



## The Twitter presidency: Donald J. Trump and the politics of white rage

by Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, New York, Routledge, 2019, 122 pp., US \$51.55 (hardback), ISBN-13: 978-0367149758, ISBN-10: 0367149753

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To cite this article: Zhou Li & Yuchen Liu (2021): The Twitter presidency: Donald J. Trump and the politics of white rage, Critical Studies in Media Communication, DOI: [10.1080/15295036.2020.1868229](https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1868229)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1868229>



Published online: 18 Jan 2021.



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## BOOK REVIEW

**The Twitter presidency: Donald J. Trump and the politics of white rage**, by Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson, New York, Routledge, 2019, 122 pp., US\$51.55 (hardback), ISBN-13: 978-0367149758, ISBN-10: 0367149753

Ever since Trump's launch of his 2016 presidential campaign on June 16, 2015, he has been covered often in the news and has remained in the public eye. Though our memory of Trump may be his self-positioning as a political outsider, his brash behaviors and even his vulgar comments about women like "Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" from a leaked video tape (*Transcript*, 2016), Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson contend in their book that the real impression Trump has made on the public is his rhetorical style and favorite communication platform, Twitter. To identify the defining characteristics of Trump's rhetorical style and his utilization of Twitter, Ott and Dickinson analyze Trump's aesthetic and affective embodiments of white rage under the theoretical frameworks of *style*, *political campaign communication*, and *presidential discourse*. Emphasizing the material consequentiality of Trump's manner of speaking in the digital era, Ott and Dickinson appeal to the entire public to defend American democracy on the grounds of *reasonable disgust* and *compassionate love*.

To begin, Ott and Dickson lay out the theoretical frameworks—combining style, campaign communication, and presidential discourse—for their study of Trump's discursive and communicative practices in the era of digital media. Beginning with scholarship on style, Ott and Dickinson explore its three fundamental characters as rhetorical, political, and collective. Then they go over the history of political campaign communication and presidential rhetoric, paying special attention to the emerging studies on Trump's nontraditional way of using social media during the campaign, as well as the changes in Trump's presidential discourse. Noting the significance of rhetoric's material consequentiality, Ott and Dickinson conclude by re-emphasizing the exigency to analyze Trump's rhetorical style together with his principal manner (white rage) and speaking modality (Twitter).

Through analyzing the politics of white rage, chapter two reveals Trump's manipulations of the centuries-old fear and anxiety surrounding the decentering of white privilege. To achieve this, Ott and Dickinson divide this chapter into two parts, with the first part explaining the appealing mechanisms of white rage—affect and aesthetics—and the second part analyzing Trump's expression of white rage across his managerial, physical, and linguistic performances. By doing so, the authors place Trump's particular performances within the historical and cultural context of the affective aesthetics of white rage. In particular, Ott and Dickinson note that though Trump successfully appealed to his supporters through the aesthetic expression of a shared cultural sentiment, the structures of white rage did not begin with Trump, but rather preexisted and enabled his racist rhetoric. Functioning on an affective register, white rage in Trump's utilization has been powerful enough to "transform the shape of our lives, expanding or contracting our horizons, creating new fissures or fixtures we never expected to find" (Bondi, Davidson, & Smith, 2007, p. 1).

Chapter three sets out to explore how Trump's rhetorical style fits well into the underlying logic of Twitter. Specifically, Ott and Dickinson point out a strong homology between Trump's general manner of speaking and the logic of Twitter as a technology of communication organized around simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. Although those defining traits could be found in any frequent Twitter user, Trump stayed outstanding in this case because 1) Trump has maintained his speaking style consistently through all modes of communication, such as public speeches; and 2) this has always been Trump's rhetorical style regardless of changes in purpose and motivation in different contexts. Thus, by comparing Trump's Twitter behaviors in contexts from citizen Trump and candidate Trump to President Trump, Ott and Dickinson argue that Trump's tone has remained stable over time despite the shifting purposes: from self-promotion of the Trump brand to the tactical positioning of himself as an anti-establishment candidate, to strategic implementation in support of his distorted and narcissistic worldview. As Dunn (2020) argues, equipped with the best vehicle to carry his populist style, Trump exploited Twitter to "reveal his desire to define himself as star and producer of any dramas he creates regardless of the impact of the dramas on the U.S., international relations, and real people" (p. 824). Consequently, Twitter plus President Trump worked well to "undermine complex, considered, and compassionate communication, thereby contributing to the divisive and coarsening tone of political discourse in the United States" (p. 86).

In chapter four, Ott and Dickinson highlight the material consequentiality of Trump's rhetoric and suggest an alternative way for Americans to defend democracy when a toxic populism has threatened the whole society. By reviewing the six consequences of Trump's embodiment of white rage and his repeated use of Twitter as the primary platform, Ott and Dickinson indicate that Trump has tapped into the widely felt cultural sensibility associated with a declining white supremacy. To combat that sensibility—an incoherent and intensely felt public sentiment—rational argument alone would hardly work. As suggested by Ott and Dickinson, mobilizing reasonable disgust at racism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia—the material consequences of Trump's authoritarian, narcissistic, racist rhetoric—with James Baldwin's radical understanding of love, a more progressive politics can be realized.

Though the book is slim, the ideas included are insightful, if not revolutionary. In particular, we want to talk more about two contributions made by Ott and Dickinson in their book. On the theoretical level, Ott and Dickinson help readers see how Trump's style is indeed a reflection of a broader confluence of cultural, political, and technological factors instead of being taken as merely "personal." Only through critical and systematic analysis can the "personal" surface be penetrated and the hidden structural power relations be revealed. Especially if we understand the social movement caused by Trump in the U.S. as a part of a broader phenomenon, "a political reflection of the economic and social consequences of capital-led globalization since the 1980s" (Zheng, 2017) which is now sweeping all over the world, then Ott and Dickinson's work has significant referential values for scholars who want to study this phenomenon in different cultural contexts. On the methodological level, Ott and Dickinson brought their "full, sensing bodies to the rhetorical task" when exploring "the sounds and visibility of white rage along with its linguistic structures" (p. 29). Though they indicate the difference between the approach taken in this book and how they were taught to "strive for objectivity ... to pretend that [their] scholarship is free from political bias" (p. 101), we believe that's where the ground-breaking point lies for rhetorical criticism, when the object of study object is style, embodied performance, and a society heading towards the brink of totalitarianism. In fact, theorizing the role that emotions play in our research has long been a hallmark of feminist scholarship, including feminist rhetors

(Collins, 1996; Royster, 1995). And the key lesson that rhetorical criticism can learn from feminist scholarship is “the acknowledgement of the multiple functions of emotions and experiences in defining one’s relationship to one’s research” to produce “emotional coolness” (Bizzell, 2010, p. 120), just like Ott and Dickinson’s notion of reasonable disgust.

To sum up, this is a timely and important book. Given its compelling illustration of Trump’s rhetoric and his speaking manner in the digital era, this book is notably useful for scholars as well as graduate and undergraduate students specializing in political communication and media studies. Also, because of its clarity and careful explanation, it is accessible to a broader audience, especially those who are looking for insights into the interplay among digital media, political communication, and the current state of the U.S. presidency.

## Funding


This work was supported by The National Social Science Fund of China [Grant Number 19CYY014] and National Student Research Training Program [Grant Number: 202010613087].

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2020.1868229>

