President Donald Trump and Twitter:

The Ethics of Unmonitored and Unchecked Tweets and Their Repercussions

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Executive Summary

Taking political views completely out of the picture and looking at it in an objective manner – there is ample amounts of proof that shows how President Donald Trump does not use Twitter ethically.

Tweets he has made have incited acts of violence from people who don't know any better, have had government leaders from other countries refuse to come to our country after months of plans have already been made, have caused mass confusion to both citizen and Senator alike when legislative remarks are made and no one seems to know even what he is speaking about, and so much more. In the most recent days, he has triggered controversy inside the National Football League that has led to such a public outcry that citizens on both sides of the argument are taking to social media platforms and firing off.

As Fitzpatrick has said in our textbook, "legal standards define minimal expectations for ethical performance" (2006) and while legal standards for social media are still being developed and defined, that leaves a person's moral compass to guide them through the maze that is social media. A simple understanding of what is right and what is wrong, thinking through to what possible reaction would happen from your words knowing the power you now have as the President of the United States must be something to consider every time you go to type in those 140 characters.

In this report, there is a brief review of President Trumps history on Twitter. Then, a focus on certain tweets that he had sent out surrounding certain events and looking into what had happened in public and online as reaction to said tweets. It would determine if there is any truth to his words, or if it was just emotional venting. A look at how the public at large, as well as other national and international dignitaries react to his words will be assessed to determine just how the President's tweets are being received, and then it would be determined if his actions on the social media platform are unethical, or if it is simply on a tweet by tweet basis.

Situation Analysis

Social media is still in it's infancy, so it's expected that ethical practices using social media would be as well. But when it comes to using social media for public relations situations, especially as a political figurehead, there are things that will be expected of you to do and not to do. President Trump uses his Twitter account in questionable ways, leading the public to react passionately to his words.

According to Fitzpatrick, "within the U. S. government, Public relations specialists work to influence the opinions of diverse intragovernmental and external publics" (2006) which is what makes President Trump and his Twitter account even more concerning. President Trump has said on multiple occasions that his tweets are his own. (NOTE: This has since been changed given the newly released information about Dan Scavino, Jr. who has been President Trump's Social Media Director and was busted tweeting out Trump's tweet on his own account – Abbruzzese, 2017)

The effects of new online media are not yet fully understood (Fitzpatrick, 2006), yet every day we are learning more simply by watching how others are reacting to words that are being sent out over a social media networking platform.

Because of this, a closer look at Twitter, at President Trumps account specifically, and some of the instances where his tweets were to blame for the actions that followed were necessary to understand why the ethics in his Twitter account and habits are questionable.

Literature Review

Social Media. According to Cornelissen, social media is defined as a group of Internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of user generated content" (2014). It's a place where people can go to share ideas, thoughts, and visions, have discussions about current events and things that are happening in their lives, and talk about what's going on in the world today.

Billions of people have joined at least one social media networking platform (Pew Research) and billions more are on multiple sites. These platforms have made it easy for corporations and organizations

with messaging and products to flourish, reaching out to their customers in a whole new way that they hadn't before.

In other words, social media appears to have empowered both the consumer and the organization, enabling both to deploy a range of strategies and tactics to achieve desired outcomes. (Laing & Khattab, 2016)

Twitter. As a mode of communication, Twitter is defined by three key features: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. (Ott, 2017). Twitter is a micro-blogging website of approximately 328,000,000 users (Pew Research) who send roughly 500 million tweets on a typical day. The site allows you to communicate in short bursts of information, limited to 140 characters each. As explained by Brian Ott, "With respect to its capacity to convey complex ideas and concepts, Twitter is the modern-day equivalent of smoke signals, which explains why one can philosophize about Twitter but not on Twitter (2017).

Eight Ethical Concerns. The eight ethical concerns identify overarching areas of concern, but also points out practices that are problematic (Fitzpatrick, 2006). The concerns – Access and choice, Accuracy of Content, Deceptive Practices, Dependability, Interactivity and Involvement, Personalization and Customization, Privacy and Security, and Usefulness and Usability – define ethical online behavior. These are acceptable standards that will continue to evolve. (Fitzpatrick, 2006)

Ethical online behavior is a matter of good citizenship in a democratic society but abuses can take place in the form of attacks, libelous or scandalous accusations, hate speech, fraud misrepresentation, subterfuge, and stealing of intellectual properties (Fitzpatrick, 2006). Public relations professionals must take steps to avoid slipping into this "dark side" of online ethics, and work hard to protect their organization's reputation, or in this case the President's reputation (Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Method

Data collection for this research included looking for academic articles that discussed social media and/or President Donald Trump. It also included news articles that included the words "President Trump" and "Twitter" in the title. Some specific titles were searched for by name, such as the Nazi tweet (Solomon, 2017), Comey (Bennett, 2017), Nuclear (Reif, 2017), transgender (Diamond, 2017), Nationalist Rally (Hinchliffe, 2017), Mexican President (Jackson, 2016) and NFL (AP, 2017).

