Habermasian analysis of reports on Presidential tweets influencing politics in the USA

Rene W. Albertus1 · Frank Makoza1

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Abstract
Over the last decade, there has been rapid growth in instant messaging platforms, e.g. WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram. Academic research on the use of instant messaging platforms is growing, but few studies have looked at the influence instant messaging could have on politics and the impact on world peace. Drawing on the Theory of Communication Action, this paper interrogated the discourses of using Twitter in the context of the USA. Media reports and tweets were analysed using validity claims to check communication distortions or misinformation that could impair the decision-making of policymakers and the public. The American President used Twitter to communicate potentially dangerous messages to American society. It was interesting to note that Twitter decided to fact-check tweets in response to the call from the community at large to have the account shut down.

Keywords Theory of Communicative Action · Discourse · Social media · Twitter · USA

Introduction
Twitter has become one of the popular instant messaging platforms in the last decade (Georgiadou et al. 2020; Hino and Fahey 2019). The uses of Twitter include instant communication, sharing of news, advertising, marketing, political and civil society engagement with communities (Ahuja and Shakeel 2017; Kavlin 2017). The use of Twitter continues to grow, and at the time of the study, it was estimated that there were 68.7 million users in the USA (Statista 2020). The anecdotal evidence of Twitter playing a central role in political and civic engagements

Rene W. Albertus
rene.albertus@uct.ac.za

Frank Makoza
fmakoza@gmail.com

1 Graduate School of Business, Commerce, University of Cape Town, 9 Portswood Road, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
point to the adverse effects of Twitter being recognised as a platform that expose falsehoods (Aizenkot and Kashy-Rosenbaum 2018; Ross and Caldwell 2020). Despite the popularity of Twitter and the impact on partisan relationships, distinguish dearth of academic research conclusively determines online rumours or misinformation from the truth. Castillo et al. (2011) have taken the lead on research concentrating on the discourse of rumour or misinformation from fact using similar methodologies to search for information on credibility to identify words retroactively, e.g. individual microblogs or posts. In contrast, Liu et al. (2015) took a more proactive approach. Journalists across the globe have taken a keen interest in the abuse of Twitter by President Trump and have written about the danger of using Twitter irresponsibly and the impact it will have on the safety of countries and their citizens (Buccus 2020; Haffagee 2019; Mpofu 2019; Smith 2017; Toosi 2016).

Twitter has gone through several changes with the potential to impact political and civic engagement (Georgiadou et al. 2020). Twitter has made it relatively easy to share content without links to its original context or senders because of fake profiles with many features, including scalability and replicability. Fake profiles have landscape have created instances in which Twitter was linked to the spreading of hoax messages and rumours that seriously impacted rational deliberation, worsened social divide and influenced the political landscape, causing much controversy (Ross and Caldwell 2020; Ross and Rivers 2018). Dwoskin (2020) reported that Twitter placed a fact check label on President Donald Trump’s tweets, sighting that Twitter is hands-off when it comes to leaders spreading misinformation and falsehoods, causing many tensions between Washington and Silicon Valley. However, after information via Twitter went unchecked for 14 years from citizens and world leaders, misinformation and falsehoods has created significant controversy in American politics (Dwoskin 2020).

Shear et al. (2019) provided an analysis of 11,000 of President Trump’s tweets, of which 5889 is attacking someone or something, e.g. news organisations, the democratic party, other leaders and women are some of his primary targets. This research will critically analyse the media discourse on Twitter to determine how the language used in Twitter influences the political landscape of contentious politics, activism and political or civic engagement. There are unanswered questions about Twitter. For example, why are politicians using Twitter to make political storms? Is the use of Twitter a national security threat? The answers to these questions are critical to various stakeholders, citizens of a country, educators, law enforcement, mobile software developers and the business community who use the application for awareness.

