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Honors Thesis

A SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION LABEL AND THE POSTRHETORICAL
PRESIDENCY

by
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

English Department
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ABSTRACT

A SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION LABEL AND THE POSTRHETORICAL PRESIDENCY

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In May 2020, presidential communication on social media was—for the first time—subject to a misinformation label applied by the social media site on which the communication originated. This development indicates a turning point in social media sites’ relationship with presidential communication and demands adaptation in the scholarly understanding of presidential rhetoric during the present era. Drawing from the theoretical framework of the postrhetorical presidency, I perform dual rhetorical analyses of this landmark artifact. The first round of analysis ignores the label and analyzes the presidential communication alone to understand its function, while the second analysis reveals the rhetorical impact of social media intervention on postrhetorical presidential communication by highlighting how the misinformation label alters the function of the artifact as described in the initial analysis. I then describe three takeaways that may aid to advance the study of presidential rhetoric as we enter into this new era of social media intervention in presidential communication.

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Introduction

Social media, misinformation, and presidential rhetoric collided on Jan. 6, 2021 to instigate a historic tragedy at the United States Capitol (Leatherby et al.). The nation watched as hundreds of protestors and rioters stormed the Capitol building, leaving five dead and over a hundred injured (Healy). Many of those that forced entry into the halls of Congress to interrupt the certification of a presidential election had traveled from across the country, believing their actions justified by a perception of fraud in the election of the next president—a belief that had been repeatedly stoked and encouraged by President Trump himself (West). For weeks and months before the event, and even before the election, Trump had taken to social media to blast voting systems and locations as fraudulent—leading to his call for the rioters to “fight like hell” lest they “not . . . have a country anymore” (Trump). In an extended political season characterized by misinformation about everything from elections to public health and everything in between, no other occurrence so memorably captured the dangerous interplay of presidential rhetoric on social media as the events of Jan. 6, 2021.

In the fallout from this event, Trump found himself removed from Twitter, Facebook, and other social media sites. Still desirous to reach his supporters, he formed a blog, experimented with alternative sites, and filed lawsuits against the big tech companies that banned him (Bond). The enormity of just what was wrought over the past several months by a twiddle of thumbs has many asking if Trump should be allowed to rejoin the conversation on social media platforms, if he ever should have been banned from them, and how such a national tragedy was brought about. How is it that a president can fabricate claims of fraud without evidence and, simply by repeating them with a loud

enough megaphone, still have a quarter of the nation convinced months later that an election was rigged (“Republicans View Trump as President”)?

The answer, to my view, lies in the unique powers and modern developments of the postrhetorical presidency—of which Donald J. Trump’s rhetoric provides a valuable example. The former president’s Twitter postings, a staple of his tenure in the Oval Office that kept him in constant contact with the public with minimal moderation, are an archive of postrhetorical presidential communication. While the extensive use of social media is not unique to Trump among recent presidents, President Trump’s unceasing social media interaction takes it to a next level. He rallies his supporters and attacks his critics while applying pressure to legislative bodies with an aggressive evolution of the postrhetorical style that elicits public response and censorship by Twitter and other social media companies. In this paper, I will provide an overview of the postrhetorical presidency as a rhetorical theory and provide rhetorical analysis of a keystone artifact in President Trump’s postrhetorical use of Twitter. In my analysis, I intend to demonstrate how President Trump’s tweets epitomize postrhetorical presidential communication and will consider their effectiveness first without and then with Twitter’s intervention. Using the insights generated from my analysis, I will then provide three takeaways on how critical conceptions of postrhetorical presidential rhetoric may be expanded to account for direct social media intervention and censorship in presidential communication.

The Postrhetorical Presidency

The postrhetorical presidency is a theoretical explanation of the rhetorical manner in which the President of the United States communicates with the American public and achieves his political agenda. The theory of a postrhetorical presidency emerged over the

past decade as an extension of the rhetorical presidency first described by James Caesar, Glen Thurow, Jeffrey Tulis, and Joseph Bessette in 1981 and further detailed in Tulis's 1987 *The Rhetorical Presidency*. This theory describes a transition in the rhetorical style and strategy of the President of the United States from the founding of the nation to the late 20th century. Modern scholarship, most notably that of Jennifer Mercieca and Stephen Hartnett, has extended this theoretical framework into the 21st century to demonstrate how presidents today are making use of the 'bully pulpit' in their political messaging. The American journey towards developing this system of presidential communication and identifying it as "postrhetorical" passes through three distinct phases of presidential rhetoric—periods that may be referred to as the foundational presidency, the rhetorical presidency, and the postrhetorical presidency. To best illustrate the nature of postrhetorical presidential communication, I will briefly discuss them each in turn.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, presidents achieved their political ends through an approach that I will call the foundational presidency. This approach to presidential communication began with the founding of the United States and is recognized by Tulis as extending until the 1901–1909 presidency of Theodore Roosevelt (Tulis 4). During this century and a quarter, presidents were rhetorically distant from the general population—delivering their addresses to legislators and other members of government to achieve their political ends without involving public citizens (5, 62). This rhetorical distance was not mere presidential habit or preference but the systemic expectation of how the presidential office performed its duties—the president was expected to maintain distance from the public to prevent the rise of populism, demagoguery, and other political ills (25, 61). Presidential communication to the public, such as during inaugural

