Social Media Spectacle: Reconceptualizing the Medium and the Message of Online Political Spectacles

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Donald Trump's Twitter spectacles reflect a shift in the traditional political spectacle. As the political spectacle was not developed to address online communication in a secondarily oral society, I argue that we must compare the established theoretical understanding of political spectacle with contemporary media to fully understand how political spectacles disrupt social expectations today. In this essay, I further that conceptualizing social media spectacle benefits critics who analyze political spectacles on new media. Although the social media spectacle's form differs slightly, the difference lies in function. Rather than drawing attention to the message's architect, the social media spectacle may divert attention away from the architect. After examining how Trump employs social media spectacles, I offer implications and future directives for scholars exploring social media rhetoric.

Keywords: Political spectacle, social media, Twitter, Donald Trump, political rhetoric

Introduction

Donald J. Trump was not a traditional presidential candidate during his 2016 campaign, seemingly playing the political joker (Kayam, 2018). Nevertheless, the political underdog achieved victory due, in part, to a support base captivated by his raw and meandering "straight talk" (e.g., Ivie, 2017; Theye & Melling, 2018, p. 323; Wang & Liu, 2018), reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's and George W. Bush's "anti-rhetorical" or "anti-intellectual" choices (see Lim, 2008; Rozell, 1998; Shogan, 2007). While his rivals followed the formal tactics of campaigns past, embodying what Hariman (1995) might call a courtly style, Trump spoke bluntly, divisively, and unapologetically (Blake, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2018; Vasile, 2017). In privileging comprehendible language over presidential decorum, he seemingly united citizens who felt "somewhat suffocated by political correctness and its impact on what they viewed as their right to free speech" (Theye & Melling, 2018, p. 324). Trump's grammar may register below the sixth grade reading level (Liberatore, 2016; Shafer, 2015), but his messages reached those who felt silenced in the political conversation. Through non-traditional rhetorical choices, Trump shared his platform simply and succinctly.

In fact, his marriage of simplistic communication style and social media allowed him to optimize 140-character soundbites to spread his political rhetoric. However, Trump is not the first political figure to incorporate social media into his political rhetoric (see Bimber, 2014; Katz et al., 2015). Twitter has become a key platform for political campaign communication, allowing candidates to reach voters through an interactive medium (Stier et al., 2017). Indeed, research on social media's role in political campaigns is rich, contemplating the unique challenges of translating campaign messages to meet the high-tech expectations of social media users (see Boulianne, 2016; Hoffmann & Suphan, 2017; Jungherr, 2016; Wells et al., 2016). Twitter specifically trends more toward public communication than private interaction (Parmelee, 2014), allowing political candidates to engage with more than those who "like" their profile due to the user pool's sheer size (Bossetta, 2018). While platforms like Facebook allow politicians to maintain their support-base (see Norris, 2003), Twitter lends itself well to interacting with followers and undecided citizens. Social media platforms like Twitter allow political campaigns and administrations to connect with the public, condemn adversaries, and maintain specific identities online.

Twitter amplified Trump's voice and provided free publicity (Kristof, 2016; Patterson, 2016), an ability of which other political figures take advantage. Nevertheless, Trump's distinct communication style allowed him to heavily profit off Twitter. By approaching his tweets like a corporate

communicator—direct, authoritative, and persuasive—Trump captured the attention of the online publics, both supporters and critics alike (Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019; see also Ott, 2017; Wells et al., 2016). Consequently, he could rhetorically sell his ideas with little support; his language was so condensed through parataxis—through the daisy-chaining of phrases—that he could make broad claims without completing his inference or providing evidence (Theye & Melling, 2018). Despite the media scrutiny surrounding his tweets that dubbed him "notoriously impulsive" (i.e., Barbaro, 2015; Keohane, 2016; Kosoff, 2016, para. 2; Patterson, 2016), Trump's discursive Twitter rhetoric granted him political traction and a popular foothold, as well notoriety as a realist-style leader (Hariman, 1995).

Specifically, the *political spectacle* of Trump's tweets contributed to his rising popularity. Political spectacles (re)construct social problems critical to voting decisions, allowing candidates to clearly identify their political stances on key policies (Debord, 1983; Edelman, 1988). However, these spectacles toy with perceptions of reality, allowing candidates and their campaigns to (re)present events to fit their agenda (Debord, 1983). In other words, "Everyday reporting of the political spectacle systematically reinforces the assumption that leaders are critical to the courses of governmental action. News accounts highlight the talk and actions of leaders and of high officials and upon policy differences and agreements" (Edelman, 1988, p. 40). By engaging in political spectacles, political candidates present themselves as crucial stakeholders in policy-making, indirectly reiterating their national leadership potential to mass media channels for public distribution.

Communication scholars have examined Trump's Twitter rhetoric in detail, analyzing his gendered displays of masculinity (Lee & Lim, 2016), socio-political self-branding (Pérez-Curiel & Naharro, 2019), incivility (Lee & Xu, 2018; Ott, 2017; Zompetti, 2019), online diffusion of populist discourse (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2018; Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Kreis, 2017), celebrity entertainment value (Kanihan & Rim, 2018; Wells et al., 2016), amateurism (Enli, 2017), and dislocative tendencies (Appel, 2018). Nonetheless, little work has pondered Trump's Twitter rhetoric as political spectacle (for the exception, see Fuchs, 2017). Fuchs (2017) declares, "Trump uses Twitter as political spectacle" (p. 53), but whether Trump's rhetoric merely falls into the theoretical construct or reimagines it has yet to be considered in communication scholarship. The theoretical implications for the evolution of political spectacle have the potential to foster deeper understandings of political campaigns in the social media era.

