From Communication to Performance: Media and Political Image Strategies in the Age of Trump, 2003 to 2025

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Abstract

This article examines how Donald Trump systematically deployed media and communication tools, from reality television and Twitter to Truth Social, podcasts, and viral imagery, to reshape public perceptions, disintermediate traditional journalism, and blur the boundary between political leadership and entertainment spectacle. The study also suggests that Trump's communicative practices signify a paradigmatic transformation in political communication, characterised by the principles of performativity, spectacle, and parasocial intimacy, rather than traditional institutional norms. Utilising theories of mediatisation, the society of the spectacle, agenda-setting, and performative politics, the paper examines six major phases of Trump's media strategy, from The Apprentice to the 2024 assassination attempt photos. The analysis reveals three key findings. First, Trump systematically inverted traditional agenda-setting by transforming media coverage from a gatekeeping function into a mechanism for amplifying spectacle. Second, performative acts (MAGA branding, viral imagery, platform ownership) constituted political substance rather than representation. Third, parasocial bonds forged through entertainment media (The Apprentice) provided the foundation for sustained political mobilisation. To better understand post-digital political communication, the paper presents the concept of the communicative-performative repertoire. It shows that rather than being a personal characteristic, performative politics is a structural aspect of platform-mediated democracy.

Keywords: *Donald Trump, political communication, social media, mediatisation, performative politics*

1.0 Introduction

When Donald Trump raised his bloodied fist moments after a bullet grazed his ear at a Pennsylvania rally on July 13, 2024, he transformed an assassination attempt into an instant political icon. This urge to turn crisis into spectacle and weakness into visual power marks a major shift in how democratic politicians communicate with the public. Before the 21st century, politicians and leaders relied on a professional press corps to get their ideas and agendas to the public. But the way politics and the media work together has evolved a lot since then. Messini [28] states that the digital revolution has enabled new methods of direct communication, fundamentally changing the conventional structure of political information dissemination and making it faster and more efficient. These days, politicians use media performances to shape public perception of politics rather than just deliver information. Donald J. Trump, the 45th and 47th president of the United States, who won two elections in 2016 and 2024, has leveraged this structural change more intentionally and firmly than any other political leader.

Trump's approach to political communication goes beyond tactical social media use. McNair [27] claims that digital media platforms enable politicians to get around traditional media and engage directly with the public, therefore enhancing voter outreach efficiency. Trump did not just take advantage of this opportunity. Trump transformed the fundamental rules of political communication along the way. In early

October 2017, he was described as "possibly the first 'social media' and 'reality TV' president", considering his presence on social media and television before his political party [9, 11]. Trump did not merely adapt to the media logic, but he took it in and changed it, going from being the target of media coverage to the main force behind it. This article argues that this shift from the usual way of setting agendas is among the most important developments in modern political communication.

This article has two main claims. First, Trump's political communication can be understood as a type of performance in the sociological perspective proposed by Goffman [13] and refined by media literature, an ongoing, multi-platform staging of political identity that prioritises emotional resonance over policy content. Secondly, this performance is not coincidental. It illustrates a consistent, changing, strategic method rooted in the principles of media spectacle, one that reversed the conventional direction of agenda-setting, turning Trump from a target of media attention into its primary driver.

The analysis goes in order and finds six different parts of Trump's media strategy: (1) using reality TV to build his brand before he ran for office; (2) the Twitter campaign of 2015–16; (3) the rhetorical building of a populist crisis; (4) the Make America Great Again (MAGA) brand and its symbolic economy; (5) the move to Truth Social after the ban and the 2023 mugshot pivot; and (6) the multimedia and podcast strategy of the 2024 campaign, which ended with the famous images of the Butler, Pennsylvania assassination attempt. When put together, these phases make up what this article calls a communicative-performative repertoire, a synthesising framework that draws together existing theories of mediatisation, spectacle, and performative politics into a single longitudinal account, rather than a wholly new theoretical construct.

Three research questions guide this article. The primary question is how Trump has deployed media and communication tools across distinct phases of his political career to construct and maintain a political image. The second question examines how Trump's strategy represents a systematic inversion of the traditional agenda-setting function of mainstream journalism. Third, how do theories of mediatization, the society of the spectacle, agenda-setting, and performative politics explain the effectiveness of Trump's communication and performance skills? Moreover, the article contributes to political communication scholarship in three ways. First, this study provides a unified longitudinal analysis of Trump's communicative strategy across all major phases from 2003 to 2025. Secondly, it introduces the concept of the communicative-performative repertoire as an integrative framework. Finally, it advances the empirical case for understanding performative politics as a structural feature of post-digital democracy rather than a product of individual personality.

2.0 Literature Review

The communication aspects of Trump's political career have been studied in depth by political communication scholars, producing a large and growing body of work across several subfields. However, this body of work is still broken up by field of study and time period, with studies focusing on separate platforms, stages, or rhetorical features rather than providing a unified linear account. This section organises existing literature into four thematic clusters, including social media and political communication, rhetoric and populist discourse, celebrity politics and entertainment media, and visual and performative politics, before identifying the gap that the present analysis addresses.

2.1 Social Media, Disintermediation, and Agenda-Setting

Scholars have been studying Trump's connection to social media, especially Twitter, for a long time. Trump's Twitter campaign in 2016 was marked by strategic authenticity. Shane's [38] study shows that Trump acted casually on social media, setting him apart from other candidates and appealing to those who didn't trust professional political communication. Zhang et al. [49] subsequently showed that, even after the shift to Truth Social following Trump's 2021 Twitter ban, his social media activity retained a measurable capacity to attract mainstream news attention. However, the effect was smaller and more focused among biased media sources. These studies collectively establish that Trump's social media use was not merely reactive but functioned as a proactive agenda-shaping mechanism.