Once the articles were selected and read through, research was done on the reactions the public had on the tweets that were sent out, paying close attention to the mentions of President Trump's Twitter username as well as how much interaction (also known as engagement) his account saw during the day the tweet was made. To do this, the author used Twitter Counter.

Data for the analysis was chosen from the most recent discussions on social media sites, including Twitter and Facebook, as well as among those the author interacted with during the 8 weeks of class. The more popular topics took the top priority of research. Comparing the researched reactions of the topics to the consequences-based ethics model and the eight ethical concerns, we get to see how the tweet and the actions caused by the tweet measure up ethically.

Results

After a thorough assessment of President Trump's Twitter account, it is determined that his @RealDonaldTrump account is ranked #21 (twittercounter.com). From a tweeting perspective, @realDonaldTrump is a casual user, with an average of 8 tweet(s) per day in the past 30 days. However, this seems to be a big change from a total of 36,031 since @realDonaldTrump joined Twitter. It seems like President Trump is really being listened to on Twitter as well, with an audience attentiveness score of 71%, which stems from being tracked on 77,760 Twitter lists and normalized to his 40,191,201 followers (twittercounter.com).

Access and Choice. Ethical online communications begin with giving publics the opportunity to communicate (Fitzpatrick, 2006) and it's this opportunity that President Trump has used even before his presidency. "Throughout his campaign and in the weeks leading up to his inauguration, he has demonstrated a willingness to call out critics, drop hints about future policy directions and shame specific companies that are not performing to his expectations, all via tweet" Meghan O'Rourke said in her piece called *Tweeter in Chief* (2017).

His access to a public forum to speak out about the things he feels and thinks, especially without having a mediator or a public relations professional to look at what he is posting before he shares it, opens him up to an audience he wouldn't otherwise have. And it is the follower's choice to not only look for his

tweets, but to also react to his tweets. President Trump knows that as the head of our country, his comments will now carry infinitely more weight (O'Rourke, 2017) yet he still speaks as if they don't.

Time and time again, Republican elected officials have politely suggested that Trump use Twitter less and differently (CNN.com) but the truth is, President Trump simply won't because he doesn't want to.

Accuracy of Content. When it comes to content, it needs to be accurate, complete and current to maintain the confidence and trust of users, as a matter of duty and users' rights (Fitzpatrick, 2006). This goes for information that is shared as well as mistakes that are sent out in error. Simple responses such as "oops, sorry" would be acceptable practice for such inaccuracies. President Trump, however, has yet to issue an apology for incorrect information nor has he ever offered and explanation for something that has crossed his Twitter account that was deemed weird, inappropriate or simply odd.

Take the "covfefe" incident. The original tweet said, "Despite the constant negative press covfefe" and was sent at 12:06am. By 6am, it was deleted and replaced with "Who can figure out the true meaning of "covfefe" ??? Enjoy!" (CNN.com)

While there is something to appreciate for the joking tone of a mistype, the speculation of what that word really is and what it really meant is still out there being discussed, and while this example seems to be insignificant – imagine what else could have flown under the radar and been missed.

President Trump has been known to get his statistics and media information from the website InfoWars.com and from Breitbart, which is known in the news world for its inaccuracies and sensationalized opinion pieces dressed as news stories (Borchers, 2016). What has he tweeted out that he has learned from these two sites and that has been inaccurate, then never corrected?

Deceptive Practices. Deceptive practices should be always avoided, and this includes the misappropriation of content from another source (Fitzpatrick, 2006). This also plays into the accuracy of content issue with InfoWars and Breitbart. With all the arguments of 'Fake News' that is being created by President Trump, it's imperative that he himself make sure that the information he is sharing is also correct (Borchers, 2016).