The Habermasian concept of ideal speech was identified to examine the validity claims of truth, sincerity, legitimacy and clarity (Habermas 1984). The validity claims will be used to shed light on the media reports about President Trump’s tweets sowing discord in America and putting the citizens at risk. A list of questions was adopted from Cukier et al. (2017) to identify the validity claims; these questions were also used as a coding scheme for the title of an ideal speech in the texts. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was considered appropriate for analysing media reports to identify distortions that influence how people react and respond to the Presidents tweets and whether it is a danger to the constitution and society.
It is not the intention of this research to discuss the merits or demerits of Twitter and the use thereof. The media’s coverage of Twitter has been positive and negative. Citizens platform instant messaging platforms are shaping citizens’ lives. The media transmits information, but they are also significant in shaping public opinion. It is essential to ensure that information presented on Twitter does not mislead or misinform the citizens but promote diversity of views and proper debate without perpetuating the marginalisation of some groups in society or abuse of power for those in authority.

**Background to the study**

**Description of Twitter**

Twitter is one of many online social networking services that enable users to send a message of no more than 140-characters called "tweets". According to Aslam (2020), Twitter, when last updated 5 September 2019, had more than 330 million monthly active users of which 152 million are daily active users, sending 500 million tweets per day, 80% of Twitter users are on mobile devices and 93% view videos using a mobile device of the 330 million users. The female population makes up 4% of Twitter users, 22% of US adults use Twitter. Internet male users using Twitter is 24% opposed to the 21% Internet females users. There are 262 million international Twitter users outside the USA, making up 79% of all Twitter accounts. The US Twitter has 48.35 million active monthly Twitter users, and approximately 42% of Twitter users are daily. The US accounts for just over 31 million monetisable daily active Twitter users, of which 38% of Twitter users are between the ages of 18–29, 26% of users are 30–49 years. About 56% earn approximately USD50,000 and more per annum, 80% of Twitter users are affluent millennials, 93% of Twitter community members are open to brands getting involved if done above board. The top four countries outside of the USA that is open to brand involvement for monetary gain are Japan (35.65 million), Russia (13.9 million), the UK (13.7 million), and (8.3 million).

Twitter’s total revenue for Q4 2019 reached 1.01 billion US dollars; 885 million came from advertising, a 12% increase year on year. The USA is Twitter’s largest market generating 591 million US dollars, a 17% increase year on year. Twitter is currently valued at 24.6 billion dollars generating 88% of total advertising revenue from mobile advertising, a 29% increase year on year (Aslam 2020). Twitter currently manages 18 quintillion user accounts; 71% of Twitter users say they use the network to get news updates, 85% of SMEs use Twitter to provide customer service updates, 93% of Twitter users are open to brands getting involved. Twitter hosted 1300 live-streamed events, of which 80% is streamed to a global audience. Twitter stream 96 million hours of live user-generated content in quarter 3 of 2019 via Periscope. Twitter’s timeline generates +31% higher emotional connection and +28% higher levels of memorability versus the social media average. As of 31 December 2019, more than 1700 topics people could follow in six languages. The UN member countries have 92.23% presence, and 95% of G20 countries are active on Twitter.
Twitter revenue per employee is USD210,417. The individual with the most followed account on Twitter is Barack Obama, with 112 million followers. There is a daily limit of 2400 tweets per day, and the most emojis used in tweets are face with tears of joy, used more than 2.7 billion times (Aslam 2020).

Twitter is a versatile tool used for sociopolitical campaigns, citizen journalism and marketing purposes. Companies like Dell reported gaining £1.9 million from sales and cost savings via Twitter (Ahuja and Shakeel 2017).

The context: public discourse, technology and leadership

The US public discourse is critical in American political culture. The Constitution (1787), Bills of Rights (1791) and Declaration of independence (1776) form part of the public discourse. Society draws on ideas from these documents to promote values of freedom of association, free speech, equity before the law, freedom of religion, promotion of civil liberties and citizen engagement in government decisions. The government is answerable to the citizens, and the citizens must understand the government’s plans and actions and support these. Thus, public discourse provides a discursive space where policy and general issues are discussed and inform those affected by the address (Bodnar 2019).

Social media, e.g. Twitter, affect how the public sphere functions (Douglas 2017). Social media enables the government, politicians, civil society organisations or social movement organisations and citizens to engage in conversations on issues that affect society. Twitter allows people to be more connected and engaged with those in power even and ask them to take account of their campaign promises, policy programs and responsibility for their actions in public offices. Social movements can now mobilise the public using the Twitter Hashtags of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Governments are reaching out to citizens and discussing diplomatic issues with other governments using Twitter, e.g. USA and North Korea communication on Twitter in 2018. However, there are challenges of using Twitter, including misinformation or fake news, information overload, limitations of technology (140 characters of Twitter stream) and misuse, i.e. hate speech (Kavlin 2017).