Minot et al. [29] and Lewandowsky et al. [25] provide the most empirically rigorous analysis of this dynamic, demonstrating that increased Trump Twitter activity directly preceded reduced media coverage of politically damaging topics, including the Mueller investigation, thereby providing quantitative evidence for a systematic political diversion strategy. In addition, Boucher & Thies [4] and Kreis [23] examined Trump's use of Twitter for populist purposes, namely how the platform's affordances (shortness, directness, immediacy) met the needs of populist rhetoric, which prioritises unmediated communication with 'the people' over discourse mediated by institutions. However, although these studies shed light on particular mechanisms, none capture the complete journey from Twitter dominance to platform exile and strategic reinvention over a longer timeframe.

Although this research demonstrates Trump's proficiency in platform-based agenda manipulation, it ignores how his rhetorical style enhanced these platform impacts. The discourse analysis literature fills this gap.

2.2 Populist Rhetoric and Discursive Strategies

Political linguists and discourse analysts have extensively studied Trump's distinctive rhetorical register. Multiple studies have found the same things in what experts call "Trump-speak". It uses simple words, repetition, emotional exaggeration, and a clear-cut contrast between good people and corrupt elites [3, 15, 34]. In a comparative critical discourse analysis of Trump and Harris's 2024 campaign speeches, Wicke & Bolognesi [47] discovered that Trump's "impact leadership" rhetoric used urgency, simplicity, and emotional resonance to appeal to working-class and economically anxious voters by fusing nationalistic framing with fear-based appeals. Elnakkouzi [10] and Nordensvard & Ketola [30] further showed how Trump used a problem-solution structure to position himself as the only way to address immigration, economic instability, and national security threats. This reinforced a "us versus them" narrative that is consistent with populist mobilisation theory.

The research on how Trump used the phrase "fake news" as a tool is especially important. Ross & Rivers [33] illustrated that Trump utilised 'fake news' via a triangular approach of assault, defence, and imposition, not only countering specific reports but systematically undermining the institutional credibility of journalism itself. Later empirical work has shown what happened to the public's trust in media institutions in the long run. Even with all this study, most analyses of Trump's rhetoric focus on single campaigns or speeches, failing to examine how his rhetoric and strategies have changed over time.

Although these studies clearly document Trump's distinct language register, they primarily treat speech as separate from the entertainment media roots that gave his populist persona credibility with viewers, a link examined in celebrity politics research.

2.3 Celebrity Politics, Entertainment Media, and Parasocial Bonds

A separate area of research in political communication has examined how celebrity culture and political involvement might affect one another. Both Street [42] and Wheeler [46] say that Trump is the perfect example of a celebrity politician, whose power in politics does not come from institutional credentials or policy knowledge but from being well-known in popular culture and playing a well-known public persona. Archer et al. [1] observe that celebrity politicians have disproportionate epistemic power (the ability to change what people believe) that works mostly without any relevant expertise, which supports this frame. This poses specific problems for deliberative theories of democratic legitimacy.

The most direct empirical evidence for the political effects of celebrity politics comes from Kim & Patterson [18]. Their groundbreaking study showed that Trump's long-term exposure to "The Apprentice" fostered parasocial bonds with viewers, leading to measurable support for him in the 2016 Republican primary. They used Nielsen ratings, show transcripts, and pre-election survey data to show that the show created an "uncontested, one-sided information flow" about Trump's qualities. This show made regular viewers much more likely to trust him, to ignore negative coverage, and to discuss his business persona

when explaining their vote. They came to the important conclusion that "the study of the American voter cannot be removed from the study of the American viewer." [18]. This conclusion has significant implications for the field of studying how political images are made. Still, this body of research has not been systematically linked to Trump's later social media strategies. This lack of research means that the continuity between his media career before and after his political career has not been fully studied.

This literature reveals the pre-political roots of Trump's political power. However, it does not establish a systematic link between celebrity capital and his later visual and symbolic techniques, which have been the subject of performative political studies.

2.4 Visual and Performative Politics

In the age of social media, there is much more research on the visual and physical aspects of political communication. Using symbolic repetition, Bareis and Katzenbach [2] argue that political performative acts are not mere extras on the surface but essential parts of political reality that shape how people see things, create emotional states, and strengthen authority. Using a case study of Trump's border wall, Kolås and Oztig [22] expand on this point by showing how political objects gain communicative force through media staging and visual circulation. Koenig and Mendelberg [21], in their research on the symbolic politics surrounding the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, reveal that Trump serves not just as a political figure but also as the movement's key symbolic element, with his image representing a restoration of status and a shared identity for his supporters.

The visual turn in political communication research has also begun to address the communicative dimensions of specific iconic images. Scholars working in Debord's tradition of the society of the spectacle have analysed Trump as the consummate image politician, one whose presidency 'reflects the integration of politics and economics by way of the spectacle' [17]. Nonetheless, current research on visual communication has focused on Trump's imagery in a fragmented way, examining individual photographs or branding components without thoroughly exploring how visual strategies connect to platform choices and rhetorical trends over time.

2.5 Research Gap

When combined, these four scholarly collections reveal distinct political communication methods of Trump, including his use of social media, his rhetoric, his celebrity background, and his visual strategies. The present literature, however, lacks a single longitudinal account that traces these mechanisms across all significant phases of Trump's political career, from The Apprentice in 2003 to the 2024 presidential victory. Current research is predominantly focused on individual platforms, phases, or methodologies. While the constituent theoretical building blocks (mediatization, spectacle, agenda-setting, performative politics) are well established, they have not previously been synthesised into a single chronological narrative that traces how each stage builds upon the last. This article addresses this gap modestly: it does not propose new theory, but rather synthesises the communicative-performative repertoire as an integrative analytical lens, and demonstrates its utility through a six-phase, chronological case study.