In this essay, I argue that Trump's Twitter rhetoric reveals the emergence of a medium-specific and language-specific political spectacle extension: *social media spectacle*. The key characteristic differentiating social media spectacle from political spectacle and visual spectacle lies in rhetorical intentionality, diverting public attention past the message's architects, not toward them. While Trump's tweet characteristics have been analyzed (i.e., Enli, 2017; Lee & Lim, 2016; Ott, 2017), no scholars have examined Trump's tweet rhetoric as social media spectacle. Therefore, I analyze Trump's tweets to illustrate the emergence of the social media spectacle. After exploring current forms of political spectacle—and the need for social media spectacle as a rhetorical construct—I elucidate how Trump employs social media spectacle to shape contemporary public narratives and evoke identification, dissolution, and distraction from himself. Through this form of political spectacle, Trump attempts to construct and control his own alternate reality, taps into public uncertainty surrounding societal dissidence, and presents himself as a national savior. From this conversation will rise implications for social media spectacle development, online sociopolitical discourse, and community building.

Political Spectacles Today: Why Consider a Contextualized Understanding?

Before we discuss social media spectacles, we must understand why I contextualize political spectacle within a specific medium. *Social media spectacle* warrants consideration as a political spectacle extension because (1) it better reflects the evolution of secondary orality and (2) it speaks to the rhetorically raw online discourse of political figures.

First, the social media spectacle would reposition political spectacle more explicitly within the era of secondary orality, which speaks to societal advancements toward deliberate, direct, and textually

informed oral discourse.[1] Scholars have long noted the visual, emotional, and rhetorical strategies that political spectacle entails (e.g., Bennett, 1992; Cheng, 2006; Debord, 1983; Edelman, 1998; Erickson, 1998; Fjelstad, 2010; Koyama & Bartlett, 2011; Sapiro & Soss, 1999). As political campaigns seek to gain public adherence through television, print, and public appearances, the continued interest in political spectacle is unsurprising. Nevertheless, the development of the political spectacle as a theoretical construct has not matched the continued emergence of social media sites as major political epicenters, especially for campaigns (like those of Obama-Biden 2008/2012, Clinton-Kaine 2016, and Trump-Pence 2016), and as indicators of broader communicative changes in American discourse. Walter Ong (1982/2012) predicted that human communication would eventually transition into a *secondary orality,* which is "a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of printing and print" (p. 133). Unlike cultures grounded in primary orality and uninfluenced by printed language, Ong posits that societies immersed in written language will transition into "a new, self-consciously informal style" of communication (Ong, 1982/2012, p. 133) that—while informed by the printed word—is largely oral in medium. In other words, societies may begin communicating more through auditory and visual means, but written communication is the mean's catalyst. Although Twitter is a platform of primarily typed communication, it functions as a medium that provides artifacts and evidence for oral content creators (i.e., televised news organizations, social media content creators, etc.; see also Dumitrescu & Ross, 2021; O'Boyle & Pardun, 2021). Tweets become talking points for televised interviews among professionals, like mass media personalities and journalists, and for the public, like Tik Tok content creators producing satirical videos around political tweets. In other words, Twitter facilitates the transition between rhetoric typed and rhetoric spoken, functioning within the system of secondary orality. While it could be argued that political spectacle is still appropriate for analyzing political rhetoric on social media, I argue that the hybridized rhetorical concept of social media spectacle more explicitly situates artifacts within the medium's context, while also recognizing the medium's role within the social system of secondary orality.

This brings us to the second reason the social media spectacle warrants consideration. One way that social media spectacles might differ from traditional political spectacles is in their tone and directive. While Debord (1983) and Edelman (1988) argue that political spectacles can build communities, they also note the divisive potential of spectacles. I anticipate that for social media spectacles, this divisiveness is incorporated not only to rhetorically other and heighten group identification, but to direct attention away from the message architect's transgressions. Despite Ong's (1982/2012) prediction that "electronic media [would] not tolerate a show of open antagonism" (p. 135), I argue that social media allows spectacles to be more negative than would a television or radio advertisement due to the direct channel formed between public figure and audience, allowing online rhetoric to be less regulated than traditional television and radio messages (see Bay, 2018; Dykhne, 2018). Social media makes negative campaign messages more accessible to the public.

