President Trump on Twitter

Yuko OKADO-GOUGH

Abstract

Following the death of George Floyd in police custody on May 25, 2020, race relations in the United States worsened as it highlighted the disproportionate police brutality against members of the black community. Combined with the frustration caused by the Coronavirus pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement took to the streets. Although the Trump administration is neither the cause of institutional and systematic discrimination nor police brutality against black Americans, the President's handling of the protests, including his barrage of tweets and retweets, has been heavily criticized for not being helpful, and maybe even detrimental, to the situation. In order to identify how his words may be influencing American society, a selection of his tweets between May 25 and June 9 were analysed using van Dijk's sociocognitive model of discourse and cognition to outline how certain events or social actors are framed in his tweets and understood by the recipients, which then become a part of social belief.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Twitter, tweets, discourse, analysis, cognition, CDA, mental model

Introduction

On May 25, 2020, the harrowing video footage of a black US citizen, George
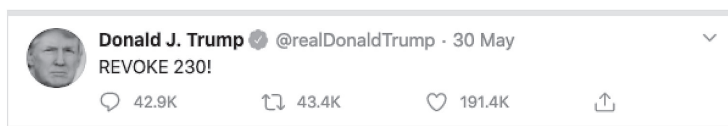
Floyd, being choked to death by a white police officer went, viral on social media and shocked the world. The 46-year-old African-American man was handcuffed and pinned down onto the ground by a uniformed officer with his knee on Floyd's neck. Floyd was heard complaining repeatedly that he could not breathe until he eventually stopped moving under the officer's knee. This incident highlighted the disproportionate police brutality against black Americans once again, and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests which began on May 26 rocked Minneapolis. The BLM protests spread to all 50 states thereafter, and in some cities, demonstrations descended into unrest. Fuelled by the frustration amid the unprecedented pandemic, which has affected minority communities more severely, the nation seemed to be devoured by racial hatred and distrust as antiracism protests and counter protests raged across the country.

The United States has a long history of institutional and systematic racism from its birth to the present day. It was not until 1965 when the Voting Rights Act was passed that all black Americans were able to exercise their right to vote, yet discriminatory sales of properties were found to be still practiced in 2019[1]. Furthermore, race relations seem to have worsened since Donald Trump took the oath of office of the President almost four years ago. He has always been very outspoken, even before his presidency. As a businessperson and TV celebrity, his abrasiveness was rather entertaining, but as a head of the state, his "inflammatory language"[2] and "dangerous rhetoric"[3] as well as his "racially charged"[4] tweets and rallies have alarmed many political pundits. Within a year of his electoral victory, a survey by the Pew Research Centre found that 60% of Americans said Trump's election had led to worse race relations in the US, compared to 13% in 2009, a year after Barack Obama was elected[5] despite the claim by the current President that his administration has "done more for black Americans than any president since Lincoln."[6]

This essay will examine a selection of his tweets in order to identify what

is so "toxic"[7] about his tweets and attempt to understand how his words may be affecting American society. It will outline how a communicative event or a social actor is framed in his tweets, because it can have a significant bearing on mental models of the recipients through which they understand what the discourse is about and retain them as knowledge. This process and the role of discourse in cognition will be explained using van Dijk's sociocognitive model of discourse and cognition. In order to identify Trump's referential choices, close attention will also be paid to the representation of social actors[8, 9] in the analysis of some of the selected tweets.

Amid mounting criticism of police heavy-handedness and his handling of the protests he tweeted on May 29:[10] (all dates shown on screenshots are JST)

This refers to Section 230 of the Decent Communications Act, which originally provided social networking platforms immunity from third party content. It has later been amended to require the removal of certain content which violates copyright, hate speech and sex trafficking laws. President Trump "threatened to 'strongly regulate' or close down social media platforms"[11] after Twitter placed warnings on some of his tweets, and he called to have the law revoked.[12] This clearly demonstrates that he appreciates the influence Twitter has on society, especially on his support base.