3.0 Theoretical Framework

Four interrelated theoretical frameworks provide the analytical scaffolding for this study. While each originates in a distinct intellectual tradition, together they constitute a coherent account of how political communication in the post-digital era operates through the production and circulation of performative images rather than the transmission of policy content.

3.1 Mediatisation of Politics

The concept of mediatization provides the overarching framework for this analysis. It refers to a process in which political life increasingly conforms to the logic of media rather than its own institutional logic [27, 43]. Scholars have documented the growing dominance of media logic. It shapes how politics is communicated and practised [27]. Trump's campaigns represent one of the most complete expressions of mediatised politics to date. In this context, the media spectacle is not just a secondary representation of political activity. It becomes the primary terrain of politics [17, 43].

Strömbäck's [43] framework distinguishes four phases of mediatization. The most advanced phase refers to politicians who actively adopt media logic as their own. Trump's political career reflects this stage. He adapted to media demands. He also absorbed and redirected them. As a result, the spectacle becomes the core of political substance [43].

3.2 The Society of the Spectacle

French theorist Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle in 1967 theorised a society dominated by a constant stream of images [8]. These images define social life. In such a society, people become spectators rather than participants. Pseudo-events and pseudo-actors also become central. Scholars have updated Debord's framework for the age of digital capitalism. They argue that the spectacle is now digitally mediated. This digitally mediated spectacle has contributed to Trump's election as U.S. president [17]. Within this intellectual tradition, Trump is understood as the consummate image politician. He performs a commodified version of the self in a very complete way. As a result, he becomes the spectacle itself rather than someone who merely uses it. As one analysis concludes, his presidency "reflects the integration of politics and economics by way of the spectacle" [17].

3.3 *Agenda-Setting and Its Inversion*

Agenda-setting theory argues that media organisations shape public perceptions of issue importance through selective coverage [26]. Trump's communication style is the opposite of this logic. He used social media to set the agenda and make news organisations follow it. This method enables him to get beyond traditional gatekeeping and directly influence what people pay attention to. Empirical research supports this dynamic, showing that heightened Twitter engagement by Trump preceded reduced media attention to negative matters, serving as a form of political diversion [25].

3.4 *Performative* politics

Closely related to mediatization is the concept of performative politics. Political performance refers to the fact that political activity is more than making policies or running institutions. It is a symbolic, theatrical, and philosophical process through which politicians build public identities, perform rhetorical events, and show their authority to audiences [2, 22]. In cultures saturated with media and digital content, political activities derive legitimacy and influence not only from their substantive effects but also from their visual and narrative presentation [22]. Bareis and Katzenbach [2] assert that performative acts are not mere surface embellishments but are integral to the construction of political reality, influencing public perception, establishing emotional atmospheres, and reinforcing institutional authority through repetitive symbolic representation. For politicians who work in a world where the media is very important, performance becomes the most important part of politics. In this light, Trump's rise to power and fame can be seen as largely performative. His unfiltered rallies, speeches, and social media posts, as well as his portrayal of himself as a strong leader, have all contributed to this.

Taken together, these four frameworks, mediatization, spectacle, inverted agenda-setting, and performative politics, provide complementary lenses for the six-phase analysis that follows. Their combination yields what this article terms the communicative-performative repertoire, a coherent, evolving approach to political image construction that is distinct from both conventional political marketing and the ad hoc social media strategies of less strategically sophisticated political actors.

4.0 Methodology

This article adopts a longitudinal qualitative multi-case study design, with a historical-narrative dimension, well-suited to tracing the evolution of complex communication phenomena across extended time horizons [39, 48]. The unit of analysis is the communicative phase, operationalised through clusters of public communication events and media artefacts within six purposively selected periods; individual events (e.g., a specific tweet, broadcast, or photograph) serve as evidence within each phase, while the six phases themselves are compared longitudinally. This article selects six phases from 2003 to 2024 for investigation. Case selection follows an explicit purposive strategy rather than convenience: phases were included on the basis of (i) temporal significance in Trump's communication trajectory, (ii) variation in media/platform form, (iii) evidence of strategic adaptation across time, (iv) relevance to the four theoretical lenses outlined in Section 3, and (v) availability of triangulatable public evidence. Phases such as Trump's early 1980s–1990s celebrity appearances or isolated post-2024 Truth Social posts were excluded because they satisfy fewer of these criteria; they either lack sufficient documentary convergence or do not mark a distinct communicative regime. This selection logic draws explicitly on Seawright and Gerring's [37] framework for purposive case selection in small-N qualitative research, wherein cases are chosen to maximise analytically meaningful variation on the phenomenon of interest rather than for convenience.

The analysis draws on three types of literature. The main sources include Trump's social media archives and public statements, campaign materials, and media reports on major news events at the time. Secondary materials include peer-reviewed academic papers in political communication, discourse analysis, media research, and political science. Quantitative contextual data, including the number of fans, fundraising, number of tweets, and audience indicators, which comes from published reports of research institutions and academic research, and is used for examples rather than inference. Therefore, this study employs literature analysis as part of its qualitative research method, examining public texts and visual materials related to the research problems [5].

