White Trumps Black: A Critical Discourse Analysis Of Donald Trump's Tweets On George Floyd's Killing

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Abstract

The current study looks at how former US president Donald Trump reacted towards George Floyd's death, at the hands of the white police men, in his tweets. The research employs critical discourse analysis as its research method and uses data from Twitter archives, from Trump's personal twitter account @realDonaldTrump. The data comprises of tweets from the day George Floyd was murdered, between May 25, 2020 and the day of Floyd's death, and his burial, on June 9, 2020. The analysis shows that for Trump, evading the issue, clouding the issue, and commenting on everything but the tragic death of Floyd, in words that show compassion is his modus-operandi, and which he does without fail, and without remorse, and concludes that it needs to be highlighted in every form as a rejection of every time similar issues are brushed under the rugs.

Key Words: Donald Trump, Black resistance, White supremacy, Twitter analysis, Critical discourse analysis.

Introduction

Trump's Presidency has seen him morph from "a willfully and deeply divisive candidate" (Herbert et al., 2019, p. 22) running "divisive presidential campaign" (Barda, 2019, p. 144) into a "divisive President" (Smith, 2020) running a country embroiled in "hyperconflict" (West, 2020) with a skewed model of governance that prioritized "Presidential talking and messaging", something that Kamarck (2020a) identifies as a major contributor to failed presidencies. A key strategy, one that makes Trump different from his predecessors, is that he "uses an informal, direct, and provoking communication style to construct and reinforce the concept of a homogeneous people and a homeland threatened by the dangerous other" (Kreis, 2017, p. 9), which gave rise to a distrust in his presidency and/or his job performance as president (Solar, 2023) by many especially the females, and ethnic and race minorities. It is Trump's way of talking about the George Floyd's major race-based killing that the researchers are interested in here. The researchers also take a comment by the NBA great Shaquille O'Neal "I really miss Obama. I think he would have handled this situation with class and with honor. I think he would have did [sic] the right thing" (Kimmel, 2020) as inspiration to analyze Trump's discourse. While this paper does not attempt to compare the two President's responses to such events, it does see that Trump has a unique personality, style of governance and peculiar discourse, and this distinctiveness makes his discourse on George Floyd's killing worth studying.

Purpose Statement

The current article is an attempt to analyze President Trump's discourse on George Floyd's death from the perspective of critical discourse analysis to account for not just the prejudice but also the manner in which it is done.

Methodology

The data for the present study consist of tweets and retweets US President Donald Trump made from his personal account @realDonaldTrump on the issue of George Floyd's murder between May 25, 2020, the day of Floyd's death and his burial on June 9, 2020. The data were analyzed from the perspective of critical discourse analysis in the tradition of van Dijk, a method favored by studies in political and racial discourse. Ndudzo (2018) labels Trump's stint in power "Twitter Presidency" and feels that Twitter contributed greatly towards the ascendancy of Trump to power. Trump has used Twitter extensively to reach out to the public and him having over 80 million followers on twitter shows that he has a large base of listeners on Twitter. Ouyang and Waterman (2020) find Trump's tweets to be "strategically-minded" and see in his tweets the potential of ascertaining Trump's personality as well as his politics. Ott and Dickinson (2019) find that Trump's "manner and modality" come together on the Twitter platform thus making it a signature element of his style. Trevor Noah (2019) turned Trump's tweets into a museum exhibit, Wheeler (2017) turned them into cartoons, and Moroz (2019) chronicled them for posterity, thus affirming the importance of Trump's Twitter discourse. Trump's proclivity to take to twitter to communicate with his base, a use of twitter Trump terms "MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL"—makes it important to study his tweets for his ideology and these studies show the potential of such a pursuit.

Analysis

A problem that immediately surfaces when one wants to talk about the issue at hand is the choice of the right descriptor—death, killing, homicide, or murder to name a few—each with its own connotation. Trump's choice to describe what happened to Floyd is "sad and tragic death" (Tweet May 27). What happened to Floyd was saddening and tragic in a non-Aristotelian sense of the word but 'death' does not convey the agency of the police officer who had his knee on Floyd's throat for over eight long minutes. Although the word was used extensively by the media, it is not the most appropriate choice as it presents the act as if there was no human volition involved.