The leadership of President Trump changed communication, politics and public relations practised in the USA when he used Twitter to communicate government decisions, policy issues and responses to the citizens and other governments across the globe, replacing traditional means of communication such as press briefings (Ott 2017; Evans et al. 2017). Examining the language and political practices that emerge from Twitter is crucial (Forchtner 2010; Kavlin 2017).

Theoretical foundation of the study

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerges from the concept of discourse, which includes talk, text and actions, and ideas, perceptions and beliefs about the world
CDA is a discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by texts and talk in the social and political context (van Dijk 2004: 352). CDA can be used as an analytical tool for understanding issues and events that affect people in a social context and can be analysed to understand social and political practices represented through language (Fairclough 1989). The text describes the language and informs actors’ actions in a social system. However, the use of language enforces ideologies and reinforcement of social practices that can limit or marginalise the interests and values of some actors in communities (Roode et al. 2004; van Dijk 2004). Thus, discourse analysis is essential in understanding the use of language to highlight power issues that are often taken for granted (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997).

There are diverse approaches to using CDA; some studies apply a small set of documents and analyse the corpus following a rigorous process, while others use a large corpus (Forchtner 2010). For instance, Thompson (2004) examined the speech of the President of the World Bank using one document to analyse issues related to ICT and the digital divide. In another study, Merkel-Davies and Koller (2012) interrogated a chairman’s statement of a defence company in the UK using one document and applied steps of CDA. Our study departed from the approach of using a single document copy and analysed a larger corpus to understand the motives behind the tweets of President Trump and the public responses. This approach was consistent with CDA studies that used a large corpus (e.g. Albertus 2015; Chigona and Chigona 2008; Cukier et al. 2009; Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). Before describing the CDA approach used in the study, we summarise the Theory of Communicative Action that informed analysis of discourse ethics.

**Discourse ethics: Theory of Communicative Action**

Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) (Habermas 1984) forms an intricate part of Habermas’s work and allows understanding of communication distortions and improving practice. TCA defines human interactions on an ethical level where systematic distortions and violations of communication in a discourse can be exposed (Forchtner 2010; Stahl 2004). TCA is grounded in “three-world concepts” of perceiving reality, including the objective world (dealing with facts), the subjective world (deals with feeling and hopes) and the social world (concerned with norms and values) (Huttunen and Heikkinen 1998; Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). The three-world concepts are closely related. The objective world is embedded in universal truth, the subjective world captures an individual’s internal beliefs, and the social world prescribes what actions are sought-after. The three-world concepts embody validity claims: truth, legitimacy, sincerity and clarity (Stahl 2004). The four validity claims are interrelated and embedded in communication competence, semantics and syntax of the language and address grammar and semantics as prerequisites for pragmatic analysis (Habermas 1984). If there is a disagreement between the listener and the speaker on the validity of claims made, then the statement is considered
disputatious. The actors should, in these instances, “seek to reach an understanding about the situation and their plans of action to coordinate their action by way of agreement” (Habermas 1984). The four validity claims are summarised in the subsequent paragraphs.

Clarity relates to clear communication and using language in touch that both parties understand (Habermas 1984). Communication can be distorted if the sender of a message use words that are confusing or missing details in a message (Cukier et al. 2009). A message can be interrogated to check the completeness, syntactic rules, biases and level of detail and how it corresponds to reality in a social context (Cukier et al. 2009; Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). Questions guiding analysis of clarity can be, is the communication intelligible, complete and burdensome to the receiver of the message? (Cukier et al. 2017).

Truth refers to correct communication and providing sufficient information that supports a statement or reasoning in a message (Habermas 1984). Communication can be misrepresented if the sender of a message is not providing adequate evidence to support the reasons (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). Truth can be analysed by checking the presence of evidence relevant to the statements or argument and understanding the context in which the message is conveyed. Further, a message is analysed if it corresponds to social norms and values (Cukier et al. 2017; van Dijk 2006).