Each phase is analysed using a three-layer interpretation framework, operationalised as follows. At the event level, the coder records the manifest content of the communication behaviour: what was said or displayed, the platform used, and the date of occurrence. At the strategic level, the coder places this behaviour within Trump's broader communication trajectory, coding for continuity with, or departure from, practices established in prior phases. At the theoretical level, the case is coded against the four frameworks in Section 3 (mediatisation, spectacle, agenda-setting inversion, performative politics) to extract broader implications for political communication scholarship. To illustrate this coding procedure, consider a worked example drawn from Phase 6: at the event level, the July 2024 Butler, Pennsylvania rally photograph is coded as 'visual artefact: fist-raised image and "Fight, fight, fight" slogan, captured by Associated Press photographer Evan Vucci, 13 July 2024'; at the strategic level, it is coded as 'crisis reframing and visual resilience, consistent with the reframing logic established in Phase 5's mugshot episode'; and at the theoretical level, it is coded as 'performative politics (the act itself constitutes political substance) and society-of-the-spectacle (the image circulates as a self-generating political spectacle).' This hierarchical coding approach aligns with established qualitative case-study analysis, facilitating the connection of precise empirical accounts with overarching theoretical conclusions [39, 48], and permits cross-case comparison to identify the continuities and adaptive transformations in Trump's communication style over time, a synthesis that is foregrounded and elaborated in Section 5.7 before being revisited in the Discussion.

To ensure the analysis was sound, each phase was examined on its own, checking for timing matches between communication events and observable media/election outcomes, the strategic logic that holds across multiple communication platforms, and agreement across multiple scholarly sources. Quantitative figures reported in Section 5 (follower counts, engagement statistics, fundraising totals) were cross-checked against at least one academic or established research organisation source wherever possible. Where a figure originates solely from a press report, this is noted at first mention, and the figure is treated as contextual rather than as the basis for causal claims. For each case, the three-layer coding framework (event-strategic-theoretical) described above was applied systematically, with theoretical coding informed by the four frameworks outlined in Section 3. To address the possibility of interpretive bias toward spectacle-focused explanations, the analysis explicitly incorporates alternative causal mechanisms, especially economic and structural political factors, at the point where each phase's electoral or political implications are first discussed, rather than deferring these caveats to the Discussion alone.

The limitations of this approach include: media performativity is treated throughout as an enabling condition for political outcomes rather than their sole cause, given that electoral results cannot be attributed to a single communication variable; some quantitative indicators rely on secondary or press-reported data whose original verification could not always be independently confirmed; and the purposive case-selection strategy, while justified above, inevitably involves some interpretive judgement regarding which phases constitute analytically distinct regimes. These limitations are noted at the relevant points throughout the analysis rather than only in this section. All the data examined in this article are derived from publicly accessible sources and do not include any human subjects. The analysis remains critical of the communication strategy under review, focusing not only on its innovative aspects but also on its known costs to democratic discourse.

5.0 Chronological Analysis: Six Phases of Communicative Performance

Before presenting the six-phase analysis, it is important to state a methodological caveat that applies throughout this section: the communication patterns documented below are interpreted as enabling conditions and contributing factors within Trump's political trajectory, not as sufficient or sole causes of specific electoral or political outcomes. Structural factors, including economic anxiety, partisan realignment, and institutional context, operated alongside these communicative strategies, and causal language (such as “was associated with” and “contributed to”) throughout this section should be read with caution, while the direct causal evidence is cited.

TABLE 1
Six Phases of Trump's Communicative-Performative Repertoire

Phase	Period	Primary Platform(s)	Key Communication Mechanism	Theoretical Lens	Associated Electoral/Political Context/Outcome
1	2003–2015	The Apprentice (NBC)	Parasocial bond-building through reality TV	Celebrity politics	Pre-political brand foundation, 20M+ viewers
2	2015–2016	Twitter	Disintermediation, inverted agenda-setting	Agenda-setting inversion	2016 Republican primary dominance, general election victory
3	2016–2020	Twitter, Rallies	Populist rhetoric, "fake news" framing	Performative politics	Sustained base mobilisation, media diversion
4	2016–2024	MAGA branding, YMCA ritual	Symbolic identity formation	Society of the spectacle	Movement consolidation across two campaigns

5	2021–2023	Truth Social, Mugshot	Platform ownership, crisis reframing	Mediatization	Post-ban agenda reconstruction, $7M+ fundraising
6	2024	Podcasts, Butler photo	Multimedia spectacle, viral imagery	Performative politics + spectacle	2024 electoral victory

5.1 Phase 1: Pre-Political Branding — The Apprentice (2003–2015)

Long before Trump launched his presidential campaign, he had spent more than a decade using media exposure to build a prominent political public image. A key part of this process was The Apprentice. The show was broadcast from 2003 to 2015, attracting more than 20 million viewers at its peak [41]. In retrospect, it is not only pure entertainment but also one of Trump's most influential tools of political communication.

On the show, Trump was consistently portrayed as a successful and decisive businessman. He appeared confident, demanding, and controlling, yet he could also guide the contestants. Week after week, this image was repeated in a stable and highly controlled environment. Over time, this left many audiences with a one-sided impression of Trump. As Kim and Patterson [18] argued, most audiences viewed him positively, with the media highlighting his personality and abilities. Because of this, even without direct interaction, audiences were more likely to form a sense of familiarity with him. This effect can be understood as a parasocial relationship. The general public began to think they "knew" Trump. Therefore, they were more likely to trust him and less likely to accept negative information about him in the future.

The political consequences were obvious. Kim and Patterson [18] used multiple data sources, including pre-election surveys, program records, Nelson rating data, and election results, to show that exposure to The Apprentice increased support for Trump in the 2016 Republican primary. Their conclusion is sobering: "The study of the American voter cannot be removed from the study of the American viewer" [18]. As early as the mid-1980s, Trump had been making guest appearances on TV shows, which cultivated his media influence long before he entered formal politics. In June 2015, when he descended the escalator at the Trump Tower, he was already one of the most famous media figures in the United States.