addresses, declarations of war or emergency, or monument dedications, were primarily ceremonial in nature and intended to promote patriotic feeling instead of further any particular policy agenda (62). Though the practice of visiting various areas of the country has been a presidential staple since George Washington, early presidents did not perform a great many public speeches during these tours nor with the same approach as today's campaigning politicians (63–5). As a striking example of the fundamental difference between presidential rhetoric during this foundational period and that of today's postrhetorical period, only 4 out of the first 24 U.S. presidents performed a speech before the public that attacked or defended a particular legislative policy (67). This period is best identified by an expectation of rhetorical distance between president and public, and a lack of policy-based communication between these two actors.

The rhetorical presidency emerged during the early 20th century as presidents began to intentionally present their policies and ideals to the American people (Tulis 4). Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William H. Taft, and Woodrow Wilson fundamentally changed the president's rhetorical role and power by ever more consistently using the public as a means of pressuring Congress to support their policy proposals and initiatives (4). Informing the public of proposed policy, and interpreting Congressional debate on the subject, became a crucial function of the president's office (127). By demonstrating the effectiveness of presidential communication with the public, this string of presidents developed a new requirement of the successful executive: "the doctrine that a president ought to be a popular leader" (4). This shift in approach caused the position of president to develop a reciprocal relationship with the press: the president providing the news to draw in viewers, and the press providing access to a vast audience (Tulis 15–16;

Mercieca 209–10). Public accessibility to mass media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, encouraged this rhetorical shift by allowing presidential messages to easily and rapidly reach huge numbers of Americans (Tulis 186). Such a relationship between the press and the presidency allowed for 20th century presidents to achieve a relationship with the American people that had never before been seen or expected of them. Towards the end of this period, a perceived intimacy between the president and the public became not only beneficial to the president's rhetorical objectives but required of him to maintain his audience's respect and support—it became a duty of the president to communicate clearly and regularly with the public (128, 132–4). It is vital to note, however, that during this period the press and the president's office itself acted as screens between the president and the American people: his messages were transmitted to the public by a courier and in such a capacity that limited his expression to particular forms and constructions, instead of a truly free communicative intimacy (132–6, 188). This period breaks the restrictive norms of the foundational period and encourages the president to communicate with the public to raise support for his policies and proposals; it blends seamlessly into the early years of the postrhetorical period.

Hartnett and Mercieca identify the postrhetorical presidency as having first emerged during the presidency of George W. Bush (600) and having become central to modern politics during the presidency of Barack Obama (207–8)—to which I would add that it has become a (if not *the*) defining characteristic of the presidency of Donald Trump. In a postrhetorical style of communication, the president “use[s] social media to go over the heads of Congress and around the news filter to speak directly to supporters” (Hartnett and Mercieca 207). Through such methods, presidents have achieved a truly

constant, public intimacy in their communication with the American people. Thus the communication becomes “postrhetorical” in the sense that there is less need for—and far less emphasis given to—classical, formal expressions of presidential rhetoric. Any distinction there may have been between ‘official’ statements or discourse and ‘unofficial’ banter or commentary in previous periods has all but disappeared as presidents become as much public celebrities as they are political actors (Gronbeck 45–6). This change in communication media also causes presidents to “see[k] to define the bounds of political discourse . . . by marshaling ubiquitous public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection” (Hartnett and Mercieca 600). In this sense, modern presidencies are “postrhetorical” because they may seek to obscure and complicate public discourse, instead of streamlining or advancing it (600).

These alterations of presidential communication are made possible and effective by the advent of the internet and the enormous popularity of social media (Hartnett and Mercieca 600–1). By personally communicating with the public through social media instead of through the press, the president is able to reach his audience instantly, with great consistency and intimacy, and without being intrinsically filtered or analyzed during the initial act of communication (Mercieca 213–4). While the press and others are still very much involved in transmitting, recording, and analyzing the rhetoric and actions of the president, the president is no longer dependent upon the press to maintain his connection with the public—in fact, what was once a cordial and symbiotic relationship between the Oval Office and mainstream media outlets has now become strained and, at times, bitter (212). By posting on social media accounts and sharing mass messages through email and text, the president can deliver his rhetoric directly and immediately to

an enormous audience without any dependency or filter.