Roles of Discourse in Cognition

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is primarily interested in, and motivated by,

pressing social issues such as racism, dominance, inequality and power abuse, and in order to better understand such complex issues, it pays close attention to the relation between society, discourse and social cognition.[13] In other words, it accounts both "for the social, political and cultural aspects of discourse and for the subjective ways individual social actors produce and reproduce social representations as well as social structure."[14]

The relationship between dominance and discourse is not straightforward. It is not just a case of "more or less direct or overt support, enhancement, representation, legitimation, denial, mitigation or concealment of dominance."[15] It can be implicit, benign, and deeply embedded in everyday communication. Thus, it is necessary to examine the role of social representations in the minds of social actors,[16] that is, to identify the role of text and talk in the formation of mental models about communicative events. Mental models are pivotal in discourse and knowledge production because they are "both the starting point and the intended results of discourse."[17] They are what the recipients construe and retain during their understanding, and recall later, rather than the exact wording or even the local meanings of discourse.

Discourse and knowledge are deeply intertwined, for a large portion of our knowledge is acquired through discourse, while some is gained via first-hand and multimodal, that is, visual, auditory, tactile, or osmic, experiences.[18] Knowledge is defined here as more "relativistic and contextual"[19] beliefs than neutral, justified and absolutely 'true' beliefs as defined traditionally. In other words, the relevance of knowledge to the communicative situation is more important than its universality. Therefore, what is justified as knowledge in one epistemic community may only be a (false) belief or superstition in another.

Knowledge plays a fundamental role in discourse comprehension and production, because an extensive amount of knowledge is required for one to construe a mental model[20] in order to process new information contained in

discourse. In this process, the vast multimodal complexity of experiences is reduced and organised in less complex representations that define situationally relevant information of our daily experiences. This forms the cognitive foundation of discourse and communication about such experiences on the one hand, and on the other hand, generalization and abstraction of similar models produce generic knowledge of the world, which in turn is used in the construction of new models of experience.[21] A participant of a communicative situation needs to activate a large volume of knowledge and make inferences from both generic and personal knowledge to fill in any missing information and to form a cognitive representation of what the discourse is about.[22] It constructs a version of reality to aid the comprehension of discursive events and to form the basis on which an individual participant forms an opinion or ideology,[23] which in turn will influence the referential choices they make in discourse production in another communicative situation.

Furthermore, these models are shared among members of the same epistemic community, as both personal and social knowledge is usually acquired and changed in social situations, that is, through social interaction and discourse, and such personal experiences and knowledge are communicated and shared with others.[24] Hence, discourses and the models they express and convey are the primary means of reproduction of knowledge in society.[25]

When producing discourse, a speaker can presuppose what recipients already know about a particular topic and omit certain details. The speaker chooses which details to include and how they are described, for example, using a metaphor or analogy, which can create more concrete visual aspect of a mental model. This process is controlled by the mental model that the speaker has about the event, its context and recipients. Thus, a mental model is a subjective representation of an event and it functions as "the necessary interface"[26] between socially shared cultural, societal or political cognition and personal

beliefs.

There are a number of potential ways "in which social actors can be represented"[27] in English discourse, and the choices made by a speaker can have a significant effect on the kind of mental models each recipient may have about an event or person. These referential choices greatly enhance the recipients' ability to form more multimodal and vivid mental models of the event and social actors. Social actors may be classified in different ways to add ideological effects. For example, they can be personalised or impersonalised, to express representation as an individual or a group of people. They can also be individualised or collectivised, to express both physical and emotional distance between them and recipients.[28] The use of functional honorifics, such as 'Judge', 'Minister' or 'President', may add specialization of role, importance or a different levels of authority to a social actor.[29] Different methods of classifications and their effects will be noted in the analysis of President's tweets.
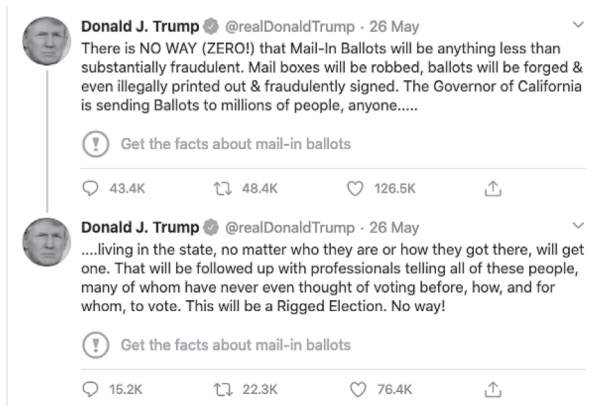
Analysis of Trump's Tweets

