

Statement for the Record

Dear Committee Members,

My name is Dr. Sam Bernard and I am submitting this statement in my capacity as a researcher with expertise in the social dynamics of online communities. The evidence I provide in this statement is grounded in my recently completed doctoral research, which focused on the use of the Reddit social media platform by supporters of former President Donald J. Trump. My research analysed the way in which Trump supporters engaged with events surrounding his campaign and administration using Reddit's functionality. In particular, I focused on how his supporters reacted to situations where the former president did something that disrupted their established consensus of how he would and should act. For this research, I studied over 1500 Reddit posts, collecting data from several representative case studies and an overview survey of popular contributions made during 2016 and 2017 to the r/The_Donald subreddit, the most popular network of Trump supporters on Reddit.

In this statement, I will:

- Provide an overview of Reddit and r/The_Donald, explaining relevant functionality and context as it relates to Trump supporters' use of the platform.
- Explain how this impacted the way in which r/The_Donald engaged with events and formed and maintained a broad consensus grounded in an anti-establishment group identity.

Context: Reddit as a platform for content sharing

Reddit is a social media platform primarily designed for sharing and discussing media content either taken from elsewhere on the internet or created by Reddit users themselves. The platform is extremely popular, ranked 6th in web traffic across the US and above prominent platforms like Twitter and LinkedIn (Alexa, 2022). Unlike other popular social media platforms, Reddit is not organised around personal connections between individual users (such as those created by Facebook's 'friend' or Twitter's 'follow' functionality). Instead, the platform enables its users to participate in smaller communities called subreddits, which are created by Reddit users to engage with content relating to a shared interest. Subreddits range from very large and general in scope, such as r/news or r/funny, to very small communities dedicated to niche hobbies, local sports teams or obscure music genres. Users participate on Reddit by sharing content to one of these subreddits and by engaging with content posted by others through the platform's voting and comment functionality. These features enable participants to share content to a relevant audience united by a common interest, but also empowers these audiences to curate the content shared by voting it 'up' or 'down'. Content that receives a significant number of 'up' votes relative to 'down' votes is prioritised by Reddit's default sorting algorithm, which displays content in order of popularity - placing recently popular contributions prominently at the top of the subreddit to which they are posted. Content that is particularly successful may even reach r/all, which amalgamates the most popular content from across Reddit as a whole. By voting content 'up', Reddit users therefore participate in making it more visible and likely to be seen by others. This link between popularity and visibility is key to Reddit's impact as a platform, as an obscure piece of media shared to a large subreddit can quickly be elevated to an audience of hundreds of thousands or even millions. In this way, Reddit acts as something of a bridge between niche and mainstream parts of the internet.

r/The_Donald on Reddit

r/The_Donald was the largest subreddit for Trump supporters on Reddit, with almost 800,000 subscribers at its peak. r/The_Donald (hereafter 'The_Donald' or 'the subreddit') was particularly impactful due to its harnessing of Reddit's link between the popularity of a contribution and its visibility, funnelling content shared or created by its users to an audience of hundreds of thousands of Trump supporters and potentially millions of general Reddit users (Shepherd 2020). The_Donald used Reddit's functionality to effectively draw its users' attention to content ranging from the highly serious, such as news reports and official White House press releases, to irreverent social media posts, humorous images and obscure in-jokes. Rules regarding what

content could be shared to the subreddit were far looser on The_Donald than other political subreddits, such as r/HillaryClinton or r/Republican, and its users appeared to prioritise creating and up-voting large amounts of content - regardless of quality - to gain as much visibility on Reddit as possible, rather than using the voting system for its intended use of promoting higher quality contributions (Mills 2018).

Regardless of what was being shared, The_Donald's users consistently framed their participation on Reddit as inherently politically significant - important in proliferating information that would otherwise have been ignored or censored. Content shared to the subreddit was typically framed as something that was being unnoticed, ignored or actively suppressed by a vaguely-defined 'establishment'. This enabled The_Donald's users to attach great importance to the act of sharing and 'up' voting content, as it was repeatedly and explicitly asserted to be the only means by which ostensibly censored or ignored information could be proliferated. Despite this, who the establishment was or what its exact intentions were remained vague and dependent on context. During the 2016 election, Hillary Clinton and her presidential campaign were typically depicted as representative of a far wider establishment dominant across all political, media and social institutions. However, following Trump's electoral victory and inauguration as President, discussion of Hillary Clinton ceased almost entirely, yet this focus on the establishment remained despite its lack of a clear definition.