Alongside framing Floyd's killing as natural, Trump continues his manipulation by framing the protestors in a negative light. He labels a 75-year-old frail protestor an "ANTIFA provocateur" and effectively casts him in a negative light of a troublemaker. Trump has promised to label ANTIFA a terrorist organization in May 2020 and while the proposal was in effect a nonstarter due to the loose structure of ANTIFA (Wilson, 2020; Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs and Sandra E. Garcia June 2, 2020), the proposal reverberated with Trump's loyal followers and created a negative association of ANTIFA with terrorism. This insinuation is supplemented by "provocateur"—an inciter of illegal activities.

Trump works to associate the protestors with the Democratic party's Presidential candidate against him, Joe Biden, thereby signaling that the protestors are coming from just one political background, and because of their political association, have an anti-government agenda (Tweet June 1). Two days into the protests about the killing, Trump tweeted to label the protestors, who were largely peaceful, "THUGS" (Tweet May 29). Thug had its origin in the region, that is now Pakistan and India, and was used for "cunning murderers who had a cult status" (Harper, 2020). It came into English and instead of murderer, got the meaning of a ruffian. With its foray into the hip-hop culture the word

achieved "desirability" (Jeffries, 2011) and rappers, following Tupac, started boasting of their thug life and created an identity for themselves as thugs: "a product of discriminatory conditions, and embod[ying] behaviors that injure the very communities" they belong to (Rose, 2008). Culturally, thug has come to be seen as "a politically correct replacement for racial slurs" (Kutner, 2015) and "the new N-word" (Wolfe, 2015). For Smiley and Fakunle (2016) thug "has become a way to describe Black males who reject or do not rise to the standard of White America" and is used as part of a process that demonizes, to justify the unlawful deaths of Black Americans. Trump's use of the word is in line with the racist use of the word already seen in the aftermath of the Baltimore protests in 2015 where the media covered the protestors only after rioting occurred and where the media and the leaders dubbed the protestors thugs (Steiner and Waisbord, 2017). Another moniker Trump employed for the protestors was "anarchist" (Tweet June 11) which he follows up days later with "other wacko groups of anarchists" on June 6 and later "ugly anarchists".

Trump has often been thought as bewildering (Wright, 2017, Kragie, 2019, Graham, 2019, Nicholls, 2019) and his statements have left his listeners, even experienced media personnel thinking "What does he mean when he says words?" (Badash, 2017). The researchers see it as "doublespeak" (Orwell, 2004) that attempts to muddy the waters by confusing the audience about the topic and the meaning, an idea explored by Lipman (2018), McKay (2019), Mcmanus (2020), and Farrar (2019). On the day of Floyd's memorial, Trump makes use of this as a strategy of evasion when he commented that Floyd was "looking down at us" and it being "a great day for him" (Palma, 2020). The reader is left bewildered if Trump is framing Floyd as being in heaven or he is callously insinuating that the rebounding job numbers are satisfying. This works to help Trump

hide behind the vagueness he creates. This also helps Trump promote topics of discussion that background the actual topic, in this case Floyd's killing and systematized racial prejudice.

There is a method to Trump's apparent madness of callously focusing on the violence that ensued in the aftermath of Floyd's killing. Trump imposes a law-and-order frame on Floyd's killing and distances the events from the racial fault lines of the American society. Looting, property damage and attacks on police take the attention away from the protests and what they are against: decades of unequal treatment that may result in Black deaths at the hands of the police. Trump's discourse works steadfastly to make the looting that followed Floyd's killing a topic of discourse through a large number of tweets dedicated to this. On June 2 he tweeted that "looters, thugs, Radical Left, and all others forms of Lowlife & Scum" had got hold of New York. The same day he addressed New York City to inform it that looters were "ripping [it] apart" and also that "NYC was ripped to pieces" (Jun 2). Trump soon escalates the looting to "terrorist assault" (Ted Cruz tweet) in which "weapon of war" were being employed. (Jun 3). While Trump hides behind Ted Cruz on June 2, through a retweet, to imply that the protestors are terrorists, he comes out in the open on June 3 to label the protestors "terrorists" himself. The manipulation is not that different from the deeply racist way of seeing a "boy with toy" as a "black male with gun" in a similar case of police brutality (Stone & Socia, 2017).