Sincerity refers to the message’s intention to the receiver and how it can influence emotional responses (Habermas 1984). A person may use utterances to control specific actions or emotions from the receiver of the message (Cukier et al. 2009). The words may appear truthful, but the message’s intentions may not be genuine. Often people use jargon and metaphors to influence their audience (van Dijk 2006). Sincerity is cumbersome to analyse and can be assumed if facts presented in a message are consistent with the discourse. Hence, analysis of sincerity can include checking the use of jargon or metaphors to suppress the understanding in the discourse or representation of hidden intentions in a message (Huttunen and Heikkinen 1998).

Legitimacy relates to the opportunity of those engaged in a discourse to be heard and that a message is balanced and not one-sided (Habermas 1984). The people involved with discourse can interact to present their ideas and convince each other. All parties should be heard and contribute to the discussion to achieve a consensus (Cukier et al. 2017; Huttunen and Heikkinen 1998). Legitimacy can be examined in assessing the message if it has multiple viewpoints of those concerned, e.g. who is

| Table 1 | Summary of validity claims (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997) |
|---------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Competence | World | Claim | Explanation |
| Linguistic Communication | Objective | Clarity | Utterance should be in terms of syntax and semantics |
| | Subjective | Truth | Utterance should match reality |
| | Social | Sincerity | Evaluate intentions of the speaker. Cannot observe can only be inferred |
| Social | Legitimacy | Utterance should be in accordance with socially accepted norms |
speaking and excluded in the discussion (Ngwenyama and Lee 1997). Table 1 summarises how the four validity claims can be examined in a communication.

**Operationalising TCA**

Habermas’ discourse ethics was adopted in this study. We applied the four validity claims (Cukier et al. 2017) to highlight communication distortions revealed when using Twitter for political purposes and political implications. The methods for operationalising TCA (see Cukier et al. 2017; Ngwenyama and Lee 1997) were used to support analysis of a large corpus (Chigona and Chigona 2008). We analysed discussions of President Trump’s tweets in the public sphere documented in various online newspapers (see “Appendix”), starting with one specific article from the New York Times (Shear et al. 2019). The tweets covered the period between 2017 and 2020. During his Presidential term, President Trump used Twitter for communication with government officials, citizens and other organisations (Ott 2017). Table 2 summarises the validity claims and speech dimensions applied in the study.

**Research methodology**

The study used a qualitative research approach to highlight discourses on Twitter and how language is used to influence the political landscape of contentious politics, activism and civic engagement. The qualitative research approach was consistent with similar studies that have used CDA to analyse public discourses (Cukier and Thomlinson 2005; Cukier et al. 2009).

**Empirical materials**

The empirical materials used in this study were purposefully selected, and only materials that could support to address the research question guiding the study were selected (Etikan et al. 2016). The empirical materials were gathered from a broad selection of online newspaper articles focusing on the period 2017 to 2020. Internet-based media were used to access American news articles. The articles were obtained by searching for the term “Trump’s Twitter”, Trump tweets”, “President Trump Tweeter” and “President Trump tweets” from Google, giving access to news websites. A list of the news articles is attached in “Appendix”. The search yielded a plethora of news articles. We relied strongly on the article by Shear et al. (2019) in the New York Times, which provided a breakdown of 11,000 tweets that reshaped the Trump presidency. We further searched news around the themes from categories of the tweets to get diverse perspectives. All the articles were stored in electronic format in qualitative data analysis software for easy referencing and coding.
Table 2 Validity claims and speech dimension (adopted from Cukier et al. 2017)

| Validity claim                                                                 | Result   | Distortion     | Validity test                                                                 | Speech dimensions                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| The propositional content is true                                               | Truth    | Misrepresentation | Is the evidence and reasoning provided in the tweets sufficient?               | Argumentation and evidence         |
| The speaker is honest (or sincere) in what she says                              | Sincerity | False assurance  | Is what is tweeted consistent with how it is said                              | Metaphors and connotative words    |
| What is said is linguistically intelligible and comprehensible                   | Clarity   | Confusion        | Is the communication through the tweets sufficiently intelligible?             | Rhetoric and semantic rules        |
| What the speaker says (and hence does) is right or appropriate considering existing norms or values | Legitimacy | Illegitimacy     | Are competing “logics” (e.g. Stakeholders) equally represented in the tweets? | Use of experts                     |
Data analysis

Shear et al. (2019) provided a breakdown of 11,000 tweets that potentially reshaped Trump’s presidency. The document drew data from Trump Twitter Archive and covered tweets between 2017 and 2019. This was a good starting point for our data analysis. The document consisted of 32 pages when printed, which provided a detailed analysis of the frequency of the tweets, down to the month and year of the specific tweet and the reaction it elicited. The data were compared with other news articles to improve the quality of our findings. We closely looked at issues emerging from the corpus, e.g. President Trump’s use of Twitter to create political storms, disparaging certain individuals or just anyone who dared to challenge him, and the tweets’ content posed a national security risk to America.

