berlin.

Luhmann, Niklas (2000): *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main.

Luhmann, Niklas (1996): *Die Realität der Massenmedien*, 2nd ed. Opladen.

Manow, Philip (2018a): "'Dann wählen wir uns ein anderes Volk …' Populisten vs. Elite, Elite vs. Populisten," in: *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für Europäisches Denken* 74 (4), pp. 5–14.

Manow, Philip (2018b): *Die Politische Ökonomie des Populismus*. Berlin.

Mau, Steffen (2017): *Das metrische Wir. Über die Quantifizierung des Sozialen*. Berlin.

Müller, Jan-Werner (2016): *Was ist Populismus?* Berlin.

Müller, Jan-Werner (2015): "Populismus: Theorie und Praxis," in: *Merkur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken* 69 (795), pp. 28–37.

Nelson, W. Dale (2000): *Who Speaks for the President? The White House Press Secretary from Cleveland to Clinton*. New York.

Paßmann, Johannes (2018): *Die soziale Logik des Likes. Eine Twitter-Ethnografie*. Frankfurt am Main/New York.

Paßmann, Johannes (2017): "Kurz & souverän. Twittern als sozioliterarische Praxis," in: Michael Gamper and Ruth Mayer (eds.): *Kurz & knapp. Zur Mediengeschichte kleiner Formen vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*. Bielefeld, pp. 325–348.

Schaffrick, Matthias (2016): "Listen als populäre Paradigmen. Zur Unterscheidung von Pop und Populärkultur," in: *KulturPoetik* 16 (1), pp. 109–125.

Schmitt, Carl (1991): *Politische Romantik* [1925]. Berlin.

Strohschneider, Peter (2018): "POTUS als Twitterer," in: *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* XII (3), pp. 61–75.

Stanitzek, Georg (1989): *Blödigkeit. Beschreibungen des Individuums im 18. Jahrhundert*. Tübingen.

Trump, Donald J. (2021): "Speech 'Save America' Rally Transcript. January 6." URL: https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-save-america-rally-transcript-january-6 (accessed June 17, 2025).

Trump, Donald J., and Tony Schwartz (2015): *The Art of the Deal* [1987]. New York.

Ulrich, Anne (2020): "'He quickly became obsessed' – Donald Trump und die Medienlogik der Quote," in: Dominik Maeder, Herbert Schwaab, Stephan Trinkaus, Anne Ulrich, and Tanja Weber (eds.): *Trump und das Fernsehen. Medien, Realität, Affekt, Politik*. Cologne, pp. 83–123.

Werber, Niels (2023): "Bedrohliche Popularität," in: Anne Ganzert, Philip Hauser, and Isabell Otto (eds.): *Following. Ein Kompendium zu Medien der Gefolgschaft und Prozessen des Folgens*. Berlin/Boston, pp. 91–102.

Werber, Niels (2017): “Keine Nacht ohne Tweet, kein Tag ohne Dekret. Trumps Show der permanenten Provokation und unaufhörlichen Überschreitung,” in: *Pop. Kultur und Kritik-Blog*, February 10. URL: http://www.pop-zeitschrift.de/2017/02/10/keine-nacht-ohne-tweet-kein-tag-ohne-dekretvon-niels-werber10-2-2017 (accessed June 17, 2025).

Werber, Niels, Daniel Stein, Jörg Döring, Veronika Albrecht-Birkner, Carolin Gerlitz, Thomas Hecken, Johannes Paßmann, Jörgen Schäfer, Cornelius Schubert, and Jochen Venus (2023): “Getting Noticed by Many: On the Transformations of the Popular,” in: *Arts: New Perspectives on Pop Culture* 12, pp.15–36. Doi: https://doi.org/10.3390/arts12010039.