Furthermore, it must be addressed that rogue sites divert traffic from legitimate site operators (Fitzpatrick, 2006) and while websites like InfoWars and Breitbart do have some legitimate news on them, there are still opinion pieces disguised as news articles that entice the reader to believe that they are

legitimate and that deceptive practice is unethical. When President Trump uses information from these sites, and quotes that he is getting information from these sites, he is promoting them and giving them credibility that they do not deserve.

Dependability includes twenty-four-hour access, timely updates, a minimum of downtime, and the proper functioning of software and hardware. It is particularly critical during crisis, the times of uncertainty that follows natural disasters and other extraordinary events (Fitzpatrick, 2006). President Trump lacks dependability in a few different ways, but the biggest example was when the white nationalist rally turned into a riot in Charlottesville (Hinchliffe, 2017).

It was almost two hours after the Virginia Governor Terry McAuliffe declared a state of emergency for Charlottesville and the city got involved with the turn of events that President Trump finally tweeted about the events (Hinchliffe, 2017) but the damage had already been done. Plenty of people commented on the silence of what is normally a very vocal president on the issue and it didn't go unnoticed that Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and First Lady Melania Trump commented about it first (Hinchliffe, 2017).

It got even worse when the initial tweet President Trump sent out didn't even reference Charlottesville directly, causing more fury among tweeters (Hinchcliffe, 2017). Noticing how he reacted to the white nationalist rally, you can imagine the turn of events when President Trump started to tweet about the black football players kneeling during the National Anthem (AP, 2017).

President Donald Trump took it upon himself to tweet out his frustrations about how NFL players were not standing for the National Anthem, criticizing them for not respecting "our Flag and our Country" (AP, 2017). This tweet was met with an onslaught of reactions – some with criticism, some with praise – that lasted for days on end… taking attention away from other important issues like the failure to repeal and replace the health care law, the hurricane issues, and the battle with North Korea over nuclear weapons (AP, 2017).

It is important to note that before President Trump's tweet, there were very few NFL players kneeling in protest during the National Anthem. After his tweet, however, more than 100 NFL players sat, knelt, raised their fists or didn't even come out of the locker rooms in defiance during the National Anthem (AP, 2017).

Interactivity and Involvement. Ethical online communications encourage users to become active participants in the communication process (Fitzpatrick, 2006). Interactivity and involvement requires tolerance for comments that challenge or question an organization's policies or practices and the elimination of fears of reprisals (Fitzpatrick, 2006). But what if the interaction ends up be contradictory to what is said to have happened in person?

President Trump and Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto had a Twitter battle over the financing of the proposed boarder wall just a day after they finally agreed to meet in person (Jackson, 2016). Trump's tweet echoed what he said his entire campaign: Mexico will pay for the wall; Nieto's tweet responded with "Mexico would never pay for a wall" (Jackson, 2016).

Then, to make matters more interesting, President Trump told reporters in person that paying for the wall wasn't even discussed, which prompted President Nieto to tweet that reiterated that he said to President Trump in person as well as on Twitter that Mexico would never pay for the wall (Jackson, 2016)

This kind of interaction on Twitter, while shows that there is someone paying attention to both accounts, also shows carelessness as well. President Trump may be trying to use his Twitter account to intimidate President Nieto but without responding to that it seems petty and insignificant. It also leaves President Trump in a bad light.

Another example is President Trump tweeting about North Korea and the fight about nuclear weapons. North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho told reporters that the United Nations and the international community have said that they didn't want "the war of words" to turn into "real action" (Lederer, 2017). But President Trump continues to tweet threats against North Korea, and North Korea's leadership led by Kim Jong Un are responding by speaking to reporters, claiming that the things President Trump are tweeting out are "declarations of war" (Lederer, 2017). A different kind of interaction, but still just as dangerous.

Usefulness and Usability are important if only to improve the communications effectiveness between an organization (in this case, President Trump) and the user constituents (in this case, the publics) (Fitzpatrick, 2006). When President Trump announced on Twitter that he was going to ban transgenders from being able to serve in the military, it took the country by surprise (Diamond, 2017). No one was expecting that to occur, and to tweet it out without a plan left everyone with a lot of questions and no answers. (Diamond, 2017).

This shocking announcement also came as a surprise to the transgender community, who was under the impression that President Trump was going to be supporting them like he said he was going to during the campaign (Diamond, 2017). And to announce this on Twitter, instead of a media press conference, adds salt to the wound for many of the transgender people who had their trust in President Trump for it was on Twitter that he sent his support out after the Pulse Nightclub Shooting in Orlando, Florida (Diamond, 2017).