Twitter saw a surge of the use of the #blacklivesmatter hashtag, reaching eight million on May 28,[30] following the death of George Floyd. Its users posting their messages of support included many celebrities[31] and some corporations, although there have been allegations by employees that these are mere gestures.[32] The President also took to his favourite social media platform, Twitter. According to USA Today, in the 15 days between George Floyd's death and his funeral service in Houston on June 9, Trump sent 769 tweets and retweets, 200 of which were related to the protests and "focused on unrest, law and order, and threat of military use."[33] Ten samples have been selected from

these 769 tweets, not all of them related to the protests. His retweets will not be included in the selection.
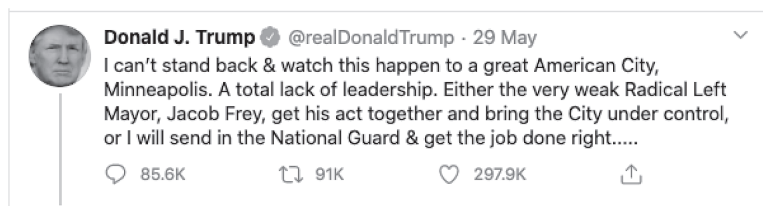
The President's @realDonaldTrump account has 80.5 million followers as of August 2020, while his @POTUS account has 31.2 million. Although all his followers may not be his supporters, his tweets directly and indirectly reach a significant number of Twitter users. His frequent use of social media is so well known that some journalists have referred to him as the "tweeter in chief"[34, 35] for he tweeted more than 6,000 times in the first half of 2020, averaging 33.2 tweets a day,[36] and his tweets are considered official statements from the president. Although he also uses other social media platforms including Instagram, with 21.7 followers, and Facebook with 30.1 million, he has more followers and is most active on Twitter by far.

As of September 2020, a total of five of his tweets have been hidden under Twitter's rules and policies, under which they have been flagged up as engaging in or containing glorification of violence,[37] synthetic and manipulated media,[38] abusive behaviour,[39] and misleading health claims. On May 26, Twitter placed a fact-check advisory on Trump's tweet for the first time under its Civic Integrity Policy[40] created in 2018 and extended in 2020. He tweeted:[41]

Donald J. Trump ✔ @realDonaldTrump · 26 May
There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent. Mail boxes will be robbed, ballots will be forged & even illegally printed out & fraudulently signed. The Governor of California is sending Ballots to millions of people, anyone.....

ⓘ Get the facts about mail-in ballots

💬 43.4K   🔁 48.4K   ♡ 126.5K   ⬆

Donald J. Trump ✔ @realDonaldTrump · 26 May
....living in the state, no matter who they are or how they got there, will get one. That will be followed up with professionals telling all of these people, many of whom have never even thought of voting before, how, and for whom, to vote. This will be a Rigged Election. No way!

ⓘ Get the facts about mail-in ballots

💬 15.2K   🔁 22.3K   ♡ 76.4K   ⬆

In this tweet, he refers to 'the Governor of California' by his title rather than his name, Gavin Newsom, whereby he is functionalised. The social and political status of the social actor's position as a governor increases the gravity of the situation to his unsubstantiated claim by sounding "more official."[42] He also claims that 'professionals' will be "telling all those people" for whom to vote. As well as functionalising, he collectivises[43] the participants. It distances them from the readers, as opposed to bringing them closer by nomination and individualising. In both instances, the governor and professionals "are activated upon"[44] millions of people, given a perpetuator-like role in their representation. The use of fully capitalised words also adds the perceived authority and strength by grabbing the recipients' attention[45] to his claim. Another group of social actors in this tweet are the "millions of people" whom he describes "anyone … living in the state, no matter who they are or how they got there," insinuating that they may include illegal immigrants, a group often targeted by Trump and his base. Collectivisation also creates the sense of 'otherness' by its distancing effect and signifies the distance between 'us' and 'them.'

The next violation came on May 29, when Twitter hid one of his tweets "for 'glorifying violence',"[46] in which he warned the protesters in Minneapolis that he would send the military to intervene should there be any difficulties. He wrote:[47]

Donald J. Trump ✔ @realDonaldTrump · 29 May

I can't stand back & watch this happen to a great American City, Minneapolis. A total lack of leadership. Either the very weak Radical Left Mayor, Jacob Frey, get his act together and bring the City under control, or I will send in the National Guard & get the job done right.....