Negative campaigning is not new, but it continues to darken contemporary campaign messages through smear tactics and critical strategies (Druckman et al., 2010; Lovejoy et al., 2012; Small, 2018). The negativity of online campaigning seems to be greater than that found off-line (Roberts, 2013). In fact, political advertisements posted online may contain more attack themes than televised campaign advertisements (Roberts, 2013). As the public increasingly consumes political information on social media platforms (see Barthel et al., 2016; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016; Shearer & Gottfried, 2017), including more divisive campaign messages than we experienced in the past (Roberts, 2013), we find ourselves facing a saucier spectacle in online spaces. What is it about social media that allows negative political rhetoric to run rampant? Based on the contextual development of campaign media and observations of critical social media rhetorics, I postulate that the political spectacle (re)presented on social media deviates in the rhetorical intention and outcome of political spectacles found in television, print, and embodied performances. No longer is the intention solely to accumulate support for the

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[1] I preface this point by noting that I reference secondary orality for contextual justification of this inquiry rather than as an analytic tool itself.

spectacle's architect. Rather, the spectacle can politically subvert attention away from the architect, a function evident in the online rhetorics of Trump during his early days in office.

Because social media spectacles are better positioned within today's secondary orality and focus on both rhetorically divisive and cohesive messages, they can provide greater insight into how political figures use social media to redirect attention toward and away from themselves. Furthermore, the social media spectacle emphasizes the divisive potential of online political spectacles. While Debord (1983) and Edelman (1988) argue that political spectacles can build communities, they also note the divisive potential of spectacles. As Debord (1983) explains, the political spectacle may not contain internal yearning for group identification, instead deeming its own presence to be achievement enough. This divisive characteristic of political spectacle is apparent in Trump's polarizing Twitter rhetoric, which in turn contributes to the development of the social media spectacle. To fully understand social media spectacle, however, we must understand both political spectacle and visual spectacle.

Political Spectacle

In essence, political spectacles are constructions of realities that frame public issues and gain public attention for political gains. They are deployed with the hope of seeming obvious and natural, for as Debord (1983) posits, "all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles" controlled by dominant power figures who shape the social reality in which the people reside (pp. 1, 4). By controlling perceived reality, political spectacles contribute to the public's accepted ideology. However, that ideology's very existence is co-constructed by the people. As such, power figures simply must ensure that their constructed reality aligns with the people's values. In presenting these self-ordained realities paralleling co-constructed values and public ideology, those in power can control the narrative of everyday life by "philosophiz[ing] reality" (Debord, 1983, p. 5). Reality might appear to be an objective certainty, but it is really a speculative domain in which "totalitarian [government manages] . . . the conditions of existence" (Debord, 1983, p. 8). Political spectacles define reality for citizens.

Admittedly, un-manipulated realities do not exist. The powerful and the public co-construct the ideology and values to which political spectacles appeal. Nevertheless, those in power captain the political spectacle, engaging in "coercion, propaganda, and the portrayal of issues in terms that entertain, distort, and shock . . . [in order to] extract a public response of any kind" (Edelman, 1988, p. 7). After all, the public must agree with the values reflected in political spectacles to reactively accept their representation of reality. This all-encompassing control within the political spectacle reflects the spectacle's roots in representation. Political spectacle poses that "everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation" (Debord, 1983, p. 1). Political spectacle reorganizes the building blocks of our experiences to form a controlled variation of them (Farrell, 1989), crafting a dramatized interpretation. Because political spectacle is built from representations, everything the spectacle presents as truth is actually a production (Debord, 1983, p. 2). It is reality, but an edited version.

Although political spectacles are representations, citizens value them. The constructed reality of the political spectacle is real to its tenants because it is the reality that they know. After all, "reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real," a concept that legitimizes the society as it stands, even if built upon representation (Debord, 1983, p. 2). The people trust—or at least abide by—those in power, so the people accept the powerful's concept of reality not as depiction, but as definition. However, citizens are not passive and idle observers in this reality. While political spectacle reflects its architect's dominant ideology, "the conditions of existence" established by the political leader (Debord, 1983, p. 8), citizens engage in that very ideology and contribute to its development. They accept the political spectacle not without question, but rather because it aligns with the ideology they themselves helped create. Political spectacle may be a *constructed* version of reality, but it functions as reality because it "exposes and manifests in its fullness the essence of all ideological systems" (Debord, 1983, p. 112). Representation becomes the people's reality because it aligns with their shared belief system.

Visual Spectacle

Like political spectacle, visual spectacle is a representation of reality. However, while political spectacle often focuses on verbal communication, visual spectacle manifests through visible, non-verbal communication, like non-verbal behaviors, expressions, inanimate objects, and imagery. The goals of visual spectacle are two-fold. The first aim is to meet public expectations by engaging in "the construction of beliefs about events, policies, leaders, problems, and crises that rationalize or challenge existing inequalities" (Edelman, 1988, p. 103). It contributes to citizens' overarching ideology and forms shared meaning. Words can certainly generate beliefs and imagery, as well, but visual spectacle develops ideology by providing citizens a visualization that aligns with their beliefs, such as seeing a leader stand tall while confirming the community's strength. In appealing to these beliefs, the visual spectacle both "immobilizes opposition and mobilizes support" (Edelman, 1988, p. 103). The mobilization helps shape visual spectacle's second goal: the creation of a community. The visual spectacle draws together those who are ideologically similar, for "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debord, 1983, p. 1). Through translating images and non-verbal behaviors that evoke specific ideological reflection, individuals become part of a community that translates imagery similarly due to common values. As such, visual spectacle creates shared meaning. The people congregate due to similar translations of visual imagery and, in the process, see their expectations of community-building fulfilled in the visual spectacle.