5.2 Phase 2: The Twitter Campaign (2015–2016)

Trump announced his presidential campaign on June 16, 2015, opening the most important social media political campaign in history. Trump joined Twitter in May 2009. By January 2015, he had accumulated 2.76 million fans [11, 31], roughly comparable to his competitor, Hillary Clinton. The campaign changed these numbers: by late September 2015, he had surpassed Clinton in terms of fans, and his audience had more than doubled since the campaign began.

What made Trump's Twitter strategy different was not only its influence but also its radical authenticity and informality. Unlike competitors' carefully planned and managed communications, Trump's direct tweets often seemed sudden. As The New York Times's journalist Maggie Haberman [14] observed in October 2015, Donald Trump had "harnessed Twitter in a unheard way for a presidential candidate, redefining its utility for political campaigning, distraction, conflict resolution, and aggression." As a digital strategist further noted, he had "utilized social media to replace the traditional infrastructure of a political campaign" [14].

The number and characteristics of Trump's Twitter activities were themselves a form of political performance. His tweets about his opponents, such as "Lying Ted" Cruz, "Lightweight Jeb" Bush and "Crooked Hillary" Clinton, sparked huge participation. They also forced the media to report on his own terms. In 2015 alone, Trump dominated the social media of all Republican candidates, and the news cycle revolved around his every tweet. He called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, which became

the most popular moment for candidates on Facebook in 2016. In just one week, it attracted 50 million interactions from 14 million independent users [18].

The strategic logic was clear. Existing research shows that Trump's use of Twitter functioned as a "systematic plan of attack," serving to promote his campaign, communicate policy positions, and coordinate attacks against opponents [11, 31]. Further studies suggest that his tweets formed a broader rhetorical strategy that bypassed traditional media's source verification processes, allowing an unchecked "broken system" narrative to spread and resonate with the perceived sense of deprivation among his core supporters [16, 45].

This pattern intensified throughout his presidency. Trump sent more than 25,000 tweets during his first term [7], and the White House officially announced that his tweets should be treated as official statements [24]. He posted 200 tweets on his most active day, June 5, 2020 [40]. In July 2017, he explained the logic: "My use of social media is not Presidential; it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL" [44]. Crucially, Trump largely bypassed the White House Press Secretary and ended the daily press conference, but preferred to "dictate and dominate the news cycle" through social media. Policy announcements, personnel decisions (including the dismissal of officials), and political attacks were often carried out through Twitter. This often happened before formal institutional channels were used, or instead of official channels.

5.3 Phase 3: The Rhetoric of Crisis — Language as Political Weapon (2016 – 2020)

Trump's digital strategy stems from his unique speech style. His language is usually concise, repetitive, emotional and confrontational. He used short phrases, strong adjectives and clear oppositional concepts such as "we" and "they". This makes his information easy to understand, easy to spread, and able to spread quickly through channels such as television, assemblies, and social media.

This style is not accidental, but an effective political tool. Trump often describes the country as in crisis, and then blames all parties, including political elites, the media, immigrants and the so-called "deep government". After that, he made himself the only person who was willing to fight back. This gave his speech a clear structure: decline, blame and revival.

The key to this strategy lies in his use of the term "fake news". Trump not only used the word to refute individual reports, but also to question the credibility of the mainstream journalism industry itself. More specifically, Trump's use of "fake news" on Twitter can be understood as discursive deflection because it helped him accuse mainstream media and shift attention away from damaging information [33]. In this way, "fake news" is no longer just a slogan. It helps him attack his opponents, defend his position, and impose the version of the event he agrees with.

The power of this rhetoric lies not only in its content but also in its practical effect. It prompts supporters to see politics as a conflict between vested interests and war-torn people. It also helped Trump shape the media agenda. By consistently creating controversy and eliciting emotional reactions, his communication strategy can divert the public's attention from politically unfavourable topics and direct the report toward his preferred framework [25]. At this stage, language is no longer just a tool for conveying policies, but also a means of creating crises, defining enemies and continuing to attract public attention.

5.4 Phase 4: The MAGA Brand — Symbol, Merchandise, and Social Identity (2016 – 2024)

The slogan "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) is not only a campaign slogan, but also the core of Trump's political brand. MAGA combines slogans, visual symbols, and symbols of group identity, telling supporters a short, powerful story about the decline, revival, and pride of the country. It also makes political support a visible, easy-to-practice behaviour in daily life.

The red "MAGA" hat is especially important. It simplifies the political position into an item that people can wear, display, take photos and share. In this sense, support for Trump is not only expressed through speeches or votes, but also through commodities, gatherings, online pictures and recurring symbols. This

helps explain why Trump's political activities don't look like traditional party propaganda, but more like celebrity-centred political branding [42].

The reason why the "MAGA" campaign is effective is that it creates a sense of belonging. It provides supporters with a common language, a common image and a common emotional framework. For many followers, MAGA is not only about policy position, but also about recognition, pride and a sense of belonging. Recent research shows that the driving force of the MAGA movement comes not only from anger, but also from status, a sense of belonging, celebration and the desire for public recognition [21]. This helps explain why the influence of this slogan extends far beyond one election cycle.