The validity claims of truth, sincerity, legitimacy and clarity (Cukier et al. 2017; Habermas 1984; Ngwenyama and Lee 1997) were used to answer the research question. Cukier et al. (2017) offer a novel process for critical discourse analysis using Habermas’s four validity claims. We adopted the approach and used the guiding questions (recall Table 1). As shown in Table 3, the samples of the tweets in each category were coded, and a validity claim was assigned. Under the four claims, misrepresentation, false assurance, confusion and illegitimacy were analysed, looking at claims and their evidence.

Further, communication distortions for the identified claims were identified. Each theme was critically examined considering the historical and political context (Myers and Klein 2011). The process was iterative, and at the end of the process, a report was produced that answered the research question guiding the study.

Discussion of findings

Considering the discourse presented by President Trump’s tweets sowing widespread division amongst the American people and presenting a risk to national security, particular emphasis was placed on Twitter taking the steps to fact check President Trump’s tweets. This was in response to long-standing criticism that Twitter is hands-off to policing misinformation or falsehoods from world leaders (Dwoskin 2020). Most of the tweets misrepresented facts, caused confusion, provided false assurance and illegitimate facts.

The truth claim expects information or content to be proportionally true, and sincerity demands honesty; clarity requires that what is said is linguistically intelligent and comprehensible. Legitimacy requires facts to be appropriate and aligned with people’s norms and values. When the President tweets, he is doing it from what he believes is factual; he defends his stance by accusing people of provoking him to respond via Twitter. He legitimises the tweets by tweeting and retweeting regardless of the consequences. The 11,000 tweets identified by Shear et al. (2019) have damaged the constitution. The international communities have questioned America’s sovereignty as the most powerful nation and have asked President Trump’s sanity. He has been criticised for running the White house like his apprentice show, believing he is his presidency’s executive producer and director. The tweets directed at
| Tweets            | Validity claim | Testing criteria | Claim                                                                 | Evidence of distortion                                      |
|------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5889 Attack on someone or something | Truth          | Misrepresentation | “Obama destroyed the American economy with his free healthcare” (NYTL1)  | America’s economy grew under President Obama Administration |
|                  |                |                  | “Why don’t they go back to where they come from: Attack on four democratic congress women of colour” (NYTL1, TWB1) | The women were born in the USA                               |
| 2026 Praise himself | Sincerity       | False assurance  | “I am the best President, the economy has been growing, unemployment is at an all-time low. Kim Jong Un is a fine person, he...” (NYTL1) | Kim Jong Un is a fine person                                 |
| 1710 Promote conspiracy theories | Clarity       | Confusion        | “I will be asking for a major investigation into VOTER FRAUD, including those registered to vote in two states, those who are illegal ....” (NYTL1) | Some of the information supported conspiracy theories and undermined the role of democratic institutions |
| 758 Promote fox news | Legitimacy      | Illegitimatises facts | “… symbiotic relationship between Mr. Trump and Fox News is apparent through the president’s tweets. In fact, he praised the network in his first tweet on the first morning he woke up in the White House.” (NYTL1, WST1) | The President praised a news media house many times, e.g. 750 times |
attacking women have been alarming when issues of discrimination against minorities have been questioned, gender-based violence (GBV) and inequality against women, which is a significant concern to the world. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), 1 in 3 (35%) of women and girls worldwide experience physical and sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. However, this only tells part of the story since emotional abuse is more rampant. When world leaders insult women and are not held accountable, a message is conveyed that women can be objectified, marginalised and blamed for the abuse happening to them with no recourse.