To date, the visual spectacle has been the predominant focus in the political spectacle's evolution. Research extending the political spectacle has examined visual-oral rhetorics, such as photographs, videos, magazine covers, and speech delivery (i.e., Durham, 2007; Erickson, 1998; Glynn, 2009; Kellner, 2006, 2015). Indeed, visual spectacle is particularly evident in public address (i.e., Cheng, 2006; Kellner, 2007). Political speeches can incorporate political spectacle to establish political credibility, repair broken relations, share political information, and present political agendas (Cheng, 2006). Similarly, when these speeches incorporate spectacles, they can counter negative media coverage of political platforms and initiatives (Kellner, 2007). However, these positive, responsive spectacles are "subject to multiple interpretations, [and thus] they generate ambiguous and often unanticipated effects" (Kellner, 2007, p. 638). For example, while U.S. President George Bush may have intended to create a positive spectacle by emerging from a jet with "Mission Accomplished" waving on a banner behind him, this spectacle backfired and made the Bush administration appear uninformed and naïve (Kellner, 2007). In other words, public addresses may incorporate political spectacles, but those spectacles can make or break the proposed political reality. However, while still evident in political campaigns, speeches are no longer the primary channel of political rhetoric and visual spectacles do not directly account for the textual spectacles found on social networking sites. To begin understanding how political spectacles function on social media, we must re-center political spectacles in our secondarily oral society.

Social Media Spectacle

One way to re-center is by combining elements of both political spectacle and visual spectacle into a hybrid, remediated concept that speaks directly to the realities of online communication. Social media sites have become key platforms in disseminating information and advocating for political issues. Although presidential speeches marry oral and textual communication, these speeches and their political spectacles do not address the rise of secondary orality that privileges simplistic communication over complex, rhetorical flourishes. The short tweet is typed rather than spoken, but it still represents the candidate's spoken discourse. It mirrors the values, beliefs, and sentiments the candidate holds dear, but in condensed, direct form. Despite tweets reflecting the communicative progression that Ong (1982/2012) projected, the political spectacle's theoretical development has seemingly paused at the visual. Admittedly, two scholars, Halloran (2001) and Ryazanova-Clarke (2012), have indirectly contributed to the notion of a secondarily oral spectacle. One argues that written text can stimulate a spectacle (Halloran, 2001). The other hints at online spectacle, noting how Russian President Vladimir Putin engages in

"online politics" to interact with the public (Ryazanova-Clarke, 2012, p. 104). However, Halloran (2001) still differentiates text and political spectacle as separate constructs, while Ryazanova-Clarke (2012) focuses on transcripts of initially oral interactions rather than messages written explicitly for textual distribution. While Halloran's and Ryazanova-Clarke's work suggests a progression toward social media spectacle, their analyses do not explicitly address the framework I am proposing. This is not surprising, as the political spectacle arose well before the social media era began. As such, the political spectacle needs reframing so that it may address the rhetorics of secondary orality evident on social media platforms.

In contrast to political and visual spectacles, which prioritize forming cohesion by meeting expectations and creating a communal "us," social media spectacles differ in both form and function. In form, the social media spectacles are constructed through typed language, encompassing textual comments posted on social media sites. While the potential for visual emojis exists in these messages, as well as oral commentary through news coverage, the bulk is devoted to short, typed messages. The space restraints of Twitter prevent long paragraphs from entering the discourse. Thus, the social media spectacle must make its point succinctly, for there is no space for elaboration. However, the deeper difference is that social media spectacles are not primarily devoted to drawing attention to the person who initiated them. Rather, social media spectacles may instead divert attention toward another person or issue to keep the spotlight away from the spectacles' original architects, reflecting more negative strategies than would political and visual spectacles on other media.

The diversion from the spectacle architect reflects the social media spectacle's purpose. While political spectacles and visual spectacles may involve othering, they primarily seek to create a community. Social media spectacles do not necessarily prioritize community-building. Rather, they prioritize the architect instead. This self-centeredness is best explained by Debord (1983) who elaborates that the political spectacle presents two parts of "the world": one part perceives itself as "superior" to the remaining world, which leaves the rest of the world alienated as a result (pp. 9-10). Moreover, the detachment of "superior" world from majority world does not require consistent reasoning and can even offer contradicting logic (Debord, 1983, p. 6). Logic, consistency, and even facts are subjective because the precedence is attention (re)direction. Although Debord's descriptions are of *political spectacle's* potential divisiveness, his words ring true for social media spectacle, too. The difference between the spectacles is not that one *only* divides and one *only* identifies. Rather, the difference is in the primacy, that political and visual spectacles *primarily* reflect identification, while social media spectacles *primarily* reflect (re)direction of attention from the self to the other.