Trump himself has always been the core symbol of this brand. He is not only the leader of this movement, but also one of its main political symbols. His image, posture and public image, like his words, convey information. In this way, the "MAGA" movement closely links politics with personal charm, performance and spectacle. The campaign enhances this effect through repeated rituals, music, visual symbols and public participation. Later, the use of "YMCA dance" vividly illustrated this point. In this sense, “Y.M.C.A.” became strongly connected with Trump’s performance style and rally culture, so the dance can be seen as part of his symbolic political performance [35]. This seemingly light, strategically playful dance actually symbolises self-confidence, celebration, and resistance.

Taken together, the "MAGA" campaign shows how Trump transforms slogans into a lasting symbol system. It links information, goods, identities and behaviours in a highly visible way. At this stage, political communication is no longer just about persuading voters, but building an identifiable political culture around a leader, a brand and a set of shared symbols [21, 42].

5.5 Phase 5: Suspension, Reinvention, and the Mugshot — Truth Social from 2021 to 2023

The January 6, 2021, assault on the United States Capitol, followed by the permanent suspension of Donald Trump’s Twitter account, together consisted of the most serious disruption to his communication strategy in his political career. His Twitter account had 88.9 million followers at the time [49], but Twitter still justified the ban as a “risk of further incitement of violence,” and Facebook subsequently imposed a permanent suspension as well. For such a political actor who had heavily and long depended on social media to establish disintermediated, direct communication with his supporters, this suspension suggests not only a platform restriction but also marked the abrupt loss of his agenda-setting power and rights within the mainstream media [25]. That is to say, Trump cannot dominate mainstream media and shape public attention any more through the high-frequency dissemination and publicity of his own content [49].

Trump’s response to the suspension reflected the principle of strategic reconstruction. In February 2022, Trump Media & Technology Group launched Truth Social, a platform described as a “free speech” alternative to mainstream social media, obviously created to respond to its suspension by mainstream media. From the agenda-setting perspective, Truth Social was not merely a communication approach but also an institutional arrangement to reassert the control of agenda-setting. Through the Truth Social platform, Trump was able to circumvent both the restrictions of traditional media gatekeeping and the algorithms of platform gatekeepers, thereby regaining autonomy in information dissemination. At the same time, he attempted to maintain his agenda-setting capacity within a relatively closed but highly loyal target audience [49].

However, this logical strategy also showcases obvious structural limitations. On the one hand, research published in the Journal of Information Technology & Politics indicates that content posted on Truth Social can still predict media attention to Trump the following day, suggesting that he retains a degree of influence in agenda-setting. On the other hand, this influence has significantly weakened compared to the 2016 campaign and has become increasingly concentrated on partisan media rather than the mainstream social media agenda. Although Trump has successfully reconstructed a “proprietary agenda space,” his capacity to influence the overall public media agenda has declined, shifting from dominance to consolidation of existing influence.

When Elon Musk acquired Twitter in October 2022 and later restored Donald Trump's account, it theoretically provided an opportunity for Trump to reenter the mainstream agenda-setting. However, Trump still chose to use Truth Social as his main dissemination platform, not only reflecting the firm relationship between brand and platform, but also revealing a prioritisation of agenda control. Simultaneously, Musk's reconstruction of Twitter has gradually been characterised as a form of "parallel agenda-setting structure", driven by the combined logics of capital and technology, while also expanding the dissemination of specific political positions. During the 2024 campaign cycle, Musk's interventions on both financial investments and platform algorithms enabled X (formerly Twitter) to play a vital role in amplifying issues and attacking opponents, thereby providing an external channel for Trump's agenda diffusion.

The most decisive propaganda turning point in the period of 2023–2024 was a photograph. On August 24, 2023, Donald Trump surrendered at Fulton County Jail in Georgia, where he faced thirteen felony charges related to alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 election results. The mugshot, the first picture of a former U.S. president, quickly became one of the most widely discussed political images in American history. According to traditional logic, this image would be coded as a symbol of criminality and scandal. Conversely, Trump transformed it into a new agenda-setting core point and a political motivation tool through highly strategic communicative dissemination practices.

Specifically, in his first post after the arrest, Donald Trump integrated the image with slogans like "Election Interference" and "Never Surrender", shifting public attention from "legal charges" to "political persecution" within a very short period. This process demonstrates a highly integrated relationship between agenda-setting and reframing, not only determining what the public discusses, but also reconstructing how the event is interpreted and how individuals understand it [12, 49]. Related merchandise was rapidly launched and sold, further amplifying both the dissemination and the commercial value of this image.

This reframing process was not incidental but a strategic operation based on a well-developed communicative logic. Donald Trump described his mugshot as a symbol of resistance to power rather than as criminal evidence, drawing on the symbolic trajectories of historical figures such as Nelson Mandela and Rosa Parks, whose arrest images were similarly reinterpreted by supporters as new, politically meaningful symbols [12]. This strategy reveals the core mechanism of Trump's communicative model: in a highly mediated environment, the meaning of political symbols is not fixed but can be continuously re-explained and reshaped through agenda control and discursive reconstruction [6]. That is to say, through effective agenda control and public mobilisation, political symbols originally defined with negative meanings in mainstream culture can be transformed into evidence of "heroic victimhood", thereby reinforcing political mobilisation in reverse.

5.6 Phase 6: The Multimedia Campaign — Podcasts, Butler, and Victory (2024)

If Phase 5 emphasises the reconstruction of agenda control following his exclusion from mainstream platforms, then the 2024 campaign showcases a further evolution for his media strategy, shifting from controlling what the public talks about to shaping how they feel and understand politics. At this stage, political communication no longer depends mainly on information content itself, but increasingly functions through media form, emotional expression, and visual symbol to reshape public political perception.