McCloskey (2020) had the following to say “The president often shares praise for himself, rants about his rivals and conspiracy theories to the 80 million Twitter followers. Trump says Twitter helps him cut through so-called ‘fake news reports on TV shows and newspapers he claims are riddled with falsehoods’. However, his tweets promote conspiracy theories, fuel fake news and create falsehoods of grave concern to national security. This is especially true when he praised dictators, called specific news media the enemy, and praised or promoted conservative media. Honouning leaders that do not respect human rights can have adverse political effects because these leaders create an environment where some members of society are marginalised, especially those with different political views. Further, the leaders may legitimise their political decision and actions using utterances from America to create a false impression about their governments while limiting the conditions of some citizens to flourish.

Table 3 illustrates some of President Trump’s tweets focusing on the four validity claims. All the tweets satisfied the four validity claims, and an explanation is provided on how the claims were evaluated. In a way, the findings confirmed that the tweets are blatant and subjective. Further, insights that emerged from the analysis are presented in the subsequent subsections.

**Truth claim**

The truth claim was evaluated by examining the argumentation and evidence of the tweets. The fact that tweets are restricted to 280 words implies that Twitter is not a medium that a President should use as a communication outlet to the world. The primary benefit of Twitter is to get important information disseminated worldwide within seconds. Therefore, it is so dangerous for the President of the USA to use Twitter as his medium of communication to the world. According to Nichols (2020), there are three good reasons to leave the President to continue with his rants on Twitter since his words are policy. The first reason not to remove his account from Twitter is that he will justify his claim that the world is out to get him. Second, because the President does not read or write, his Twitter account provides a presidential record that will follow him and provide evidence he will not be able to deny. Third, since the tweets constitute policy and a record, it is crucial to leave the account active, preserving the history against the inevitable attempts at memory-holing his administration the moment he is gone. His real-time utterances undermine the ability of the White House staff to disassemble and lie about the facts. “You may
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not like those words. They may be boorish, ignorant, ill-advised, or inflammatory. But they are coming from the head of the Article II branch of government, and it is better to have them in writing where we can all see them.” (Nichols 2020). This may imply that some government decisions made by the President may be difficult for the government structures (federal and congress) to execute and support when questioned. As a democratic society, government decisions are constantly challenged and scrutinised through engaging with the discourses. This provides the opportunity for government decisions to be clarified and meaningful to those affected. The President attacked the integrity of the vote-by-mail ballots, discounting the fact that mail-in-ballots will come in slowly and significantly impact the election outcomes (Hatmaker 2020). He claimed premature victory, trying to hold the counting of the votes, which represents the gravest of threats to America’s stability and undermines the institutions of a democratic society (Balz 2020).

Sincerity claim

The sincerity claim tests the speaker’s honesty in what is said, including the use of metaphors or associative language. Examining the merits and demerits of the tweets, much of the power of the discourse is in the obscure postulations, the invocation of metaphors and associated language. For instance, dominant metaphors reinforced in the corpus is that Trump has made more than 20,000 false or misleading claims during his term, according to a July report by The Washington Post’s Fact Checker. Leading author and attorney Richard Greene questioned Trump’s positive test for the coronavirus; he claims it diverts attention from topics of white supremacy that Trump condones. Greene theorises that Trump claiming that he tested positive for the coronavirus was because he is on his way to losing the re-election bid after his dismal performance at the presidential debate on 29 September 2020 (Cox 2020). According to Bursztynsky (2020), Facebook and Twitter removed a post by Trump...
where he claims the seasonal flu is more deadly than the coronavirus. Trump said this: “Flu season is coming up! Many people every year, sometimes over 100,000, and despite the Vaccine, die from the Flu. Are we going to close down our Country? No, we have learned to live with it, just like we are learning to live with Covid, in most populations far less lethal.”. A day after the President is discharged from hospital, having had access to the best medical care for the coronavirus, he claims that it is no different from the seasonal flu and encourages American citizens to learn to live with COVID-19 and not let it “dominate their lives” (Hider 2020). This is reckless and thoughtless, spreading misleading and potentially harmful information related to COVID-19, which people believe because it is coming from the President.