The opportunities presented by a postrhetorical presidency have been implemented in various fashions by recent presidents. The 2008 Obama campaign has been lauded extensively for its adoption and use of social media, a move that allowed it to build and engage with a vast coalition of voters (Carr). After winning the presidency, Obama's White House became even more committed to reaching Americans on social media: the president created the official @POTUS Twitter account, went Live on Facebook, answered questions on YouTube, and even shared filtered photos on Snapchat (Schulman). Obama's presidency demonstrated the "independent, competitive, and unstable relationship [with] the press" that characterizes the postrhetorical presidency (Mercieca 215). As Mercieca has observed, "his enactment of the postrhetorical presidency relied upon strict message control, speaking directly to supporters, and counting on 'friends' and 'followers' to circulate his messages throughout their networks," occasionally even electing to not air notable speeches on live television in favor of social media (221). As the first social media president, Barack Obama made the playbook for his successors to follow.

Coming into the Oval Office right after President Obama, President Trump inherited the official accounts created by his predecessor and set them to work right alongside his own personal social media. Similar to Obama, Trump's take on the postrhetorical presidency brought him into contention with traditional media—though Trump proved to be markedly more outright antagonistic than Obama. While President Obama would occasionally snub reporters, give priority to social media, and provide lengthy answers difficult to cut into headline-size chunks (Milligan), Trump never

attended a Correspondents' Dinner (Farhi), threatened a reporter with prison (Itkowitz), and called journalists everything from “dishonest” to “corrupt” to “human scum” and “the worst human beings you’ll ever meet” (“Trump Administration and Media”). This combative relationship with the press merged with the postrhetorical ability to obfuscate truth and fantasy (Hartnett and Mercieca 600) as Trump discouraged his supporters from trusting mainstream media, constantly referring to them as “fake news media”

(@realDonaldTrump, 11 Nov. 2020, 9:03 a.m.) or “lamestream media”

(@realDonaldTrump, 8 Nov. 2020, 1:52 p.m.). Sowing distrust in mainstream media sources—and broadcasting his own take on news and policy to his millions of Twitter followers—constituted constant postrhetorical communication during Trump’s tenure in the Oval Office.

Introduction to Analysis

President Trump’s Twitter communications, inseparable from national headlines and political discussion for the past several years, have demonstrated the powers and constraints of the postrhetorical presidency. He has used social media to pressure Congress (Mercieca 213–4), bypass mainstream media filters and create audience intimacy (217), and obfuscate reality (Hartnett and Mercieca 600). For the purposes of my discussion, since the collected tweetings of President Trump would be too large a subject to discuss in the scope of this paper, I have selected a single text that exemplifies the postrhetorical nature of the wider collection: a two-post thread on election fraud preceding the 2020 presidential election (@realDonaldTrump. 26 May 2020, 8:17 a.m.). This artifact is remarkable for being the first instance in which a directly-intervening misinformation label was applied to presidential communication on social media (Fung).

Such a direct intervention on the part of a social media outlet into presidential communication represents a turning point in postrhetorical presidential communication. While the constraints of traditional electronic medias such as radio and television have been extensively analyzed in the theoretical context of the rhetorical presidency (Tulis 186–8; Gronbeck 41–5), it has so far been the scholarly consensus that social media permits presidential rhetoric to significantly bypass media filters in appealing to the public (Hartnett and Mercieca 603; Mercieca 207; Smith 133–4). The artifact that I have selected, with its accompanying site-imposed label, provides the first example of how social media sites can filter presidential rhetoric and allows for a unique opportunity to explore the rhetorical presidency’s interaction with such intervention. A rhetorical analysis of this text in the theoretical light of the postrhetorical presidency has the potential to teach volumes concerning the future of postrhetorical presidential communication on social media in this newly-altered landscape.

I will perform my rhetorical analysis of the selected artifact over two rounds and in the mode defined by David Zarefsky for the field of presidential rhetoric. This method of analysis aims to provide insight into a rhetorical artifact’s function and meaning through consideration of how a speaker’s choices achieve their goals in the context of a specific situation (Zarefsky 608–9). During the first portion of my analysis—that ignoring the applied misinformation label—I will primarily focus on the relationship between rhetor and artifact to identify key rhetorical moves embodied in the text and presumably selected with intention by the speaker (609). My hope is that this first round of analysis will provide insight into the function of the text on its presumed audiences as intended by the speaker, President Trump—in direct correspondence to Zarefsky’s

second “dimension” of rhetorical analysis (609). I hope, through this first analysis, to describe a ‘base function’ of this text that may be contrasted with the results of my second analysis to isolate the impact of Twitter’s misinformation label.