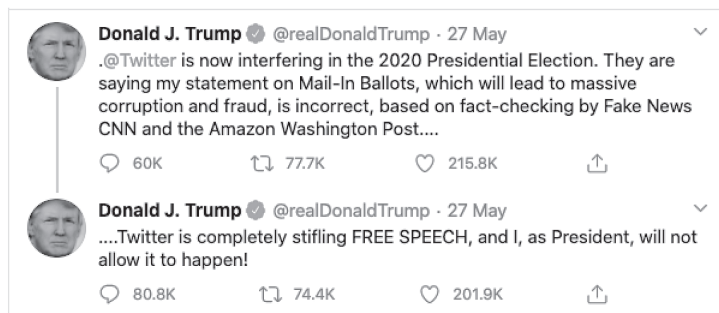💬 85.6K   🔁 91K   ❤ 297.9K   ⬆

He singles out Jacob Frey, the city's Democratic mayor, for his "weak" leadership and adds the adjectives "Radical" and "Left" to his functional honorific, neither of which would be a popular word amongst the President's supporters. He collectivises and functionalises the protesters as "THUGS" which diminishes the legitimacy of legal, peaceful protests. On the contrary to blaming the "Radical Left" Mayor, he personalises and nominates the Minnesota Governor, Tim Walz. He legitimises the use of military in order to "assume control" by appearing to side with the Democratic governor in 'getting the job right.' He ends the tweet by quoting a former Miami police chief who in 1967 promised violent reprisals to protests over stop-and-frisk tactics[48] with the words "when looting starts, shooting starts," which would probably be a popular phrase amongst the right-leaning population of the country.

Name-calling is Trump's favourite tactic for denigrating anyone who opposes him. As well as many prominent Democrats, mainstream media outlets, which are not sympathetic towards his administration, such as Cable News Network (CNN) and Microsoft/National Broadcasting Company (MSNBC), who frequently receive a similar treatment. This undermines the role of media as a credible source of information. The phrase "Fake News" appeared 18 times

during these two weeks, often referring to CNN and other mainstream media outlets. Trump made an allegation that Twitter was meddling with the 2020 Presidential elections and "stifling FREE SPEECH" the day after Twitter placed fact-check warning on his fraudulent mail-in ballots claim:[49]

They are depicted as perpetrators, thus undermining their credibility, while Trump added functional honorific, "President" to himself, promoting his authority and legitimacy.
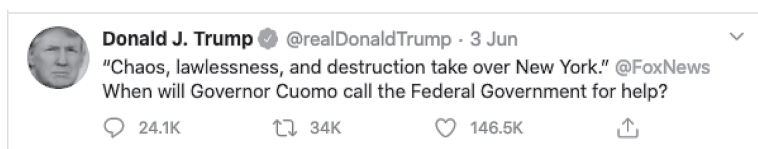
On June 1, in a speech in the White House's Rose Garden, Trump issued a threat to deploy the military if cities and states did not take actions to bring protests under control, which was criticized heavily. Shortly after this, protesters were tear-gassed and forcibly dispersed away from Lafayette Square and surrounding streets by national guardsmen and federal officers, just so that President Trump could walk from the White House to St John's Chapel for a photo op, which further inflamed the criticism. Trump introduced an online article which defended the use of tear gas as a "must read" on June 3:[50]
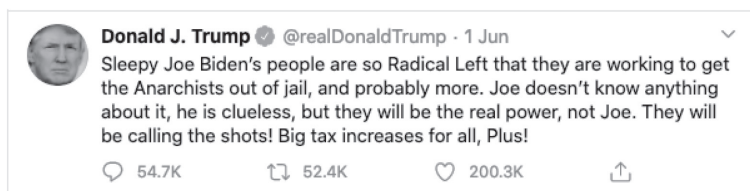
In this tweet, he depicts "Fake News" media is an enemy of "our Country" whose coverage on the protests is false. He uses a line from the article, word for word, which describes the demonstrations as "Violent Riots" and calls protesters "Rioters," criminalising them and delegitimatises the BLM protests. He substantiates his claim by referencing to an article by a right-leaning online magazine, the Federalist, which many of his supporters would find more plausible than CNN. He also mentions the burning down of churches, which would anger the fundamentalist Christian base among his supporters, although the fire was small and isolated to the basement nursery room and St John's Church was not burnt down.