The_Donald's users consistently dedicated far more attention to the 'establishment' against which they were ostensibly opposed than they did defining what their own political goals were beyond the vaguest notion of support for Donald Trump. Between July 2016 and June 2017, content discussing the establishment appeared in 78% of all contributions. In contrast, content discussing the goals and activities of Trump and his supporters or allies only appeared in 46% of contributions. In this way, The_Donald's users primarily engaged in sharing content that could be framed as suppressed or ignored by the establishment, even if the reasons for this suppression or even the substance of the content itself were vague and inconsistent. Understanding the establishment in such vague terms meant that its aims and constituents could be defined pragmatically, giving The_Donald's users scope to frame the alleged 'establishment' position on any given issue and then articulate their own in opposition to it. The subreddit avoided the need for consistency in its own interpretation of events, as its users instead focused on sharing content that claimed to discredit, embarrass or highlight the hypocrisy of an opponent that was itself typically defined in whatever way was most relevant to any given context. This meant that The_Donald's engagement with news events was highly resistant to 'fact-checking' or counter-arguments, as participants were more concerned with discrediting the alleged beliefs and character of political opponents than with consistently defending their own position (see also Roozenbeek and Salvador Palau 2017 for an account of The_Donald's apparent "immunity" to negative news events).

Relationship between The_Donald and Reddit

Reddit itself was consistently framed as part of the establishment that The_Donald was using the platform to oppose. Despite the fact that the subreddit made highly effective use of Reddit's functionality, its relationship with the platform's administrators - and indeed other Reddit users in general - was consistently characterised by antagonism. The_Donald's users were well aware that they were something of an unwelcome presence on Reddit, disruptive in both their manipulation of the platform's functionality (Shepherd 2020, Mills 2018), their harbouring of hateful content (Gaudette et al 2020) and simply their presence as a Trump-supporting network on a platform that they perceived to be unwilling to listen to alternative viewpoints. This antagonism was highly important to how The_Donald's users understood their use of Reddit. As the platform's administrators and other users were seen as political opposition, simply maintaining a visible presence on the platform could be understood by Trump supporters as a politically significant act. The_Donald became known for attempts to gain the attention of other Reddit users by manipulating the voting functionality to gain as many posts as possible on r/all - so much so that Reddit administrators brought in numerous changes to the functionality of r/all to prevent any one subreddit from taking up disproportionate space on this shared page (Huffman 2016a). In this way, antagonism with the rest of Reddit, and the perceived bias of its administrators against the subreddit, became an important rhetorical strategy available to The_Donald's users. Asserting that something shared was being ignored by the rest of Reddit, or that Reddit's administrators were

actively making changes to the platform to suppress content from The_Donald, was a consistent way of framing *any* contribution to the subreddit as an act of resistance against the establishment.

This relationship between The_Donald and the rest of the Reddit platform was facilitated by the relative independence that Reddit's structure and management affords to subreddits. All Reddit users must adhere to the platform's 'global' rules, which prohibit illegal activity and specific forms of disruptive or abusive behaviour. However, beyond this, subreddits are largely left to govern themselves. Both Reddit's site-wide rules and any others specific to a given subreddit are, in the first instance, enforced by a subreddit's own volunteer moderators who are typically everyday Reddit users rather than Reddit staff. This system has meant that Reddit's administrators have historically been seen to take a notably 'hands-off' approach to moderation, largely leaving managing what constitutes appropriate behaviour to the moderators and users of each individual subreddit. This became a point of tension between Reddit's administrators, The_Donald, and Reddit's wider user base. Reddit's initial attempts to manage the subreddit were seen as inconsistent and reflected the tension between the platform's growing mainstream profile and commitment to self-governing communities (a tension acknowledged by Reddit CEO Steve Huffman in a 2016 post (Huffman 2016a)). Indeed, the breakdown of the relationship between The_Donald's moderation team and Reddit's administrators was cited by Huffman as a core reason why the subreddit was eventually banned from the platform in June 2020 (Huffman 2020).

Key Points:

- Reddit is primarily a platform for sharing and reacting to online content and has the potential to quickly elevate obscure media to a large audience. The_Donald used Reddit's functionality in a way that was highly effective in proliferating content, but also disruptive to other users.
- The relationship between The_Donald and Reddit was often antagonistic and The_Donald's users understood their participation in Reddit as an anti-establishment act, using the platform to spread information that was claimed to be suppressed or ignored.
- The_Donald's goals were largely focused around Reddit, and its users understood their role in opposing the establishment as the proliferation of information through use of the Reddit platform.

Framing events by sharing content

The functionality of the Reddit platform described above means that subreddits primarily interact with the subjects they discuss by sharing and reacting to media content. Because of this, subreddits are influenced both by their own rules and norms, but also by the availability of relevant content to share and interact with. For example, a subreddit dedicated to supporters of a particular sports team might become more active following an important game, as the resulting media analysis, highlight videos and interviews with players and coaches provides participants with a wide array of potential content to share. In the context of a political subreddit, major events such as elections, interviews or debates will result in news articles, political speeches, campaign videos, social media posts and other forms of media that can be shared and otherwise engaged with. Participants must then make judgements regarding what content is relevant to share to a particular subreddit and what content is not. For example, live video footage of an ongoing Trump rally would be appropriate to share to r/The_Donald, but less appropriate to share to r/HillaryClinton. Participants in r/HillaryClinton might instead share an article responding critically to claims made during the rally. However, The_Donald's users often complicated this dynamic by sharing articles produced by political opponents or critical media outlets, usually as evidence of an alleged establishment position that needed to be opposed.

