

Chapter 20

Profiting From the “Trump Bump”: The Effects of Selling Negativity in the Media

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contributes to scholarship in the fields of media ecology and political communication by investigating the effects of the Trump bump in media-driven democracy. Specifically, it explains how the media’s obsession with Donald Trump allowed them to capitalize on his political brand, which in turn contributed to changing the tone of political discourse in the United States. The effects of mediatisation, including click-bait framing, increased negativity, and person-centered media coverage, had a distinct impact on the behavior of political actors and the political system as a whole. The dominance of marketing logic in contemporary media democracies provides a compelling argument for critical investigation of brand appropriation in political communication and its impact on the state of democracy. This chapter advocates for the further investigation of the current media ecosystem in order to move toward a public deliberation model that would support enhanced media literacy and citizen engagement in public policy debates.

INTRODUCTION

In a perfect world, a free press would support democracy by delivering fair and balanced news that represents both sides of the story and allows readers to draw their own conclusions. Ideally, news makers would always be mindful of a personal responsibility to provide their audiences “with proper historical context, diverse perspectives, and explicit linkages to the officials responsible for policy outcome[s]”

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(Entman, 1989, p. 21). In practice, however, news stories frequently support selective constructions of reality.

In 2017, the Mason CARP lab released a report stating that the media ecosystem has significantly transformed in recent years, becoming extremely prone to negativity and conducive to incivility and character assassination practices (Icks et al, 2017). According to the report, the decline in journalistic standards (e.g., independent interpretation of events) and frequent media bias have also become more evident in recent years. A primary concern is the increasing mediatization of society, resulting from the pervasive integration of media logic into the operation of other social institutions (Esser & Matthes, 2013). One critical impact of mediatization on politics is that the production of news content is ever more dictated by commercial imperatives and consumers’ expectations rather than by substantive policy issues.

In line with this logic, some political brands have steady commodity value. In the context of a “culture war” between progressives and conservatives, materials supporting emotion-driven politics prove especially lucrative to media producers. Since the 2016 U.S. primaries, any content related to Donald Trump has become a hot commodity on the media market, contributing to the economic revival of many traditional media outlets. This has trapped media and audience alike in a Trump filter bubble, with a significant impact on American society.

This chapter sets out to accomplish several objectives. First, it discusses the effects of mediatization on the political system by focusing on framing practices, personalization, and negativity as drivers of commercial logic. Next, it explains how the media’s appropriation of Donald Trump’s political brand saw the economic revival of many mainstream mass media outlets (a phenomenon known as “the Trump bump”). The chapter concludes by explaining the effects of the Trump bump on today’s democracy.

THE EFFECTS OF MEDIATIZATION ON WESTERN SOCIETIES

In many Western democracies, the role of mass media has grown disproportionately compared to that of other democratic institutions (Esser & Matthes, 2013). Contemporary media scholars refer to Western societies as *media democracies* (Donges, 2016) in which democratic functions increasingly rely on mass communication infrastructure. The media are no longer a neutral mediator between citizens and government institutions, but an active player that transform politics by acting in accordance with their own judgments and rules (Mazzoleni & Schultz, 1999).

In this sense, “the mediated reality becomes more important than the actual reality, in the sense that it is mediated reality that people have access to and react to” (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 238). In negative use, the term “media democracy” refers to conditions in which news production becomes driven by media logic rather than society’s needs. The increased intrusion of media logic into the operations of other social institutions as an institutional rule has become known as *mediatization*. In some cases, the adoption of media logic may lead to the substitution of political and judicial functions by the rules of mass media. For example, in his analysis of the famous O. J. Simpson case, Thaler (1997) argues that the media did not just report the case; instead, they were instrumental in creating a spectacle that hijacked American culture.

The development of the Internet and mobile technologies has contributed significantly to the integration of social media marketing into traditional media practices, which in turn has resulted in fragmented media, audience segmentation, and growing ideological polarization (Bonfadelli, 2002; Lee, 2009). Social media have transformed formerly passive readers into highly active contributors and agents of persuasion

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