My second round of analysis will take into consideration Twitter’s misinformation label. When I considered how to analyze this aspect of the text, I found myself required to shape my approach in one of two ways: I could consider the Twitter label as a separate rhetorical object crafted in response to Trump’s posts, or I could consider the label as a member of the artifact and inextricable from Trump’s posts. Since I wish to focus primarily on presidential rhetoric and the effects upon such by the intervention of media between the speaker and his audience, I have elected to analyze the posts and their label together as a single text and without a consideration of Twitter as an independent, responding rhetor. I believe that such an approach will allow for the most appropriate consideration of the artifact as it functions and allow me to analyze how it may have been read after the label was applied, at which time audiences would have encountered the post and label conjointly and as a single object. During this round of analysis, my approach will most closely correspond to Zarefsky’s third dimension of rhetorical analysis—I will be considering the artifact’s entire meaning and effect as embodied within itself, present to be considered as an artifact independent of its direct relationship with its creators (Zarefsky 609). Consequently, my language will shift from focusing on the authors’ intentions or choices to that of audience reaction (though I have no original data to describe such empirically, as Zarefsky indicates would be most appropriate in a true analysis of audience reception) (609). I hope, through this shift in language, to accommodate the conflicting motivations of the multiple rhetors that led to

this hybrid object, which may be confusing to approach through the speaker-centric language I will make use of during my first analysis. My primary objective in this dual rhetorical analysis is to reveal how the intentions of a presidential rhetor were hindered and opposed by the imposition of social media intervention and the consequential alteration of this artifact of the postrhetorical presidency.

The Rhetorical Situation

I will begin my discussion of the selected artifact with the rhetorical situation in which Trump composed and published my selected artifact—the speaker, goals, audiences, exigencies, and constraints.

Speaker: To any person recently engaged in the realms of social media, politics, or presidential rhetoric, the political persona of Donald J. Trump will not be unknown. The 45th President of the United States, Trump makes for a divisive political figure whose rhetorical styles range from hours-long rally speeches to bursts of all-caps posts consisting of only a few lines. Any tweets that I have selected to reference are presented as direct communications by Donald Trump himself via his @realDonaldTrump account. This account, separate from the official government @WhiteHouse and @POTUS accounts, is the personal account of Donald Trump and often gives the impression of being less moderated by aides and advisors than the official office accounts, being more prone to spark public pushback and to engage in heated exchanges with other users. Though it is not necessarily the case that President Trump typed out each message with his own thumbs—having an official White House Director of Social Media, Dan Scavino, who was known to write and take dictated messages for the @realDonaldTrump account—this should be considered as no different from any other politician making use

of speech writers in the creation of their remarks (Chute). There has been no recorded instance in which Scavino was claimed to have posted something to the account against the president's wishes nor anything that has been denounced or contradicted by the president after posting as the work of another, so it may be assumed that all posts to this account were actively or tacitly authorized by the account owner. Though the Twitter account and the man are not one and the same, for the purposes of my analysis, I will be considering Donald Trump's Twitter presence as an extension of his own rhetorical self.

Goals: Like most users of social media, Trump posts to Twitter with the hopes of attracting attention and support to his ideas and personal image—in the case of his posts claiming fraud in the 2020 presidential election (such as my selected artifact), Trump's goal is to convince his supporters and the public that the election was fraudulent and unreliable. The text I will consider, posted on May 26th, targets mail-in voting as such a potential source of fraud. The intent of these posts would seem to be questioning and casting doubt upon the methods and processes of the election in sufficient strength to impact the public's perception of such voting systems and the legitimacy of the election overall. The end goal of such an attempt, as with nearly any political messaging in the months prior to an election, is to gather electoral support and degrade enemies to increase chances of election victory.

Audiences: The audiences that President Trump addresses from his Twitter account can be roughly divided into three groups: his supporters on Twitter, all other users on Twitter, and all other secondary audiences encountering his tweets through other sources. First, and often explicitly addressed by Trump, are his supporters. The vast majority of Trump's tweets surrounding the election seem intended to convince his

supporters that there has been fraud, that there is proof of such fraud, and that he (Trump) will still prevail despite this fraud. These posts can come with reassurances—“WE WILL WIN! America First!” (@realDonaldTrump. 5 Nov. 2020, 11:22 a.m.)—and with calls to action—“WATCH FOR MASSIVE BALLOT COUNTING ABUSE” (@realDonaldTrump. 10 Nov. 2020, 10:33 a.m.)—but most importantly serve to reiterate claims that fraud has occurred. Second, Trump posts to a general Twitter audience; these posts do not as explicitly target themselves at his supporters but are certainly well-received by them, putting forward more general claims setting forward the President’s interpretation of events. Such posts as “71,000,000 Legal Votes. The most EVER for a sitting President!” (@realDonaldTrump. 7 Nov. 2020, 4:54 a.m.) do not seek identification with sympathetic supporters or directions for the same but are presented as statements of fact intended to posit the occurrence of fraud without assuming a supportive predisposition. The effective scope of a general, non-supporter Twitter audience likely to accept the president’s messaging is mostly composed of moderates and conservatives. Given the politically-divisive figure that he tends to cut and the current trend towards polarization and partisanship in American politics, it is unlikely that Trump would be concerned about targeting any messaging besides attacks at the American Left, as it is nearly inconceivable that he could bring any to his side.