In the context of media structural transformation, Donald Trump systematically and strategically shifted toward podcasts and internet celebrity platforms to reach younger audiences who are sceptical of mainstream media and have lower levels of political engagement. This strategy is not solely a channel substitution but reflects a typical performative politics [6, 12]. Political actors engage in quasi-everyday performances under the backdrop of decentralised and informal media, thereby constructing a more intimate and authentic public image.

Specifically, the media types Donald Trump engaged with covered the intersection of politics and entertainment, including highly influential podcast and content creators such as Theo Von, Logan Paul, Nelk Boys, Patrick Bet-David, and Joe Rogan. These platforms are typically characterised by long-form

conversations, minimal editorial intervention, and authentic expression, shifting political communication from being interviewed to self-presentation. During this process, political communication no longer relies on agenda-setting by institutionalised media but gains a sense of identification through performative interaction, emotional expression, and the display of personality [6]. The boundary between politics and entertainment is increasingly ambiguous, and political actors increasingly enter the public view as producers of cultural symbols.

However, the most communicatively powerful moment of the 2024 campaign is from an unexpected event, rather than emerging from any carefully designed media strategy. On July 13, 2024, at a campaign rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, a gunman, Thomas Matthew Crooks, shot Donald Trump with a bullet grazing his right ear. In the later chaos, Trump's image with blood on his face, an American flag waving in the background, and raising his fist three times while shouting "Fight, fight, fight", created a striking visual moment. This scene was recorded by Associated Press photographer Evan Vucci (CNN, 2024)and increasingly became one of the most widely circulated political images in American history.

This event can be explained by the theory of the Society of the Spectacle. In highly mediatised societies, politics is not mainly expressed by speeches, language and policy, but represented and circulated through images and visual symbols. As Guy Debord points out, the spectacle is not merely a reflection of reality, but a central mechanism in the construction of reality itself. In this context, the image generated by the Butler incident is not simply a recording of the event but a self-generating "political spectacle." It doesn't require explanation, but can also be immediately understood as the concentrated expression of strength, resistance, and national symbolism.

The communicative effectiveness of this image reflects the integration of performative politics and spectacle. On the one hand, Trump's actions during the incident, such as standing upright, raising his fist, and repeating slogans, constructed a highly symbolic performance, transforming his role from a target to a resistor. On the other hand, once captured in visual form, these types of performance will be detached from their immediate context and reproduced repeatedly, becoming a political symbol for widespread consumption and reinterpretation [12]. The image integrates "a blend of resilience, instinctual strength, and a keen awareness of visual communication," reflecting the ability to seize communicative opportunities even under extreme uncertainty and dangerous conditions.

Ultimately, this visual moment became a highly concentrated representation of Trump's overall political narrative. That is an outsider who remains defiant under pressure from hostile forces, reaffirming himself against the backdrop of national symbolism, particularly the American flag. The image simultaneously serves diverse purposes, including photojournalism, political propaganda, and a cultural symbol, indicating a shift in competition from information to symbols. By January 2025, the image had already been officially displayed, with music and dance full of campaign elements (e.g., YMCA), further deepening the fusion of political events with entertainment spectacle.

To sum up, this phase showcases the final form of Trump's media strategy. Political communication shifted from focusing on controlling issues to shaping public perception through performance and spectacle. In this process, political meaning is mainly co-produced by images, emotions, and media forms rather than solely by language [12, 25]. As a result, politics is reconstructed as a visualised practice that can be watched, consumed, and reproduced.

5.7 Cross-Phase Synthesis: Three Continuities and Two Transformations

Examining these six phases comparatively reveals three strategic continuities and two adaptive transformations, which together constitute this article's strongest analytical contribution and are foregrounded here before being revisited in the Discussion. The continuities include the consistent prioritisation of emotional resonance alongside policy content across all platforms, the systematic use of controversy generation as a mechanism for media attention from 2015 onward, and the persistent cultivation of parasocial intimacy, from The Apprentice's one-sided information flow to podcast long-form

conversations in 2024. The adaptive transformations include escalating platform control, progressing from disintermediation (Twitter) to platform ownership (Truth Social) to platform alliance (Musk's X), and increasing multimodality, evolving from text-based tweets (2015-2020) to integrated text-image campaigns (mugshot in 2023) to multimedia spectacle (podcasts and Butler imagery, 2024). These patterns show that the communicative-performative repertoire is an adaptable strategic system that responds to platform affordances and political settings while preserving an underlying performative logic, one that operates as an enabling condition for political outcomes rather than their sole determinant.

6.0 Discussion: The Communicative-Performative Repertoire and Its Implications

Building on the cross-phase synthesis presented in Section 5.7, this Discussion situates the communicative-performative repertoire within broader debates on political communication norms, platform power, and the boundary between political substance and performance.

6.1 The Inversion of Political Communication Norms

Beneath the seeming spontaneity of Trump's media behaviour, there is a clear strategic logic throughout all six phases. Trump methodically reversed the conventional framework of political communication. Instead of projecting a pre-existing political identity through the media, he created one through media performance. The media was the formative context in which political selfhood was created, not just an outlet for the message.

This inversion had profound consequences for journalism. Research demonstrates that Trump's Twitter activity served as a diversionary tactic, flooding the media environment with content that diverted coverage from narratives harmful to him [25, 29]. Media organisations found themselves in a structural dilemma, ignoring Trump's provocations risked appearing out of touch, while covering them amplified his framing and reach [6]. Boydstun and Lawrence [6] and Enli [11], through the study of the 2016 campaign, document how Trump's entertainment-infused politics created "a profound dilemma for the press's ability to cover the campaign coherently," leading to coverage that blended serious political journalism with clownish sensationalism.