Indeed, the social media spectacle can draw attention to itself just as political spectacles and visual spectacles do. However, the social media spectacle primarily functions by diverting attention away from the architect. This finger-pointing occurs when the architect does not wish to join the conversation. Instead of engaging, the architect diverts, engaging in "the opposite of quotation" (Debord, 1983, p. 208). Rather than participating in the discourse or even remaining silent, the architect points to an alternative subject. The architect engages in "the fluid language of anti-ideology," refraining from co-contributing to public values (Debord, 1983, p. 208). In doing so, the social media spectacle privileges the architect over the community; if the spectacle serves to (re)direct attention elsewhere, the architect need not contribute to the communal ideology. After all, the point of the social media spectacle is not to develop relationships, but to direct people. While this might sound like Boorstin's (1992, 2007) pseudo-event—a premeditated, human-made, news-worthy event designed to attract attention regardless of truths and realities—social media spectacles differ from pseudo-events in their attention diversion function. For example, a pseudo-event—like Trump's tweet claiming he won both the Electoral College and popular vote in 2016 (see Friedersdorf, 2016)—seeks to direct attention *toward* the rhetorical architect (i.e., Trump). In contrast, a social media spectacle would not center the architect within the message. Rather, the spectacle would shift attention to another person or event rather than toward the rhetorical architect. In other words, both constructs share a disregard for reality, but the pseudo-event attracts while the social media spectacle distracts.

Considering the prominence of political and visual spectacles and their ability to create a communal "us," the social media spectacle's shelving of group cohesion as a primary result is surprising.

The public anticipates being the subject of political discourse, the jury that watches lawyers battle for their ideal verdict. However, the architect of the social media spectacle cares less about the jury and more about the architect. This realization is unsettling to the public, as the social media spectacle privileges self-service. While this emerging public uncertainty might bring the public together, this community would form as an indirect appendage of the social media spectacle.

Trump and the Social Media Spectacle

Trump's political rhetoric on Twitter could be examined for the presence of both political and visual spectacles. However, his tweets deviate from traditional political rhetoric, reflecting a need for a new theoretical construct to explain his rhetorical choices. The informality of his rhetoric suggests a departure from current constructs of online political discourse and a need to revisit how we theorize the spectacles arising in secondarily oral societies. Social media spectacle addresses political rhetorics arising online, while also underscoring the focus on rhetorical architects rather than the public audience. This violates citizen expectations, but reflects the rhetorical complexity and clarifies the distinctiveness of political spectacles found on social media.

My close textual analysis of 119 tweets posted between January 20, 2017 and February 28, 2017 reveals trends that reflect the social media spectacle. As social media spectacle is not limited to campaign rhetoric, I examined the tweets Trump posted during his first month in office to witness his use of spectacle during the rhetorical transition from campaigning candidate to elected official. While my initial process resembled the primary and secondary cycle coding of grounded theorists (e.g., Charmaz, 1983; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I ultimately employed close textual analysis (see Browne, 2016) to identify the rhetorical themes used to persuasively craft meaning among public audiences. All tweets in my artifact set met the following criteria: (1) stemmed from Donald Trump's personal Twitter account (@realDonaldTrump), (2) were typed tweets from the account rather than retweets, (3) focused on political content, and (4) reflected rhetorical themes reminiscent of social media spectacle. Of the 224 tweets Trump created between January 20, 2017 and February 28, 2017, I selected 119 tweets most appropriate for this project.

Although his speeches focused on his supporters, as would be expected in political spectacles, Trump's unification efforts seemed limited to his anthem, "Make America Great Again!" Although he spoke to his followers, he did not prioritize the rhetorical construction of community in his tweets. Instead, he focused on directing attention to other people and issues through three techniques: deliberative sales-pitching, implied heroism, and media redirection. These three techniques are not concrete cornerstones of the social media spectacle, but the social media spectacle does emerge through these techniques. The result is akin to that of a flag person; the social media users briefly notice the person with the flashy clothing and sign, but ultimately pay more attention to the traffic situation the flag person points out, following the flag person's directions to another route. After examining each technique, I will explain how the message compares with that of the political spectacle to illustrate how the social media spectacle theoretically contributes and functions.

Deliberative Sales-Pitching

Although the social media spectacle prioritizes (re)directing attention away from the architect, it must first grab attention to direct it. Thus, the spectacle functions like a persuasive pitch attracting customers to direct them to a product that could benefit their future, reflecting the employment of deliberative rhetoric. The social media spectacle accomplishes this direction through (1) soundbites that imply political positions and (2) dramatic capitalization.

Soundbites
Catchy soundbites help political figures imply their political positions online. For instance, Trump's tweet, "We will follow two simple rules: BUY AMERICAN & HIRE AMERICAN!" makes his

position on employment clear. Social media users read between the short line, interpreting his succinct statement as an indicator that Trump supports American business and wants to keep that business within the country's borders. Similarly, when he tweets, "A new radical Islamic terrorist has just attacked the Louvre Museum in Paris. Tourists were locked down. France on edge again. GET SMART U.S.," he does not explicitly condemn radical Islam as the root issue, but with the short sentence "GET SMART U.S.," he gives users a rhetorical wink. He need not state his opinion outright. He merely needs to hint at it and in doing so, he directs the people's attention away from his person and toward the issue at hand (in these cases, employment and terrorism).