**Legitimacy claim**

Testing for legitimacy, the President’s relationships with certain news outlets were analysed. The President legitimises Fox News, calling them the best broadcasters since they endorse everything he says. However, CNN, which tries to be objective, labels fake news and threatens legal action against CNN (Wolfe 2019). It was challenging for the American public to deal with the President’s non-stop tweets causing chaos and controversies, exhausted with his dishonesty, narcissism and nastiness (Goldberg 2020). Because the legitimacy claim focused on participation, specifically the inclusions and exclusions of different stakeholder opinions being biased to one broadcaster and favouring another, the President caused anarchy and chaos amongst individuals coexisting in an industry on which people rely for the news that they can trust. Still, if the President discredits the news, it jeopardises Americans’ safety. Suppose CNN should report a terrorist attack. In that case, the president denies it could be detrimental to the American people since they might believe it is
fake, thereby endangering their lives. According to Wolfe (2019), in a letter dated 16 October 2019, Trump threatened to sue CNN over what he sees as unfair media coverage since launching his 2016 presidential campaign, although no lawsuits have been filed. After Twitter and Facebook flagged his posts, Trump tweeted “REPEAL SECTION 230” (see Fig. 1), the Communication Decency Act, which allows online platforms to moderate and remove harmful content without being penalised, making Trump’s threats of legal action baseless. Trump, however, signed an executive order targeting the legislation, claiming alleged “censorship” by the platform (Bursztynsky 2020).

### Clarity claim

The clarity claim looks at evidence of jargon or obfuscation, which embodies Trump’s tweets. After almost 1000 days in office, Greenberg (2019) reported that the Washington Post’s fact-checker database found 13,435 false and misleading claims made by President Donald Trump. The blatant attacks come from unabashed lying by the President, who obfuscate and use jargon in many tweets with impressive regularity. The President made assertions of voter fraud, claiming Mail Ballots are open to fraud. During the presidential debate with Joe Biden, Trump unleashed a torrent of disinformation about voter fraud, interrupting Biden 73 times (Bedo 2020). Further, the author notes that “As is so often the case, Trump’s comments mangled real issues relating to mail-in voting and jumbled it with speculation and confusion about ballots in creeks or wastepaper baskets” (Bedo 2020). As shown in Fig. 2, the tweet is a snapshot of the jargon from the president relating to election fraud.

### Conclusion

The study set out to critically analyse unanswered questions about the use of Twitter by politicians that caused political storms and to highlight contentious politics that can emerge from the use of Twitter. The analysis focused on the effects of the tweets to uphold the values of ideal speech that represented issues at a strategic level of
government that were perceived to be policy. The researchers were critical of their understanding of the use of Twitter and assumptions on the use of the platform in consideration of standards for critical theory that inform studies in information systems (Myers and Klein 2011). We reflected on gathering information, reading the reports of the tweets, and interpreting the tweets in consideration of the social, cultural, political and historical context of America. This was important to avoid biases in our analysis and let issues emerge from the data without imposing our values and ideas. We attempted to advance our understanding of the political use of Twitter and take a critical stance that helped us to highlight issues taken for granted when using Twitter. This opens opportunities for further research to examine the discursive practices that emerged from the tweets over a long period and the impact on stakeholders. The findings that emerged focused more on the tweets from the President’s utterances that were fact-checked against the responses of other stakeholders participating in the discourses.

The study demonstrated the application of TCA to understand the use of Twitter in a political context. It was interesting to note that while we focused on validity claims of President Trump’s tweets, the issues that emerged from the tweets generated interest of people and organisations in the USA and beyond. This may mean that validity claims helped understand the hidden motives of the messages targeted to a broader audience. The concept of validity claims is often applied to a particular social context. Still, the study demonstrated the possibilities of social media to extend the public sphere (i.e. creating a space where different stakeholders participate on issues that matters to them, as shown in discourses related to elections, international relations and health). Further, studies can examine the validity claims on the intentions and motives of responses from the different groups participating in the discourse.

![Example of tweet related to election fraud (Twitter 2020)](image-url)
The findings showed the use of Twitter for those with political power in changing conventional ways of communication and participating in diverse discourses. It contributes to insights emerging from media articles since academic articles primarily focus on the critiquing of Twitter as a platform. Overall, the President used Twitter in a way that did not follow government protocol directing conversations to the public at large, which led to an insurrection on the 6 January 2021. The tweets were loaded with falsehoods and misinformation, which he believes is accurate and factual and claims that his tweets are justified. The tweets are selective and misleading, generally unclear, loaded with verbiage. President Trump also claimed that the protagonists and antagonists of the tweets lean strongly on the legitimacy to advance and justify his tweeting. The legitimacy claims indicate that what is said is appropriate considering existing norms or values. The study offers the following recommendations for practice, especially politicians and policymakers (a) developing policies on integration of instant messaging platforms in government communication that promote accountability and fairness and (b) developing strategies that allow technology companies to promote free speech when using instant messaging while enhancing responsibility on the users to avoid misinformation and information overload.