Third, we must briefly consider the perhaps-unintended audience of those who do not see these posts on Twitter but through other media, like news outlets or alternative social media. This audience is interesting, though challenging, to consider from my declared perspective of postrhetorical presidential communication, as the source in which an audience member encounters the text may or may not provide immediate

interpretation or ideological framing that would counteract the postrhetorical nature of the communication and thereby alter the appropriate reading. Screenshots of tweets shared to other social media may come with varied amounts of intervening interpretation, ranging from an Instagram caption to a lengthy Facebook post, and news programs that covered these tweets during the period of the election provided extensive commentary, often either explicitly supporting or discounting the President's claims. For its incompatibility with a postrhetorical analysis and its extremely varied nature, I will be excluding consideration of this audience from my analysis of President Trump's tweets and focusing on audiences that encounter the posts on Twitter.

Exigencies: Donald Trump began to post concerning election fraud months before the 2020 general election occurred to respond to the exigency of his projected election loss. Even months before the election, Trump was trailing Biden in the polls and was not projected to have a strong probability of victory ("National Overview"). Though the election proved to be closer than predicted by many such polls, the rhetorical situation leading up to November was one in which a Trump victory was considered unlikely, requiring rhetorical action on the part of the president. Due to the high number of mail-in and early-voting ballots cast during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the strong correlation between these adaptive voting methods and their predominant support for the Democratic opposition, Trump's rhetorical move seems to seek the creation of mistrust in the systems most likely to inhibit his victory. The slew of messaging and posts claiming fraud that occurred after the election results were announced, a natural outgrowth of the artifact considered today, was a response to the exigency of his electoral loss that built upon his previous claims (Sandler).

Constraints: In creating his Twitter postings claiming fraud in the 2020 general election, the most notable constraints Donald Trump faced were those determined by the social media site itself. Simply by posting on Twitter, Trump faces a constraint of message length: 280 characters. Though he does occasionally string together a series of tweets to form a longer message (as in the text I have chosen), each post by itself is character-capped and therefore posted as a separate object. While this is a universal constraint experienced by all users of the platform, President Trump discovered another constraint that is not as commonly seen: Twitter's policies on misinformation labeled and blocked the visibility of many of his posts that they deemed to violate their policies against the spread of political misinformation. This already-present but newly-encountered constraint greatly impacted the effectiveness of Trump's claims and messaging on this platform by restricting the latitude of claims he could make without being tagged as potentially misinformative, an action that certainly impacts the audience reception of his message ("Civic Integrity Policy"). It is this constraint, the application of misinformation labels and censorship on presidential rhetoric, that I intend to make the focus of my commentary.

A Presidential Misinformation Label

The first time a tweet of President Trump was labeled as potentially misinformative demonstrates key aspects of social media censorship's impact on postrhetorical presidential communication. The post in question, actually two tweets sent out in rapid succession on May 26, 2020, reads as follows:

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.....

....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! (@realDonaldTrump. 26 May 2020, 8:17 a.m.)

Both of these tweets were labeled by Twitter with a bright subscript inviting readers encountering them to “Get the facts about mail-in ballots” (Fung) The label linked to a Twitter page declaring the claims as “unsubstantiated” and indicating that “mail-in ballots are very rarely linked to voter fraud” (“Trump Makes Unsubstantiated Claim”) While the tweets by themselves would perhaps provide grounds for a discussion of postrhetorical communication in Trump’s signature style, the label by Twitter is the novelty that makes this post worthy of unique contemplation. To best demonstrate how the post’s rhetorical effectiveness is altered and determined by the application of a misinformation label, I will first analyze the post itself and then describe how the application of a label affects this rhetorical communication in context of the postrhetorical presidency.

The Post Itself

As mentioned, the post I will be analyzing is an exemplar of President Trump’s Twitter rhetoric made especially significant by the novel application of a misinformation label. In considering the strengths and weaknesses of the post, I will first ignore the presence of the attached label so as to highlight aspects inherent to Trump’s



Figure 1: President Trump's Twitter Post with the Accompanying Misinformation Label.
Image credit: "Twitter adds a warning label fact-checking Trump's false voting claims." TechCrunch, 26 May 2020, www.techcrunch.com/2020/05/26/twitter-trump-labels-fact-checking-tweet/.

postrhetorical presidential style. I will discuss the moves he makes to communicate strength and certainty, establish a wide audience, and engage his political base. I will then move on to complicate these subjects with recognition of the applied label.