In a nation "evolved out of dissent" (Uschan, 2010, p 24) and where protests like the Tea Party, Daniel Shay's protest of 1786 and later day protests by women and Blacks became the winds of change (Stoltman, 2018), Trump could not allow people to see the protest for what it is, protest. He sets about denying the identity of peaceful protestors and fallaciously attempts to create the identity of rioters for them. He asks "If the protesters were so peaceful, why did they light

the Church on fire?" (Jun 3). A church was set alight but Trump's claim that protestors did it has little value other than it being an attempt to make a connection between the protestors and rioters thereby giving the protestors a negative identity. Uschan (2010) comments that a historical look at protests shows that protestors are joined by "throngs of excitement seeking adolescents, by the idle, the unemployed, the merely curious and malicious […] people who like to cause trouble". Equating these with those struggling for an ideational change is a politically motivated propaganda. In addition to the rioters being altogether different persons from the protestors, it is also worth noting that violent protests may be seen as "legitimate outrage" by "societally disadvantaged groups" (Reinka & Leach, 2017). In any case, sporadic violence during protests cannot be of the same magnitude as the structural violence against African Americans and similarly disenfranchised groups and may well be seen as anger against "white denial" (Wise, 2009; Joseph, 2020) and similar "epistemologies of ignorance" (Nelson et al., 2012). Anderson clothes the tactic of disenfranchising the protestors as "white rage" and shows how making the protests the topic of discussion serves to obfuscate the deeper issues of racial divide and sustained institutionalized racist attitudes. This is exactly what Trump attempts to do through his tweets. He also disregards the possibility that the violence may be a reaction to the police tactics in dealing with the protests in a classic case of violence begets violence as Jamilah King (2015) shows in her timeline of riots that violence flares ups whenever there is police brutality, which works as a match stick very time.

Miller's (2019) different—though not unique, (Danver, 2010; Deverell, 2010) —take on the destruction of property is informative here. He opines that destruction of property takes a wholly new perspective when one realizes that the acts of destruction are being attributed to those whose ancestors were 'owned', considered

as 'property' and were used to increase the wealth of the white owners. He moves on to assert that "property destruction […] is the most impressive feature of Black Lives Matter movement" (p. 163). Setting aside the debate whether looting is "a constitutive act" or as Martin Luther King called "language of the unheard" the researchers would only go as far as asserting that Trump's intention is to present looting as the issue and not what led to the looting.

Framing the protests and the protestors in a negative light serves a heinous purpose of justifying violence against the protestors. After labelling the protestors "THUGS" the President threatens the use of force. "…when the looting starts, the shooting starts" (Tweet May 29, 2020). The phrase has been attributed to Miami Chief of Police (Leonetti, 1968) who used this phrase to threaten ghetto residents. Trump later sought to assert that he did not know the racial association of the phrase and had picked it up in a different context (Faulkner, 2020). However, it is important to note that even as he distanced himself from the racist origin of the phrase, he did not step back from the threat of violence. Trump's words betray that for him police violence is justifiable and this leads us to say that he frames the issue in the religious tradition of believer vs. infidel, a tradition fresh in minds due to its use in the war rhetoric after 9/11. Trump's retweet "This isn't going to stop until the good guys are willing to use overwhelming force against the bad guys" (Sexton, Tweet May 31) is one example of such overt attempts to create good vs evil binary. An associated strategy of blaming the victim is justifying the aggression. For the excessive use of force against a 75-year-old frail protestor Trump comes with the explanation that Martin Gugino "instigated or even faked the encounter" (Feuer, 2020). Trump begins by cloaking the brutal action of the police as self-defense—as he launched the baseless theory that Gugino was trying to blackout the police's equipment—and ends up by questioning the entire episode as "a

set up" (Tweet by Trump 9 June). The assertion conveniently ignores that Gugino was 75 years old and too frail to attempt to overpower a policeman or even put himself in any danger. Trump's accusation also ignores that the police officer's shove landed Gugino in a hospital while the policeman, and his colleagues, marched on as if nothing had happened.

Elsewhere Trump turns the issue from Floyd's unlawful killing to "bring[ing] the City under control". He attempts to make controlling the rioting and protests the issue. Petras (2020) shows that one fourth of Trump's tweets from the day of Floyd's death to his memorial—spread over fifteen days—are about the protests, how to deal with the protests, and his views on the protestors' call to defund the police. This makes it apparent that Trump creates the discourse to sideline the issue of racial discrimination, and police brutality and makes protests, violence and the quality of governance the issue of debate.