Appendix

| Source                              | Title                                                                 | References       | Code |
|-------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|------|
| Chinchilla news (www.chinchillanews.com.au) | Big problem with Trump’s conspiracy                                  | Bedo (2020)      | CHI1 |
| CNBC (www.cnbc.com)                 | Facebook, Twitter block Trump post that falsely claims coronavirus is less deadly than flu | Bursztynsky (2020) | CNB1 |
| Common dreams (www.commondreams.org) | The war on words in Donald Trump’s White House: How to Fudge, Obfuscate and Lie Our Way Into a New Universe | Greenberg (2019) | COD1 |
| Daily maverick (www.dailymaverick.co.za) | Beware the Weaponisation of Social Media: Twitter is not reality, the Twitterati are not “the public” | Buccus (2020)    | DMV1 |
|                                      | Twitter and the rest of social media are a rising threat to media freedom—and I am part of their road kill | Haffagee (2019)  | DMV2 |
| Indivisible (www.indivisible.org)    | Donald Trump is a national security risk. Here’s the current #TRUMPTHREATLEVEL | Dohl (2020)      | IND1 |
| Metro UK (www.metro.co.uk)           | Donal Trump admits he often regrets his Twitter rants               | McCloskey (2020) | MET1 |
| New York Times (www.nytimes.com)     | How Trump Reshaped the Presidency in Over 11,000 Tweets              | Shear et al. (2019) | NYT1 |
| Source                                | Title                                                                 | References | Code |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------|
| Politico (www.politico.com)           | Is Trump’s Twitter account a national Security Threat?                | Toosi (2016) | POLI |
| Reuters (www.reuters.com)             | Trump Threatens to sue CNN, seeks “substantial” payment over damages: Letter | Wolfe (2019) | REU1 |
| Sowetan live (www.sowetanlive.co.za)  | Beware Helen Zille, the Twitter Vigilante                            | Ntwasa (2019) | SOW1 |
| TechCrunch (www.techcrunch.com)       | Twitter restricts Trump’s tweet claiming foes would try and steal the election | Hatmaker (2020) | TEC1 |
| The Denver channel (www.thedenverchannel.com) | Trump compares COVID-19 to flu in tweet, Twitter hides it for violating rules on disinformation | Hider (2020) | DEN1 |
| The Guardian (www.theguardian.com)    | How Trump uses Twitter storms to make political weather              | Smith (2017) | GUD1 |
| The hill (thehill.com)                | What’s behind Trump’s slump? Americans are exhausted, for one thing  | Goldberg (2020) | HIL1 |
| The Times of India (timesofindia.indiatimes.com) | India PM Modi crosses 60 million followers on twitter                | Timesofindia (2020) | TIN1 |
| Time (www.time.com)                   | This Tweet didn’t Age well.’ 22 Tweets that came back to haunt President Trump | Hoffman (2017) | TIM1 |
| Tweet binder (www.tweetbinder.com)    | Donald Trump on Twitter 2009–2020 analysis                          | Tweetbinder (2020) | TWB1 |
| USA Today (www.usatoday.com)          | Fact check: Claim that Trumps positive Covid-19 test results is a “con” has no basis in fact | Cox (2020) | UST1 |
|                                       | Keep Trump on Twitter. Each indefensible tweet is a reminder of the stakes this fall | Nichols (2020) | UST2 |
| Washington post (www.washingtonpost.com) | Trump has attacked democracy’s institutions, but never so blatantly as he did overnight | Balz (2020) | WST1 |
|                                       | Twitter labels Trump’s tweets with a fact check for the first time  | Dwoskin (2020) | WST2 |
|                                       | Commander in tweets                                                  | Andrews (2020) | WST3 |
|                                       | Twitter’s decision to label Trump’s tweets was two years in the making | Dwoskin (2020) | WST4 |

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