The certainty and strength projected in this post is a signature of Donald Trump's messaging. Though many politicians find their success while projecting confidence, virility, and conviction, Trump is a figure who seems especially concerned with communicating strength in all his dealings. This post is no exception. Opening with a brazen absolute in all-caps—"There is NO WAY"—and then doubling down with a synonymous parenthetical, similarly capitalized—" (ZERO!)"—indicates complete certainty in the claims to come. Likewise, using the certainty of the modal verb *will* in place of *may* offers no question as to whether or not these drastic consequences will arise; we the audiences are repeatedly told that they *will* in all but the last two-word sentence, providing extensive repetition of the certainty of the unavoidable and undesirable future events. While, as observed, the opening of this thread makes use of all-caps, this use is minor when compared to similar posts written exclusively in all-caps. To audiences who have seen other Trump posts, these claims may benefit from appearing not only strong and certain, but also restrained in their certainty and more palatable for audiences uninterested in great bravado. The organization of the post suggests a more studied take on the subject as well—the post opens with a claim, provides its predictions, and closes with a reiteration of its thesis: "This will be a Rigged Election." While lacking the presentation of evidence for its claims, the trace elements of traditional composition in this duo of posts imparts a feeling of rhetorical authority that allows audiences to feel more certain the speaker is arguing from a rational, informed standpoint. The final major

sentence, leaving the audience with a thesis statement, imparts the message of the posts as a certainty predicted by the man in the country's highest political office.

In order to have his message of certainty reach a large audience, Trump leaves the post accessible to as large an audience as possible. As mentioned earlier, a post seeking a 'wide audience' for Trump is unlikely to be overly concerned with catering to his staunch political opponents, such as consistently-Democratic voters; a message intending to reach non-supporters would be successful so long as it allowed identification with political moderates and conservatives not yet committed to his cause. One way that Trump seeks out this audience is through his treatment of the California mail-in voting system. By referring to "The Governor of California," Trump removes a potential knowledge barrier for some of his intended audience by not referring to the governor by name—while a mention of Gavin Newsom, not a particularly household name at this time, may have excluded certain audience members through the inclusion of an unrecognized variable, the descriptor of office (though heavier in precious characters) allows all viewers to understand the context. Also relevant is the state chosen for this attack: California is one of the most securely blue states in the nation. While the mail-in voting laws described in the post are not unique to this state (8 other states and D.C. automatically mailed out ballots to voters) (Love et al.), Trump did not have much chance to win California overall—by selecting California as the target for his attack, he kept his audience wide in conservative Utah and battleground Nevada (which had similar laws) by not risking alienating voters with a jab at their state. The very last thing a politician would want in the months before an election is to offend voters in a state that he may have a chance at winning. Trump kept his audience wide and focused his nationwide audience on the core

of his message: the drastic consequences mail-in ballots will introduce into the election.

Though Trump takes measures to include all his audience, he makes sure to engage his supporters through mentions of their prioritized issues. By referring to robbery, forgery, and other ballot-based illegalities, Trump creates a direct connection between mail-in voting and an increase in crime—a great concern to the party of ‘law and order.’ By describing how California will send ballots to “anyone . . . living in the state, no matter who they are or how they got there,” Trump ensures that any audience members concerned about undocumented immigration and border security will oppose this process by believing it to allow non-U.S. citizens to fraudulently influence the election. What’s more, this particular affliction is being brought on by the leader of one of the bluest states in the nation—just another symbol to supporters that the opposing party is irresponsible and untrustworthy. Lastly, by describing how the mailed ballots will be followed up by government agents “telling all of these people . . . how, and for whom, to vote,” Trump calls on a mistrust of—and desire to restrict—big government visiting homes and determining individuals’ choice. Including some of his major political calling cards, popular among his supporters—and directly stating that mail-in ballots will lead to a worsening of all these undesirable elements—Trump ensures that his supporters will join him in opposing the validity of this election system as he has described it.

Reading the Label

Though President Trump had made prior posts and claims saying that the 2020 election was certain to be rigged and expressing his mistrust of mail-in ballots,¹ the May 26th post was the first time that Twitter (or any major social media company) applied a

¹ E.g. @realDonaldTrump. *Twitter*, 24 May 2020, 10:08 a.m.

misinformation label to the U.S. president since its creation in 2006. In describing this post's function, I observed how it sought to convey strength and certainty, reach a general audience, and engage supporters; the historic and novel application of a misinformation label greatly affects each of these categories. The interaction of the Twitter-imposed label and the rhetorical tools used by the president indicate much of the opportunities, challenges, and constraints of postrhetorical presidential communication.

While Trump uses a well-oiled combination of his typical methods to convey certainty and strength, the application of a misinformation label undermines much of these tactics' effect. In my analysis, I observed how the opening bravado, the repetition of a certain *will*, and a nod to conventional composition all contributed to a post that, though lacking a presentation of evidence, communicated an authoritative voice against the use of mail-in ballots. Twitter's label counteracts these effects by raising uncertainty in the validity of the president's claims and concerns. A label reading "Get the facts about mail-in ballots" attached to a post berating such systems as "substantially fraudulent" is not to be interpreted as an invitation supporting the speaker's claims. The mere application of such a label, where none such has ever been before applied to a presidential figure, implies an enormous necessity for correction that casts doubt on the arguments presented in the post. Postrhetorical presidential communication thrives when it can avoid intervening interpretation; this is a driving purpose behind avoiding mainstream media. Here, we see Twitter taking on some responsibility for the interpretation of the president's messaging; instead of allowing the president to unilaterally interpret the events surrounding mail-in ballots to create "waves of disinformation[]" and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection," Twitter provides an

interpretation, from a place of authority over its own site and referencing other sources, that establishes the ground on which the president's claims will stand or fall (Hartnett and Mercieca 600). This simple label takes from the president much of the persuasive power he mustered through his perceived authority. The one-sentence addendum of this post's misinformation label goes far in subverting the rhetorical tools that the president uses to communicate strength and certainty.