Fox News is the mainstream media outlet that Trump trusts most. Amongst the three main cable television news networks in the US, it currently has the

largest viewership with about 3.97 million primetime viewers in June 2020, followed by CNN with 2.5 million and MSNBC with 2.2 million,[51] and 60% of its regular viewers identify themselves as conservative.[52] As well as frequently retweeting, he quotes journalists from Fox News in his tweets to validate his claim that the BLM protesters are responsible for the "Chaos, lawlessness, and destruction"[53] of New York whose governor should promptly seek help from his administration.
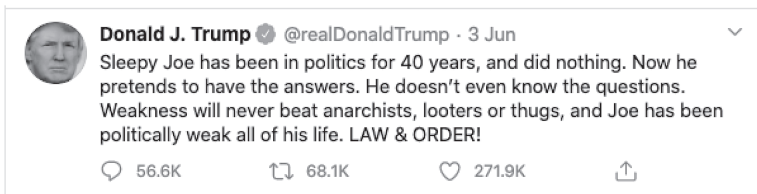

As the 2020 Presidential election looms, Joe Biden, the Democratic Presidential nominee, frequently appeared in Trump's tweets. Trump mentioned "Biden" 35 times, 16 times of which were accompanied by the adjective 'sleepy'.

The word "Sleepy"[54] gives an impression of Biden being a dull, inactive, drowsy and maybe lethargic old man, who is totally controlled by 'Radical' leftist Democrats. He presents a doomsday scenario that "Anarchists", who are not expected to respect authority, law and order, will be freed out of jail, should Biden be elected President. In this tweet, Democrats are depicted as instigators of anarchy by being "activated upon"[55] in their representation. He also mentions

"tax increase for all" which is a hallmark image of the left, alarming his supporters of a possible realisation of socialism.

Trump again attacks Biden for his weakness and ineffectiveness and claims that he will not be able to "beat anarchists, looters or thugs," thus requiring "LAW & ORDER!" to bring an end to the ongoing protests.[56]
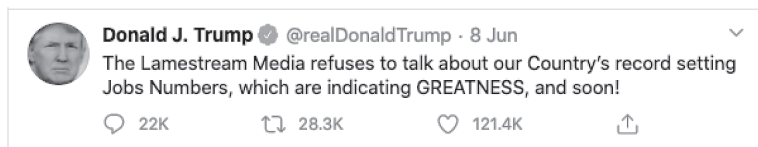

He continues with his attack on Biden by quoting a New York Post journalist, Michael Goodwin:[57]
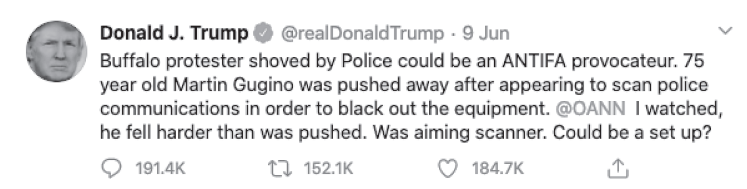

Goodwin attacks Biden for his criticism on police and siding with protesters. He also criminalises the BLM protesters by referring to them as "arsonists" and "looters," which also undermines Biden's reputation. By referencing a comment of an established journalist, Trump validates his opinion and presents this allegation about Biden and the protesters as a fact.

"Lamestream" is another term he regularly uses when referring to mainstream media outlets. As the etymology of the term "lame" + "mainstream" embodies, it refers disparagingly to the traditional media.[58] On June 8, he tweeted:[59]

> **Donald J. Trump** ✔ @realDonaldTrump · 8 Jun
> The Lamestream Media refuses to talk about our Country's record setting Jobs Numbers, which are indicating GREATNESS, and soon!
>
> 💬 22K   🔁 28.3K   ♡ 121.4K

This was a criticism towards mainstream media whose coverage was dominated by the ongoing BLM protests, and not reporting on the drop in unemployment, as announced by Department of Labor on June 5, despite the decrease being attributed possibly to "many states reopening their economies and sending people back to work, often against advice from healthcare and policy professionals."[60]

On June 9, footage of an elderly protester being knocked down by a police officer in riot gear went viral on social and traditional media. In response to the outrage, he tweeted:[61]