These soundbites could be perceived as political spectacle because they provide a perception of reality, one that is fraught with terrorism, but one that could be made safer with secure borders that contain American businesses and jobs safely inside. The soundbites also seem to make a political stance on public issues. Indeed, there is a fine line between political spectacle and social media spectacle in this case. Nevertheless, the slight difference lies in the implication of opinion. Because tweets are confined by characters, there is little space to articulate thoughts. Thus, we might expect that political figures would write directly to make their positions clear. However, when a tweet employs social media spectacle, it may reveal more ambiguous language. Rather than a clear declaration, it may coyly hint that the architect holds an opinion on the issue but direct attention to the issue itself—even solutions—rather than the architect's perspective. Their opinion is present, but subtly interwoven. Trump certainly hints at his opinions regarding employment, business, and terrorism, but rather than stating his opinions outright, he treats them as if they are obvious. As such, he can call for the solution ("BUY AMERICAN & HIRE AMERICAN!") and warn of the alleged problem ("GET SMART U.S.") without directly placing himself in the message. Social media spectacle allows him to treat his presumption as fact and jump ahead to proactive and preventative measures.

Capitalization

One structural feature of these two example tweets is the capitalization of all letters. This technique also feeds into the deliberative sales-pitching of the social media spectacle, but not just because capital letters look loud. They also indicate importance, especially regarding future implications of current actions. By foreshadowing potential responses to issues, capitalization allows social media spectacles to draw attention to the message, but not necessarily the messenger.

Moreover, capitalization underlines the message's importance by foreshadowing potential responses to political issues. Take, for example, the following tweet: "If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech . . . NO FEDERAL FUNDS?" This tweet capitalizes for emphasis, but also to highlight what might occur if the university restricts free speech. Similarly, when Trump tweets, "It all begins today! . . . THE MOVEMENT CONTINUES – THE WORK BEGINS!" and "SEE YOU IN COURT, THE SECURITY OF OUR NATION IS AT STAKE!", he underlines that today's actions (e.g., allowing free speech, working for the movement, going to court) affect the future (e.g., funding, the movement's future, national security). Rhetorically, capitalization forecasts future consequences. In doing so, the technique directs attention to how present actions affect the future, rather than on the person pointing out the potential outcomes. By foreshadowing, capitalization helps the social media spectacle direct the public toward the chain reaction from present to future. The point of capitalization is to give the *spectacle* attention.

Even though the intention is to gain attention, the result of social media spectacle is still rhetorical distraction. Certainly, a capitalized phrase draws the eye toward the tweet, but the message within that capitalized phrase is what truly captivates the social media user. Future possibilities spark uncertainty, which pulls the focus away from the message architect. While politicians might incorporate political spectacles to draw attention to themselves, they would incorporate social media spectacle if they wanted to heighten awareness of issues without placing themselves in the conversation. Social media spectacle allows for the sharing of issues and abstract distribution of opinions without *explicitly* associating the architect with a position.

Implied Heroism

Joining social media spectacle's toolbox of deliberative sales-pitching is implied heroism. Social media spectacles can subtly cast political leaders as saviors within contentious contexts, but without explicit declaration of said heroism. This is evident (1) in Trump's rhetorical framing of himself as protagonist and (2) in his assertions about unexpected spaces.

Protagonist Self

The subtle framing of self as protagonist is one way in which social media spectacles emerge. When political figures present themselves as saviors and, more importantly, others as villains, these figures can create dramatic tension and divert attention to the constructed other. Trump establishes himself as the national protagonist to form a narrative of contention between himself and the villainized others, a narrative that draws public attention. In Trump's case, the antagonists are those who he dislikes and those who offer dissenting critiques. He types, "The crackdown on illegal criminals is merely the keeping of my campaign promise. Gang members, drug dealers & others are being removed!" to frame certain demographics as nefarious. When he types, "The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!", he condemns news organizations who disagree with his policies. Similarly, he frames the Democratic Party as the opponent when he declares, "Democrats had to come up with a story as to why they lost the election, and badly (306), so they made up a story – RUSSIA!" Sometimes, the antagonist is even more broadly defined. Trump may not define his enemy when he declares "We must keep 'evil' out of our country!", but he certainly maintains his hero role when making such claims. After all, he "call[s his] own shots, largely based on an accumulation of data, and everyone knows it. Some FAKE NEWS media, in order to marginalize, lies!" Trump makes it clear: *they* are the enemy, not *me*.

In his role as the hero, Trump constructs a dramatic plot within his administration's saga. In his tweets, he identifies and focuses on the dissenting parties. When he declares, "Any negative polls are fake news, just like CNN, ABC, NBC polls in the election. Sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting," he labels critics as untrustworthy while portraying himself as the person who is just trying to do the people's bidding. However, he does not necessarily articulate that he is the hero of the story. Rather, he often remains on the sidelines of his plotline by focusing on his antagonists to create dramatic tension and draw viewer attention, just not toward Trump himself. As the aforementioned tweet notes, he is "sorry, people want border security and extreme vetting." He portrays himself as the messenger and the avenger who serves at the pleasure of the people. Although political spectacles typically strive to positively portray the political figure, they seek to shine the spotlight directly on that figure, the architect. Although social media spectacles are indirectly garnering attention, they do so not by drawing attention to the architect, but rather to the villains. Even though the social media spectacle simultaneously constructs the architect as the hero, the architect is seemingly a hero by default, not by design.

