

Chapter 11

A Historic First: The President of the United States as/is a Cyberbully

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the nature, processes, and effects of Donald Trump’s social media uses, Twitter in particular, to cyberbully individuals, groups, and organizations. Trump’s discourse constitutes his role as a “cyberbully” and the “targets” of his attacks. Trump’s social media discourse also illustrates how power, intimidation, and aggression are contextually situated within the relationship between the president and the public. The president’s social media messages—which for historically marginalized groups such as women, nonwhites, and nonwhite immigrants constitute their everyday lived experiences—additionally function to preserve communication systems that keep those groups in marginalized positions within a white supremacist ideological framework. As a result, this discursive environment creates a form of “presidential cyberbullying” where the most influential person in the United States, and the world, consistently employs a modern communication technology not to uplift and unite, but to attack and aggress many of the people whom he is charged with serving.

INTRODUCTION

He regularly takes to Twitter to lash out at his perceived enemies. In fact, he attacks someone or something in more than half of his tweets.

Shear et al., *The New York Times*, 2019

My use of social media is not Presidential – it’s MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL. Make America Great Again!

President Donald J. Trump, *Twitter*, 2017

When you give a crazed crying lowlife a break, and give her a job at the White House, I guess it just didn’t work out. Good work by General Kelly for quickly firing that dog!

President Donald J. Trump, *Twitter*, 2018

Since the day he was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States of America on January 20, 2017, Donald J. Trump has used social media to create an unprecedented and unsettling state of affairs in U.S. presidential history. President Trump uses a social media platform known as “Twitter” to *cyberbully* individuals, groups, and organizations (Holder, 2017). Trump’s tweets construct a discourse that constitutes his role as a “cyberbully” (Piotrowski, 2012) and his perceived enemies as his “targets” (Einarsen et al., 2011). President Trump’s social media discourse also illustrates how power, intimidation, and aggression are contextually situated within the relationship between the president and his targets, many of whom are the citizens he is supposed to serve, including former cabinet members, diplomats, whistleblowers, athletes, journalists, and entertainers (Lee & Quealy, 2019).

This chapter locates President Donald Trump’s cyberbullying behaviors in the context of workplace cyberbullying research (Baruch, 2005; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010) and abusive supervision (Ashforth, 1994, 1997; Tepper, 2000; Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). Specifically, Trump’s use of Twitter to cyberbully internal (e.g., former cabinet members and political opponents) and external (e.g., private citizens such as entertainers and athletes) stakeholders creates a toxic institutional context that has adverse consequences for the democratic institutions of civil society (e.g., the federal government apparatus and the electorate). Therefore, this chapter advances a particular type of organizational cyberbullying: President Donald J. Trump’s *presidential cyberbullying*. This communication phenomenon represents an emergent problematic practice worthy of observation and analysis due to its present and latent harmful effects—for example, the potential long-term consequences of Trump’s penchant for promoting distrust in the election process.

This chapter’s subject is particularly troubling given the vast amount of symbolic power and influence that *the person* at the center of this narrative possesses, namely, the President of the United States of America. President Donald Trump’s incessant virtual attacks in the first three and a half years of his presidency lead to an irrevocable and painful conclusion: The 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, behaves as/is a cyberbully. The chapter illustrates how President Trump routinely engages in presidential cyberbullying, a practice whereby the most influential person in the United States, and the world, uses communication platforms such as Twitter not to uplift and unite, but to aggress many of the

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