For example, comments made by Trump in February 2017 seemingly alluding to a terror attack in Sweden that had not actually occurred were widely criticised in the media (Bradner 2017). However, articles that fact-checked or criticised misleading statements such as these were not ignored by The_Donald's users, but were in fact actively and enthusiastically shared to the subreddit. In situations like this, the fact that outlets such as *CNN* were reporting on the misleading nature of the then-President's comments was not engaged with on The_Donald as potential evidence that Trump had been incorrect, but instead as proof that the media was biased against him. Indeed, The_Donald's users routinely shared news reports and statements by political opponents that were highly critical of Trump's actions or that disputed the veracity of his

statements or claims. This enabled the subreddit to collectively critique or argue against claims made by opponents. However, particularly in response to situations where Trump's position was difficult to defend consistently, media texts produced by political opponents could also be shared simply to demonstrate that Trump's opponents were indeed criticising him - confirming 'establishment' bias and ignorance of the 'real' facts surrounding a particular issue whilst avoiding the need to clearly define what those facts actually were. This gave The_Donald's participants significant freedom in building their own narratives around events that often diverged from more mainstream interpretations.

The_Donald's response to any given issue was therefore guided by two factors - the availability of relevant media texts and the extent to which these texts could be framed in ways consistent with the subreddit's rules and norms. As discussed above, The_Donald had far looser rules regarding the quality or relevance of submissions than other subreddits, yet its users were constrained by the requirement that all participants must unambiguously support Trump. However, my analysis found that The_Donald was primarily united by its users' shared opposition to an alleged 'establishment' rather than uncritical support for Donald Trump. The twin goals of Trump support and opposition to the establishment usually overlapped to the extent that they were effectively the same. However, in situations where Trump acted in ways that disrupted The_Donald's framing of the establishment, this tension became apparent. For example, Trump's authorisation of a missile strike against a Syrian military airbase in April 2017 was extremely controversial on The_Donald as it potentially disrupted this core anti-establishment narrative. The subreddit had reached a consensus that the establishment was attempting to pressure Trump into taking military action in Syria in response to the alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian military (Chulov and Shaheen 2017) - an attack which The_Donald's users widely believed to be a hoax. Trump's eventual authorisation of military action could therefore potentially be interpreted as the then-president succumbing to establishment pressure, falling for the hoax or otherwise acting in a way that was complicit with the very institutions he was supposed to be disrupting. Trump's actions were therefore difficult to justify as consistent with an anti-establishment framing.

However, in situations such as this, The_Donald's users utilised several strategies that enabled them to engage with media texts that were critical of Trump or otherwise disrupted the subreddit's consensus:

- Focus on criticism of Trump produced by political opponents and mainstream media outlets. If mainstream media and politicians were criticising Trump, then this was evidence that his actions were in conflict with the goals of the 'establishment'
- Highlight errors and inaccuracies in media reports criticising Trump. This enabled opponents to be criticised in ways that did not need to justify any specific decisions or actions.
- Use texts produced by opponents to create humorous content, such as internet memes. If a humorous post was unsupported by evidence or contradicted other consensuses, this did not matter as such posts were clearly intending to be amusing rather than accurate.

Because of these strategies, media texts that contradicted The_Donald's consensus interpretation of events could often be re-contextualised to instead reinforce the broader consensus that Trump and his supporters were working against the establishment. The_Donald's users focused primarily on criticising this establishment and re-framing Trump's actions as disruptive to their apparent goals. This avoided the need to justify any specific action taken by Trump on its own terms, instead focusing on analysing the reactions of his apparent political opponents. For example, sharing media articles from 'mainstream' outlets such as the *New York Times* or *CNN* that were critical of Trump's Syria strategy could be taken as evidence that the establishment had indeed been disrupted by Trump's authorisation of the airstrike - even if this contradicted the subreddit's earlier consensus that any kind of military intervention would be unjustified. In this way, the broad narrative of Trump working against the establishment was maintained, even if specific claims were contradicted or exact expectations were not met.

Key points:

- The_Donald's users primarily engaged with events by sharing media content relating to those events. This meant that they often had to respond to content that was critical of Trump

- Content that criticised Trump or appeared to contradict The_Donald's consensus could be engaged with in numerous ways that instead confirmed broader narratives of conflict with the establishment.