Discussion of Unexpected Spaces

To further direct attention away from the architect and paradoxically position the architect as a de facto hero, the social media spectacle can also indicate indirect heroism by focusing on unexpected spaces. Namely, the social media spectacle can shift political attention from Washington to alternative locations to imply a political figure's problem-solving ability. Trump entered the White House by perceptually centering political power among citizens, declaring "January 20th 2017, will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again." He started his presidency under the pretense that the people "are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People." While this could be interpreted as a commitment to leaving the citizens be, Trump's future tweeted spectacles reflect that it is a foreshadowing of Trump's emergence in spaces outside of Washington.

The expectation might be for the presidential architect to positively address such spaces. After all, criticizing spaces could reflect negatively on the architect. However, critical statements about spaces

might divert attention more than positive applause because the criticism itself deviates from expectations of political decorum. For instance, when Trump declares, "If Chicago doesn't fix the horrible "carnage" going on, 228 shootings in 2017 with 42 killings (up 24% from 2016), I will send in the Feds!", he draws the public attention to violence in the Windy City. Although he does so by threatening federal intervention, his critiques ultimately point someplace far away from his person. Similarly, he makes sweeping remarks about dangers overseas, like, "Iran is playing with fire – they don't appreciate how 'kind' President Obama was to them. Not me!" and "The threat from radical Islamic terrorism is very real, just look at what is happening in Europe and the Middle-East. Courts must act fast!" In making a spectacle of foreign powers' alleged weaknesses, Trump frames those spaces as problematic areas in need of intervention or avoidance. Even though he inserts himself briefly, insisting he will sternly handle pressure from Iran, the emphasis is on the space and the issue within, not on the person who solves the puzzle. However, the presence of self is not required for the introduction of unexpected spaces to be effective. For example, when Trump declares, "Mexico has taken advantage of the U.S. for long enough. Massive trade deficits and little help on the very weak border must change, NOW!", he does not place himself in the message. Rather, he condemns another country, a surprising choice for a political figure to make on a casual social networking site. Neither international nor domestic spaces are safe. In fact, by calling out recognizable public spaces, like Chicago and—as the aforementioned tweet notes—UC Berkeley, Trump problematizes their existence in public life. Everyday spaces become political battlegrounds. As such, the critiques shock the public, further define in-groups and out-groups, and seemingly disintegrate feelings of community, the latter of which runs counter to the political spectacle's common result. The architect can present a social media spectacle to make the public aware of national and international problems. In doing so, the architect becomes both a source of perceived knowledge and solutions, potentially heightening public faith in the architect's heroic capabilities.

Media Redirection

Through dramatization and hero-villain portrayal, the social media spectacle redirects the attention gathered through deliberative sales-pitching and implied heroism toward, yet past the message's architect. One way the spectacle achieves this is through the media coverage of said messages. Due to the inflammatory divisiveness of tweets framing a villainous figure, such messages may trend on social media. Unsurprisingly, news media may cover said tweets or use them as evidence in their own reports. In "retweeting" the tweets outside of the social media platform, the news media further perpetuate the messages.

Trump employs social media spectacles to redirect the news media by emphasizing content and context and minimizing his participation within them. When Trump tweeted that he would "be asking for a major investigation into VOTER FRAUD, including those registered to vote in two states," news organizations like the *New York Times*, *Associated Press*, and *Los Angeles Times* quickly noted the tweet's hypocrisy (Burke, 2017; Lee, 2017; McCann, 2017), namely that multiple members of Trump's cabinet registered to vote in multiple states, including former political aide Steve Bannon (Anderson, 2017; McCann, 2017), former press secretary Sean Spicer (Gold & Crites, 2017; McCann, 2017), son-in-law Jared Kushner (Gold & Crites, 2017; McCann, 2017), and daughter Tiffany Trump (Kim, 2017; McCann, 2017). Greg Phillips, Trump's authority on voter fraud, registered in three states: Alabama, Texas, and Mississippi (Burke, 2017). Once hooked on the hypocrisy, news channels began discussing the legality of being registered to vote in multiple states (Gold & Crites, 2017; McCann, 2017). As the conversations broadened, Trump and his tweet became the opening narrative. Nevertheless, he received publicity (Domonoske, 2017; Martin, 2017; Newkirk, 2017; Pindell, 2017; Quigley, 2017). The news media may have intended to inform the public and even scold Trump for his divisive discourse, but by commenting, they granted him the attention he desired. Still, his message and the issue it addressed became the story more than he did. By creating messages that would spark the news media's attention, Trump could amplify his stance on the issue while simultaneously redirecting attention from himself to social implications of voter fraud in the American legal system. In this regard, Trump seemingly deploys

a political spectacle as he "offer[s] an appearance of [gaining attention] so long as attention is diverted from the problematic premises" (Edelman, 1988, p. 5). However, rather than diverting attention from the problematic premises of the issue, he diverts attention away from the problematic premises of his character. He becomes secondary to his commentary. As such, Trump simultaneously gains media attention and redirects it away from himself to heighten publicity without having it dwell on his past acts. He keeps the public focused more on what he and others say and less on who he is.

In sum, social media architects draw attention to public issues and divert attention away from themselves. By incorporating soundbites that imply political opinions and capitalization that foreshadows future political actions, the social media spectacle engages a deliberative rhetorical strategy to sell the public on a particular political figure. By suggesting the presence of a protagonist self and villainous others and addressing unexpected spaces to heighten awareness of public issues, the spectacle implies that the figure is a hero by default. Finally, by directing the media toward content and context, the architect directs attention toward issues the architect cares about without drawing attention to the architect's own problems. The architect gains publicity in doing so, but not by placing themselves in the issue. In other words, the architect uses social media to point at problems that do not implicate the architect.