6.2 From Disintermediation to Platform Ownership

A key developmental arc in Trump's media strategy runs from disintermediation (using Twitter to bypass mainstream media) to platform diversification (Truth Social) to platform alliance (Musk's X). This trajectory reflects a strategic ambition not merely to communicate without journalistic mediation but to control the infrastructural conditions of political communication itself.

An unparalleled arrangement of political and platform power was reflected by the Trump-Musk partnership that developed throughout the 2024 campaign. To support Trump's campaign and amplify right-leaning content through algorithmic recommendations, Musk turned X into what research refers to as a "pro-Trump echo chamber" that effectively served as an extension of the Trump campaign's communications infrastructure [32]. Existing legal frameworks are ill-suited to address the fundamental issues this configuration raises regarding the link between platform governance, political communication, and democratic accountability.

6.3 The Spectacle as Substance

The most theoretically significant aspect of Trump's communicative strategy is its collapse of the conventional distinction between political substance and political performance. In classical political communication theory, communication is understood as the representation of political positions, a

secondary process through which pre-formed policies and ideologies are transmitted to publics. However, in Trump's practice, performance is politics [12].

A political platform is not represented by the MAGA hat, the YMCA dance, the mugshot photo, or the raised fist at Butler. For Trumpism's supporters, these acts of identity, rebellion, and belonging make up the political agenda [20, 21, 42]. Debord's paradigm captures this: "its representation" replaces "the authentic directly lived" in the society of the spectacle [8]. The strategic effectiveness of this approach lies in Trump's ability to portray this substitution as liberation rather than starvation, freeing "modern day presidential" communication from the limitations of institutional form and convention [36].

6.4 Ethical and Democratic Implications

The communicative-performative repertoire documented here raises important ethical and democratic concerns that any comprehensive analysis must acknowledge. The weaponisation of "fake news" as a rhetorical resource has been linked by research to significant erosion of public trust in journalism and expert institutions [15, 33]. The political diversion function of Twitter use, as documented by Lewandowsky et al. [25], represents a systematic strategy of public misleading. The platform alliance between Trump and Musk demonstrates the vulnerability of democratic information environments to capture by politically motivated actors with concentrated platform power.

Trump's communication triumph, however, also highlights real shortcomings in traditional political communication, a professionalised, gate-kept, and distant form of political expression that had lost contact with sizable segments of the electorate [27]. It is necessary to consider both the creative aspects of his media approach and its democratic costs to fully comprehend it.

It is crucial to recognise that it would be oversimplifying a complicated phenomenon to attribute Trump's political victory just to his communicative-performative repertoire. His victories in 2016 and 2024 were influenced by structural electoral advantages, anti-establishment sentiment, and economic worry (inflation, wage stagnation). The value of this article, however, is to show that media strategy served as a critical enabling condition, enabling Trump to turn policy failures into performative disobedience and economic grievances into parasocial loyalty. In contrast to traditional political marketing, Trump's communicative-performative repertoire produced its effects through spectacle, platform management, and direct parasocial bonding, ignoring the institutional framework that had traditionally facilitated the formation of political identities.

7.0 Conclusion

According to this article, Donald Trump's political career serves as a paradigmatic case study of the communicative transformation of democratic politics, in which the lines separating political message from entertainment spectacle and communication from performance have been methodically blurred.

Trump has used a communicative-performative repertoire that is notable in its sophistication and consequences, from The Apprentice's creation of parasocial bonds through Twitter's reversal of agenda-setting, the rhetorical weaponisation of populist crisis narratives, the symbolic mobilisation of the MAGA brand, the mugshot's conversion of legal jeopardy into political capital, and the Butler photograph's crystallisation of a political mythology in a single image.

The timeline of Trump's media tactics shows the gradual development of a cogent, if changing, approach to political image-making rather than the random improvisation of a media-savvy outsider. Each stage built upon the previous one, strengthening the performative logic that, in Trump's hands, makes politics inextricably linked to spectacle, broadens the range of communication channels, and deepens parasocial interaction with followers.

The Trump phenomenon necessitates both theoretical development and empirical investigation for political communication scholars. It is necessary to update the traditional frameworks of agenda-setting,

political marketing, and even mediatization to account for a communication mode in which politicians produce media logic rather than merely adapt to it [17, 26, 43]. Trump's media success calls into question the connection between political information, emotional mobilisation, and the prerequisites for logical public discourse [2]. These are some of the most pressing political issues of our day, not just scholarly ones.

Although Trump is used as the sole case in this analysis, illustrative parallels suggest that aspects of the communicative-performative repertoire may be emerging in other political settings; these parallels are noted here only as directions for future comparative research and were not analysed as cases in the present study. Platform-based disintermediation, performative spectacle, and celebrity-political hybridity appear, at least impressionistically, in Jair Bolsonaro's use of WhatsApp networks in Brazil, Narendra Modi's direct-to-citizen app in India, and Javier Milei's TikTok-driven campaign in Argentina. However, the specific expressions of the repertoire likely vary considerably across media systems, democratic institutions, and cultural environments. This article's analytical framework is intended to assist future scholars in conducting systematic comparative research on the open empirical question of how culturally specific versus exportable Trump's model is.

This analysis opens three avenues for future research. Firstly, systematic comparative case studies, not undertaken here, should examine whether a similar communicative-performative repertoire is discernible across other populist leaders (e.g., Bolsonaro, Modi, Milei) or is specific to the American media system. Second, experimental and survey-based research is needed to determine how specific performative elements (e.g., MAGA branding versus rally rituals) affect trust and participation in elections. Third, the article does not resolve whether deliberative democratic ideals can persist in an era in which spectacle functions as substance, or whether normative political theory needs to be revised, given that performative politics is increasingly embedded in digital democracy.

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