Idiosyncratic Interpretations

The way in which The_Donald engaged with events was guided by the extent to which texts produced in response to them by media and political institutions could be used to create meaningful content to share to the subreddit. My analysis found that the veracity of the claims made in a given text were less significant than its compatibility with the established reference points, in-jokes and format conventions that made content meaningful to the subreddit's users. This was seen particularly prominently in the way in which the subreddit engaged with Vice President Mike Pence, who was depicted on The_Donald in ways that differed significantly from his public image as a mainstream, fairly conventional politician who contrasted significantly with Trump in his political style (Silver 2016). When he was first announced as Trump's running mate for the 2016 presidential campaign, Pence was initially poorly received by The_Donald's users. His record as a long-term politician with links to the big donors and Republican establishment that Trump's campaign was ostensibly disrupting (Cillizza 2016) meant that his selection was difficult to frame as an anti-establishment victory. However, Pence quickly became popular on The_Donald due to a re-framing of his political persona in line with The_Donald's expectations of how a Vice President should behave in the Trump administration. This was done by using the available media content in novel ways, following two broad strategies:

- Focus on criticism of Pence by 'establishment' opponents. As outlined above, this was a common tactic. By highlighting criticism made by opponents, the individual or policy position could be framed as anti establishment precisely because the 'establishment' was seemingly opposed to it
- Create humorous content making light of Pence's mundanity. Content intended to be taken as humorous rather than informative could imply interpretations of events that were otherwise unsupported by available evidence

As the tone of The_Donald was irreverent and anarchic, it was often difficult to determine the seriousness of a given contribution. The use of humour to make offensive claims in ways that avoid bans and afford a degree of deniability has been well explored in a range of online contexts (Phillips and Milner 2018). Whilst offensive humour was indeed common on The_Donald, humour also played a wider role in engaging with subjects that were otherwise difficult to frame in terms coherent with the subreddit's broad anti-establishment narrative. In the case of Mike Pence, the subreddit's users frequently depicted the Vice President in a range of outlandish scenarios through the use of internet memes - humorous pieces of online media grounded in repeated iterations of an established format (Milner 2018). The_Donald's users established their own genre of memes surrounding Mike Pence, depicting him in a range of heroic scenarios using edited images from the 1960's cartoon *Johnny Quest*. Internet memes can play an important role in tying together online communities, as absurd and obscure humour separates community insiders from those who do not understand the joke (Literat and van den Berg 2019). In this way, whilst images claiming to depict Pence personally guarding the US southern border or wrestling with political opponents were obviously intended to be humorous, they nonetheless reinforced the image of Pence as a tough, maverick politician actively working against the 'establishment' and made awareness of this depiction something required to understand and fully participate in The_Donald as a subculture. This had significant implications for the way in which The_Donald engaged with genuine events surrounding Mike Pence. When the Vice President did do something that could be interpreted in line with this 'maverick' persona, such as his 2017 visit to the Korean Demilitarised Zone (see Bash and Crutchfield 2017), The_Donald's users could draw on an established repertoire of reference points to understand these events as consistent with their hopes and expectations of Trump's Vice President. This dynamic meant that the subreddit could develop a seemingly consistent, consensus interpretation of who Pence was and what he might do that would likely appear outlandish to outsiders. Pence was widely depicted in mainstream media accounts as "conventional" and "soft-spoken" (Levingstone 2016), yet was understood by The_Donald's users in exaggerated and outlandish terms that were reinforced in equal parts by internet memes and in-jokes as they were by real events.

Summary of findings

Overall, the way in which The_Donald's users engaged with media events was conducive to building and maintaining idiosyncratic expectations of how subjects would act or how events would unfold. These expectations, grounded in a blend of humorous and serious content, often reflected The_Donald's users' own ideas, in-jokes and established conventions surrounding the subreddit's use of Reddit's functionality - rather than the sober interpretation of available evidence. These narratives, however unreasonable or even absurd they might have appeared to outsiders, were difficult to discredit and, due to the effective use The_Donald made of Reddit's functionality, were able to be proliferated to a wide audience.

I summarise the key points of this statement as follows:

- The_Donald was significant due to its effective use of Reddit's functionality to proliferate media content to a large audience of engaged Trump supporters. However, it maintained an outwardly antagonistic relationship with Reddit's administrators and other users.
- The subreddit primarily engaged with events by sharing and framing media content relating to those events. In doing this, its users often developed and maintained distinctive interpretations of the subjects it discussed that differed significantly from those presented in mainstream political and media discourse. This was often supported by content that blurred the line between serious and humorous, making it difficult to engage with critically.
- Despite the fact that its understanding of events was often highly idiosyncratic, The_Donald appeared to be highly resistant to criticism or fact-checking. This was due to an overarching narrative of establishment bias, which meant that criticism could be dismissed or used creatively as evidence of this alleged bias.

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