Implications

Social media spectacle highlights how the political architect crafts reality behind the screen. Although the architects of days past have promoted themselves on social media, pointing out the positive attributes they bring to the table, architects today function in a divisive online era. Some architects function in that era by less explicitly aligning themselves with their opinions online. In doing so, political architects attempt to minimize their personal character flaws, while still articulating their own stances.

The implications of social media spectacles should be considered as rhetorical scholars contemplate how politicians incorporate political spectacles in their social media communication. Specifically, we should consider how the anti-politician platform into which the social media spectacle feeds functions as the spectacle itself. We see the emergence of the anti-politician if we return to Trump's tweets. Even though his incorporation of social media spectacle reveals political savviness, Trump's tweets reflect an anti-politician platform and allow him to deviate from expectations. Although his tweets seem like casual afterthoughts due to their informal structure, Trump's social media usage reflects some degree of political strategizing. While he claims not to be a typical politician and has no background in American politics, Trump's incorporation of social media spectacle indicates that this very claim might also be part of the spectacle. In other words, Trump claims political inexperience to distract from his strategized decisions. This does not mean that he possesses the contextual knowledge to run a country, but it does indicate that he understands how to play the game. Therefore, it is vital for the American public to view anti-politician claims as social media spectacles, potential distractions from something politically significant. Scholars should consider how anti-political identities are constructed and maintained through spectacles on social media.

Additionally, political rhetoricians should contemplate the dialectic of division-unification emerging from social media spectacles. Trump's use of social media spectacle reflects that division can be paradoxically initiated to unite a community through shared knowledge rather than splinter it. When diverting attention, Trump continuously underlines political issues that affect significant populations (i.e., terrorism). While highlighting these issues, Trump condemns the villains and binds the non-villains together. This interplay of division and unification is not uncommon in group communication literature and rhetorical studies. Nevertheless, the interactions between online political spectacle and the division-unification dialectic have yet to be fully dissected. Researchers specializing in political communication, computer-mediated communication, and/or mass communication might explore how simultaneous unification and division occur on social media platforms.

Finally, social media spectacle as theoretical extension warrants deeper consideration in communication studies. As previously established, social media spectacle draws similarities to the established political spectacle. However, I have argued that both the form and function of online

communication calls us to revisit how we conceptualize computer-mediated communication in a society that radiates secondary orality. As the political messages online evolve, the theories we use to examine them must also adapt. Still, social media spectacle needs further consideration to complete its development as a metatheoretical concept. The functions I have put forth today are reflective of social media spectacle, but they are not all inclusive. They are based on the rhetorical social media usage of one man alone. Social media spectacle must be explored among the online rhetoric of more political figures. Moreover, questions remain regarding how the spectacle might emerge differently when employed among different demographic groups online. I still question the following: How might social media spectacle manifest differently when the partisan/ideological identities of architect and audience (mis)align on a medium? How might the political rhetoric of Black Twitter challenge my assertions about social media spectacle's privileging of self over community? How do social media spectacles emerge within image repairing attempts in the wake of sexist and racist campaign rhetoric? In short, Trump's tweets reveal techniques that function as social media spectacle, but these are preliminary observations of a construct that still needs to be finessed. Scholars might compare how other political figures tweet to grow the extension to its potential.

Conclusion

Social media spectacles are representations of reality. They are constructed, which should be kept in mind when considering the meaning within online political rhetorics. In fact, it is critical to interpret power figures' proposed *Reality* as a representation of *a reality* instead. To deem a political voice to regurgitate absolute Truth is to ignore the influence of framing, motivation, and context. A power figure's projection is a factor-laden argument, not irrefutable Truth. Social media spectacle reminds citizens of a need to view architects as presenting a viewpoint, but not the only viewpoint available. In doing so, citizens may develop healthy questioning of "absolute truths" presented by power figures and recognize alternative realities. In essence, social media spectacle's explanation of reality representation provides citizens a means to actively check political power rather than passively accept constructed reality.

This essay explored the development of social media spectacle through Trump's online political rhetoric. As his tweets reveal, contemporary politicians may incorporate spectacles that breach citizen expectations, garner attention, and divert the public gaze to public issues rather than to the tweet's architect. By analyzing Trump tweets, this criticism identified similarities and differences between political spectacle and social media spectacle. After evaluating the attention-seeking or diverting tendencies of Trump's signature tweet trends—and their resulting divisiveness—the essay explained why Trump might tweet in such a style and how social media spectacle directs the nation's focus.

Those who contemplate the political rhetoric of social media may find that social media spectacle clarifies how text-based communication functions and what intentions might lie between the lines. This essay sought to demonstrate the scholarly value of social media spectacle in the hope of encouraging its incorporation in the contemporary scholarship of those whose interest lies in the transition to text-based communication in political discourse. Scholars studying social media and political rhetoric might construct insightful questions and discover intriguing implications from texts that intersect human communication of past and present, of oral, textual, *and* technological media.

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