As Trump makes efforts to allow a general Twitter audience to approach his post, Twitter's application of a misinformation label restricts the members of that audience that are likely to find his messaging effective. While Trump was already limited in terms of persuadable audience to political moderates and conservatives, the misinformation label applied to these posts serves to distance him from non-supportive audiences. With the large and unsupported claims that Trump made in these posts, he appears to be mostly ignoring appeals to *logos* in favor of inciting outrage through *pathos* (such as his description of mail-in ballots' negative effects) and the strength of his *ethos*. His dependency upon *ethos* in his claims is not unique in the postrhetorical presidency; *ethos* may be considered the "primary criterion for presidential success" during the postrhetorical presidency (Gronbeck 44). It is extremely consequential, then, that the *ethos* Trump brings to these posts is largely undermined by the application of a warning label suggesting his content is not to be trusted or believed. The entire purpose of this label's application is to reduce the number of audience members willing to believe the president's claims without further evidence. The only circumstance in which an audience member is unlikely to have their esteem for the president and his claims weakened in this case is if the audience member already has a higher trust in the president's *ethos* than in

that of Twitter or any of the other information outlets cited in the label—an audience subgroup that instinct dictates must largely be made up of those already supporting or highly sympathetic to Trump’s claims. What’s more, the applied misinformation label, even with a brief glance, draws the eye before the post itself with its bright color and prominent exclamation point icon—a symbol closely associated with warnings and alerts of danger, such as on vehicle dashboards or computer pop-ups. The effect of the label, then, is to negatively flavor the audience’s perception of the president’s *ethos* (at least in these posts) before they encounter the text itself. Whereas the postrhetorical presidency finds strength in achieving a feeling of intimacy with its audience (Mercieca 2007), this label prominently stands between the president’s messaging and the reader. In this post, the warning label has begun to shuffle Trump back towards the limitations of the rhetorical presidency by damaging trust in his character and placing a layer of interpretation between him and the public.

While the range of audience members that may be effectively persuaded by these posts is limited because of the label’s application, identifying the posts as misinformation is unlikely to have a large effect on the post’s reception among the president’s supporters because of their disposition to trust Trump’s claims over media’s fact-checking. It is well-evidenced that Trump voters will typically stand by the president when he faces off with media authorities. He has repeatedly labeled the “FAKE NEWS media” as “the enemy of the American People”² and has made countless attacks on news media sources as well as individual reporters, to great popularity among his voters (Roig-Franzia et al.). According to a 2019 poll, 51% of Trump’s Republican base agreed with his sentiment

² E.g. @realDonaldTrump. *Twitter*, 17 Feb. 2017, 4:48 p.m.; 5 Aug. 2018, 7:38 a.m.; 19 Mar. 2019, 8:24 a.m.; 20 May 2019, 7:20 a.m.

that the press was an “enemy of the people” (“Poll: One-Third Say Media Is ‘Enemy of the People’”) and polls repeated throughout 2017 and 2018 reveal that approximately 75% of Republicans trusted Trump to tell the truth over mainstream media outlets (Bump). These sources demonstrate that, prior to the misinformation label’s application, Trump supporters were prepared to trust him over other media sources and fact-checkers. Within hours of the label’s imposition on his posts, Trump blasts Twitter for their intervention, associating them with the “Fake News” outlets that he has so often criticized (@realDonaldTrump. 26 May 2020, 7:40 p.m.). Creating this association with a group that his supporters already distrust weakens the social media’s intervention. Trump also accuses Twitter of “interfering in the 2020 Presidential Election,” building upon his original claim that the election’s outcome will be fraudulent (@realDonaldTrump. 26 May 2020, 7:40 p.m.). In this way, and to some of this audience at least, the label meant to weaken Trump’s persuasive power may lend it additional weight as proof of the alleged fraud. The resilience of Trump’s supporters to even the attempted fact-checking of the media site on which the president is communicating belies one of the postrhetorical presidency’s greatest strengths: the president’s capacity for popularity. While in previous periods presidents were expected or constrained to be restrained and distant from their supporters, Trump has built a movement surrounding his own image (Breuninger). Everything about the postrhetorical presidency is intended to cultivate the emotional investment of the public as a form of relationship, not merely political interest. Though Twitter may provide fact-checks and interpose their messaging on to Trump’s, since the president’s supportive audience has already built a relationship with the speaker or his messaging *before* encountering the intervening label, and this relationship encourages a

distrust of the media, any media fact-checking or other intervention is unlikely to be effective. These factors taken together indicate that most Trump voters were likely unaffected by the misinformation label, and perhaps even agitated by the intervention due to the president's characterization of such as contributing to the fraud he was claiming.