"Bring in National Guard! (Tweet Jun 3) CALL UP THE NATIONAL GUARD (Tweet Jun 2). NYC, CALL UP THE NATIONAL GUARD (Tweet Jun 2) The Governor refuses to accept my offer of a dominating National Guard" constitutes Trump's calls for New York City to call in troops to impose a curfew that would also put an end to any protest. He builds up the argument by bringing in a poll that 58% of the American public supports calling troops to quell the protests (Jun 2). Whether Trump's quoted figure is correct or not is immaterial here as this constitutes only an attempt to detract focus from the travesty of using such violence against Floyd and his killing. These also constitute Trump's attempts to turn dealing with the aftermath of the killing an issue.
Trump's tweets craft the issue in terms that would help him promote his agenda of appealing to his mainly white support base. This starts as innocuously bringing in the deictic "tragic death in Minnesota" in his first tweet on the event whereby he casts the event as an isolated occurrence and attempts to isolate it, temporally and spatially, from similar incidents across the United States. The clever shifting of topic later brings the city Minneapolis into the issue such as his comment "I can't stand back & watch this happen to a great American City, Minneapolis" (Tweet, May 29). This is manipulative on at least two levels. He not only changes the topic, but also casts white supremacist thinking as American. Minneapolis has had an unenviable record in terms of racial inequality which includes the state of Minnesota grabbing land from the Native American Dakota tribe, taking till 1971 to desegregate schools, not punishing the killers of Jamar Clark in 2015 (Panicker, 2018), and where even a decade into the twenty first century "discrimination against the Negro has been and still is a major factor in the fight for equal opportunity (Nathanson, 2010). Trump's label "a great American City" serves to evoke this white supremacist past and attempts to create a sense of us, who cherish this history of group success. It is no different from the classification of "Real Americans and Fake Americans" Trump had sought in his 2018 Presidential campaign, a campaign which Hart (2020) opines "has never really ended" and a race where 75% white voters preferred Trump to Clinton.

A significant aspect of the way the US President attempts to sideline the protests and backgrounds the deeper fault lines running through the system lies in the way he brings up the Covid19 scare. As the Covid19 ravages continued in June 2020 and the vaccine still eluded scientists, health professionals advocated social distancing as the best way of checking the spread of the disease, Trump brings up the point that the protestors are not keeping health concerns foremost. Bringing up the pandemic works to create a negative perception of the protests. "Covidiots" became a lexical item during the pandemic and it conveyed public disapproval of the people who were violating the safety and health guidelines putting themselves

and others at risk of contracting the infection (Roig-Marin, 2020). Trump's comment works to present the protestors in a negative light. Secondly, it works to make the pandemic a topic of discourse and take attention away from Floyd's killing to the depredations of Covid19. "There are more important things to talk about" (Rose, 2008) appears as a ruse and "easy deflection" in the misogynist discourse and the same strategy is evoked here to cloak systemic racial divide.

Trump even in his first tweet on the issue spends more time on issues other than addressing the real issue—the fatal mix of racial discrimination and police brutality. He expresses his sadness and condoles with the Floyd family yet does not fail to "greatly appreciate" the police for "all of their work". Thus, he condones the police's action. Another key element here is that Trump focuses on the "investigation" that he initiated and has asked to be expedited with a view to serving justice. Video footage and eye-witness accounts did not leave much to be investigated. The actors in the episode and their roles were clear from day one. They were: a person who had not been accused of causing bodily harm, who was unarmed and who did not resist arrest, was in handcuffs and on the ground gasping for air, one police officer with his knee on the downed man's neck, being helped by three other officers. This leaves little room for investigation or traversing a long path to find justice at the end. The President could not have been uninformed of what had happened or what was the right thing to do here but he chose to bring in the investigation so as to avoid the real issue. It is worth pointing out that even when homicide charges were brought against the officers, Trump did not change his stance.

Trump also makes calls for defunding the police a topic and discussed the implications this may have for governance and the safety of the people. In a number of tweets, he comments on the issue dismissing the calls for defunding the police, cites the accomplishments of the police, their hard work, and the anarchy that such a step may cause. He also associates it with the "radical left democrats" (Jun 8).

Trump's business background makes him focus the losses due to the violence in the aftermath of Floyd's killing more than the human tragedy of Floyd's death or the renewed emotional scars of a historically disenfranchised people. He labels the destruction of Macy's storefront in New York a "tragedy" (Tweet June 3) thus placing financial loss in the same category as loss of Floyd's life—"a grave tragedy" for Trump (Hass, 2020). The businessman in him also seeks solace in thinking that Floyd, up in the Heaven, would be happy about the rebounding job numbers.

Election remains the undercurrent of the Trump's tweets. With the Presidential election six months away, Trump wants to talk to his voter base and earn points. Even as the entire country is trying to come to terms with Floyd's killing, Trump uses the opportunity to dent his opponent, Joe Biden's position as a Presidential hopeful. "Leaders lead, cowards kneel" (Jun 6) is his comment on Biden's gesture of grief. Trump's voter base mainly constituting over 40 years old white males earning above the average national wage (Kivisto, 2017) wants a return to the era where the "values of the majority were valued most" (Cosgrove, 2018) and Trump's stance on Floyd's killing is meant to please this base.