Personalization and Customization, Privacy and Security are not being used in this discussion as they don't seem to fit and relate to President Trump's Twitter presence in ethics. While Trump does put his own personalized spin on his tweets, the announcement that he has a social media director damper that (Abbruzzese, 2017). There is nothing to customize, there are no privacy fears nor security issues to be concerned with.

Discussion

Ethical public relations professionals are forthright and honest and counsel clients and employers to adopt responsible communication policies built on principles of openness and transparency (Fitzpatrick, 2008). Unfortunately, President Trump doesn't have that with his own Twitter account, and it puts the administration at risk time and again.

On Jan. 15, Trump tweeted out a barrage of criticism, not only undermining the CIA's credibility on foreign policy issues (a defensible position from an analyst, exceptional coming from the PEOTUS), but on the fundamental issue of trust and patriotism. This came after he compared U. S. Intelligence agencies to Nazis. (Solomon, 2017)

When the Trump administration began ordering the removal of scientific data from government websites and imposed gag orders on the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Departments of Interior, Agriculture and Health and Human Services, more than 50 rogue Twitter accounts claiming to be affiliated with current or former government employees launched into operation, including @AltNatParkSer, @RogueNASA and @AltHHS to fight the gag order (Kapko, 2017).

Boeing and Lockheed Martin saw their stock prices take a temporary dive, shaving billions of dollars off their market value, after Trump criticized the costs of the Air Force One and F-35 fighter jet programs on Twitter (O'Rourke, 2017). Companies like Ford, GM, Toyota, BMW, Sprint and Carrier have also found

themselves in either a positive or negative spotlight after President Trump tweeted about their decisions to move jobs or products into or out of the United States (O'Rourke, 2017).

Practitioners should tell the truth, minimize harm to others, and be accountable for their actions (Fitzpatrick, 2006). Trump's simple, impulsive, and uncivil Tweets do more than merely reflect sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia; they spread those ideologies like a social cancer. (Ott, 2017)

The one consistent thing about the Trump brand has been inconsistency (Dumenco, 2017). He can't even keep himself in check; President Trump ended up contradicting himself and his top aides about his firing FBI Director James Comey when he fired off tweets at odds with his own statements about the decision. It ended up triggering a special counsel investigation (Bennett, 2017).

Trump's tweets could almost be considered propaganda, because as Fitzpatrick says, "propaganda generally does not aim for open-mindedness among members of its audience, but rather seeks adherence to the particular viewpoint being promoted." Since tweeting is, in short, a highly impulsive activity, something that one can do easily even if one has nothing considered or important to say (Ott, 2017). Put those two together and you have a recipe for disaster.

Supplying meaningful content in a functional format that is usable by both novice and experienced online users (Fitzpatrick, 2006) is necessary for a strong social media account, especially if you are going to be using it as a big name such as President Trump. As during his campaign, and during his time as president-elect, he'll say or tweet one thing, and it'll mean something else. Or he'll say or tweet something, and it'll mean nothing (Dumenco, 2017). That's not ethical, nor is it professional.

The one and only way to combat this kind of unethical social media behavior is to take Twitter away from President Trump and have the posts go through a professional public relations and social media writer who understand politics and how the world of media works. Having someone who can think it through to the end game, and maybe re-word that phrase so that it isn't so antagonistic or crass could help President Trump a thousand-fold because sometimes it's not the message that is the problem, but how it is delivered. A lot of times that's been the issue all along; changing just a little bit of the language can do wonders in making the harsh, insensitive tweet suddenly be more concerning and practical.

When it comes to social media, especially with short and sweet messaging platforms like Twitter, it's necessary to be aware that tone of voice and inflection are missing and can be easily misconstrued.

President Trumps use of monosyllable words and exclamation points can be counterproductive to his end game. While I know he is most likely just trying to get the discussion started by saying what it is 'people' are thinking and are too afraid to say, there is a way to do it ethically and tactfully.

Following up with more posts and/or tweets when actions that are unacceptable based on something that has been tweeted out is necessary as well. Ignoring it won't fix the problem. President Trump must take the time to acknowledge that some of his tweets are instigating reactions that can be at times violent and outrageous and need some reprimands. As President of the United States, it is his responsibility to do that, especially if it's his tweets that caused the reaction.

Having a thesaurus, an AP Style guide, a dictionary and spell check on always would be necessary as well.

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