Examining the president's dual-post accusation of election fraud, in light of its being the first application of a misinformation label to a president's post, provides a much different reading than the posts alone and unedited. By interjecting with its own authority and interpretation, Twitter weakens the president's perceived strength and certainty. By distancing neutral audiences from the speaker at first sight, the label restricts the audience willing to trust and engage with the information contained therein. Due to his postrhetorical popularity, however, Trump maintains a great portion of the original post's persuasive power to those who already support him.

Misinformation Labels and the Postrhetorical Presidency

By applying a misinformation label to Trump's tweets, Twitter explores the power and limitations of the postrhetorical presidency. Though the president's posts, by themselves, may have proven effective and found some ground among neutral and supportive audiences, Twitter's intervention greatly reduces the persuasiveness of the president's messaging to audiences not already committed to Trump's cause. In my analysis, I discovered three key takeaways from this novel artifact that help define postrhetorical presidential communication, particularly as it interacts with social media intervention.

First, the presence of intervening interpretation may limit the postrhetorical presidency's capacity for misinformation. Current scholarship recognizes one of the

hallmarks of a postrhetorical presidency as the speaker's capacity to "go around the news filter to speak directly to supporters" (Mercieca 207). Without the presence of a strong media filter, it has been observed how presidents may define public discourse through "ubiquitous public chatter, waves of disinformation, and cascades of confusion-causing misdirection" (Hartnett and Mercieca 600). However, before Twitter applied this first misinformation label, there had been no opportunity to analyze the strength of social medias' potential reapplication of the media filter inherent during the era of the rhetorical presidency. From this analysis, I observe that social media intervention in postrhetorical presidential discourse is largely capable of reimplementing a media filter that reduces presidents' capacities for postrhetorical communication. As in the artifact that I analyzed, applying warnings and labels to presidential discourse weakens the rhetorical strength of unsubstantiated noise; even stronger responses, such as Twitter's later decisions to hide posts from public view or even ban President Trump, are even more decisive examples of a social media's ability to implement filters on a president's ability to elect when, where, and with what information they may communicate to the American public. Though it would be inaccurate to say that such intervention forces a president to revert to a rhetorical presidency in place of a postrhetorical one, social media's capacity to filter presidential communication has now been explicitly proven.

Second, social media can most effectively intervene with postrhetorical communication by targeting a president's *ethos*. As political scholars have indicated, "much of American politics has been telescoped down to the moral and patriotic—to a question of *ethos*" (Gronbeck 44). In no situation is this more true than in consideration of the postrhetorical presidency. While previous scholars have indicated the increasing

importance of *ethos* through all eras of presidential communication, there has been little discussion of how media censorship interacts with a president's *ethos*. In my analysis, I found that a key result of social media intervention through the application of misinformation labels is indeed a direct reduction of a president's perceived character and reliability. Since postrhetorical presidential communication is so dependent upon the perception of intimacy and direct communication with the public, presidents are made more human and more fallible than ever before (40, 44–5). Through hampering a president's exposed *ethos*, social media intervention can reduce one of a modern president's greatest assets.

Third, due to the postrhetorical presidency's contentious relationship with the press, media interventions are intrinsically weakened. The postrhetorical presidency is characterized in scholarship by a president–press relationship that is “independent, competitive, and unstable” (Mercieca 207). In practice, attacks and snubs against the media were a strong pattern during President Trump's presidency, leading to widespread distrust of news media (Bump). Following the advent of social media intervention in presidential rhetoric, similar numbers have been reported for distrust of social media censorship (Vogels et al.). In my analysis, I discussed how this weakening of trust in the media may lead to a decrease in the effectiveness of media misinformation labels. It is my observation that, due to an antagonistic relationship with the press during the postrhetorical presidency, social media intervention is likely to be weaker than comparable media intervention or fact-checking during previous periods of presidential communication. Rising mistrust of social media and the journalistic sources it is likely to cite in fact-checking labels (as in this paper's selected artifact) reduces the potential

strength of social media responses to misinformation.

The postrhetorical presidency is still in its infancy—having only now entered into its fourth iteration with the election of President Biden—yet it has already left its scars in the halls of our government and in our online forums. The evolution of the postrhetorical presidency witnessed over the past few presidential terms has been enormous and has revealed many of the unique opportunities and dangers of its function. In this paper, I performed dual rhetorical analyses to illustrate the function of social media misinformation labels on one particular set of tweets by President Trump and have identified three takeaways that help to clarify and expand scholarly definition of the postrhetorical presidency.

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