> **Donald J. Trump** ✔ @realDonaldTrump · 9 Jun
> Buffalo protester shoved by Police could be an ANTIFA provocateur. 75 year old Martin Gugino was pushed away after appearing to scan police communications in order to black out the equipment. @OANN I watched, he fell harder than was pushed. Was aiming scanner. Could be a set up?
>
> 💬 191.4K   🔁 152.1K   ♡ 184.7K

Antifa is an anti-fascist and left-wing political movement started in 1980s, and is opposed to neo-Nazis, neo-fascism, white supremacists, racism and the alt-right.[62] It is not a centralised movement, however. Its disruptive tactics and willingness to use violence[63] have resulted in the right-wing's claim that it is a terrorist organisation, and a petition was lodged in August 2017 to have it recognized as a terror group.[64] The response from the White House was that federal laws provide no mechanism to formally designate a domestic terrorist organisation,[65] yet, there is a tendency among the right-wing to consider the movement a terror group, as it has often been called as such by many prominent

figures including Donald Trump and Attorney General William Barr. As one of the far-right and pro-Trump news outlets, One America News Network (OANN) shares this view and the station aired a program titled "America Under Siege: Antifa"[66] in 2017. In its report on an antiracism protest in Buffalo on June 9, OANN described 75-year-old Martin Gugino as "a well-known activist, bragging on social media of far-left views."[67] The President cites OANN as the source of information, which may add credibility to this claim, coming from a traditional media outlet. With the image of Antifa being terrorists, on an equal level with ISIS and Al Qaeda, he describes the 75-year-old protestor as a possible "ANTIFA provocateur", which functionalises the man as a member of a terrorist organization. The use of the term 'provocateur', which is a synonym for words including agitator, demagogue and inciter, adds maliciousness and aggressiveness to both Antifa and the protestor, reenforcing the image of the movement as terroristic, although neither does he commit to the claim nor declare his belief with the use of a modal 'could' to hedge the possibility.[68] By degrading the protester to a possible terrorist, he simultaneously legitimises the police officer's action.

Conclusion

The mental models President Trump expresses and conveys suit a certain type of scenario, in which Democrats are rigging elections by getting illegal immigrants to vote for them, and the Black Lives Matter protests are mere thuggery orchestrated by Antifa, and therefore, a heavy-handed response by the police and the military is totally justified. He also insinuates that, if elected, "Radical Left" Democrats and their 'puppet' leader Biden will release criminals from prison, and cities will be overwhelmed by anarchists and lawlessness.

These allegations are supported with references and retweets, while Trump himself stops short of declaring that he believes they are true. Neither does he appear interested in convincing everybody of his beliefs nor garnering support from a large majority, as these images will not go down well with those with different sets of knowledge, for example, of the history of police brutality or even the very history of the United States itself. However, those in the same epistemic community, who tend to consume the same news sources and share a similar set of social knowledge, will not have much difficulty in accepting and retaining the mental models construed from the President's tweets as knowledge, which can be recalled and used in order to understand other discursive events.

Mental models are the starting point of discourse. Discourse is informed by, and produced based on, the mental models of a speaker. At the same time, they are the intended result of discourse. Recipients construe and retain a mental model in their comprehension of discourse by activating vast amount of knowledge. This validates, justifies and confirms even the most biased briefs and ideologies and facilitates the sharing of such briefs with other members in the same epistemic community.

Embedded in Internet culture, especially in the United States, lies almost evangelical commitment to the First Amendment and therefore the freedom of speech. Pew Research Centre found that Americans are more tolerant of all forms of freedom of expression than others worldwide. A large majority in the U.S. think it is acceptable to make offensive comments about minority groups or their religious beliefs, and nearly half (44%) think calls for violent protests should be allowed.[69] This tendency is evident in the President's tweets and comments, for which he has been accused of racism,[70] "shameless misogyny,"[71] blatant lies[72] and conspiracy theories.[73] His words are often described as, "toxic"[74] dangerous[75] and irresponsible.[76] When asked why they

support the President, however, one of his supporters listed "his honesty" and "determination" for her reasons, while another described him as the "strong leader" that the US needs.[77] The stark differences of his reception are a manifestation of this radical libertarianism towards free speech, and if it does not translate into the responsibility that comes with it, it only seems appropriate to grant social networking sites the power to mediate and possibly remove such accounts or posts that can aggravate social issues such as racism, inequality, dominance or power abuse.

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