The threat of violence was so clear that Twitter took the unprecedented—and controversial—step of flagging Trump's tweet for violating Twitter's rules about glorifying violence. Twitter's decision to slap the warning precipitated Trump's executive order to allegedly address editorial powers of such media. These events are important from a critical discourse analysis perspective. The debate regarding controlling voice through editorial powers to allowing voice even when it is incendiary will take quite some space in the times to come.

Moreover, this debate has the added dimension of two different sorts of power pitched against each other: the political and executive power of a leader and President versus the corporate power of a wealthy business entity. A side battle has also become discernable in the varying attitudes of Jack Dorsey and Mark Zuckerberg. Dorsey allowed his staff to flag Trump's post while Zuckerberg's Face Book and Instagram did not. The fall out of these battles will have immense implications for the way discourse is created, disseminated or controlled in the years to come.

Discussion and Conclusion

Political discourse has remained a fertile area for the growth of critical discourse analysis and Van Dijk, Fairclough and Hart have theorized on it, and a large number of researchers have studied it. Obeng (2002) feels that the "contextual properties control lexical choices" (pg. 5). Typically, CDA has studied inaugural addresses, political campaign advertisements, rallies and debates. There has been a growing interest in the twitter discourse for discussing any and all concerns of the people, by the people themselves, and would be interesting to see how the social media platform of Twitter, with its focus on content words, contributes to the dissemination of an ideology through lexical choices. Stone and Socia (2017) conclude that newspaper coverage of Tamir Rice's killing at the hands of a police officer showed "a reliance on official accounts" but with the social media becoming more pervasive, though Ali and Fahmy (2013) find its ability to bypass censorship to be limited, and being adopted by protestors (Poell & Borra, 2012) mainstream media are increasingly incorporating social media content, if not relying on it (Newman, 2009; Paulussen & Harder, 2014). Keyboard warriors employed by political parties and groups add a different dimension to the discourse on the social media as these promote content of particular lobbies, and

pursuits in CDA in the future need to look at this dimension also.

Racism is an issue of voice—denial of voice, to be more exact—and this has remained a key pivot of the discourse around Floyd's killing. While Floyd was literally choked for over nine minutes, the protestors were figuratively choked when their voice was drowned by noise—at time as inane as discussing the impact on US-Canada relations of Trudeau taking the knee for Floyd—of other topics such as property damage, the impending trial and its likely outcome, impact on the US economy, role in the spread of Covid19, and implications for the Presidential elections etc. Of particular interest here is the role the possibly alternate media play in awarding or denying voice to the victim in such cases. Jack Dorsey exercised editorial control over the comments and Andrew Clark asked for more transparency in the way platforms of voice such as Twitter and Face Book control voices, whether of dissent or of dominance. (Guardian Staff, 2020). Other than the editorial control of the social media the very nature of the social media of "simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility" (Ott & Dickinson, 2019, p. 20) need to be discussed for the content this nature spawns and its role in purveying ideologies. From a CDA perspective the Twitter feature of retweet is significant and worth studying as it allows a person to promote a point of view with a disclaimer that a retweet is not an endorsement. Though such a disclaimer carries little weight due to the under erasure at work but the weight is enough to put a legally tenable distance between the message and the powerful person promoting that contentious message. The trend is already apparent where a tweet is planted and then retweeted to exercise the control of thought.

A takeaway from the present study, and Floyd's death, is that despite the huge body of work done in the field of critical discourse analysis, critical discourse analysts have a significant role to play in uncovering racial

inequality, racist attitudes, discourse that legitimizes racial discrimination, among other similar issues particularly as the prejudice is cloaked in newer technologically savvy ways. The researchers feel that CDA is so important because it has a heart and while the positivist tradition in research may strive ever harder for objectivity, some issues like race need to be felt, rather than be seen with an icy detachment. CDA with its avowed desire to side with the victim (van Dijk) brings the element of humanity into the equation. In this paper, this has been evident in the slightly emotive language which has not tempered because the researchers feel that the diction needs to reflect the outrage that the interpretation engenders. Furthermore, there also needs to be a thorough discussion on the rhetoric of a critical discourse analysis paper that is aiming to unravel, undo and reverse the racist rhetoric and attitudes.

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