

Cringeworthy politics: Trump sparks 'embarrassment' spikes on Twitter

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A piece of not-fake-news: there has been a 45-percent increase in people tweeting about embarrassment since Donald Trump took office. In an analysis of Twitter traffic between June 2015 and June 2017, researchers revealed how the platform's users responded to Trump's actions at high-profile events.

"The Twitter data across America are really powerful. People are tweeting far more about [embarrassment](#) now than they were during the pre-Trump inauguration," said Dar Meshi, assistant professor of advertising and public relations at Michigan State University and co-author of the study. "Overwhelmingly, the number-one thing most consistently related to spikes of the word 'embarrassment' on Twitter is Trump."

Researchers from MSU, and Germany's University of Lübeck and Goethe University in Frankfurt, identified instances when embarrassment mentions spiked and aggregated the tweet content during that time. Then, they created word clouds to see what words were most linked to embarrassment.

Three of the most-prominent peaks took place on Oct. 10, 2016, March 18, 2017 and May 26, 2017. These are the dates of the final 2016 presidential debate against Hillary Clinton, when Trump denied German Chancellor Andrea Merkel's handshake at her visit to the White House and the date Trump pushed Montenegro Prime Minister Dusko Markovic at the NATO Summit, respectively.

"Looking at the word clouds for these three peaks of embarrassment, we can see that words such as Trump, debate, @realDonaldTrump, POTUS,

country, America and NATO are most-heavily used," said Frieder Paulus, assistant professor for social neuroscience methods at Lübeck University and lead author. "Other peaks appeared to happen around controversial Trump-related news, like withdrawing from the Paris Climate Agreement, talking about the 'mother of all bombs,' the G20 summit and his statements about the Charlottesville rally."

Another key finding in the research was identifying correlations between the nationwide expression of certain affective words and Trump.

"Beyond embarrassment, there is a slight positive correlation between Trump and the words disgust, shame and anger," Meshi said. "This means when people tweet these words, there's a higher probability that those people are tweeting about Trump."

In their article, the authors argue that two factors might motivate the nationwide increase in embarrassment mentions on Twitter. First, compared to former representatives, Trump seems to violate norms and etiquettes on purpose. Second, Trump's role as president means he represents all Americans—even those who don't agree with his politics. So, his norm violations threaten U.S citizens' social integrity. This two-step process causes people to cringe and feel vicarious embarrassment for Trump and his actions.

"For Americans, Trump's election and inauguration made it more difficult to distance themselves from his behavior," said Paulus. "In his role as the representative of all Americans, he formally became their most significant public figure. So if Americans consider Trump's behavior inappropriate, it also threatens their own social integrity, which contributes to them feeling an increased urge to express embarrassment."

Data revealed the emotional spikes Americans felt toward their leader and representative.

"We found that people felt the need to share their emotions related to Donald Trump's politics—and embarrassment was the emotion that most clearly described what people felt," said Sören Krach, professor for social neuroscience at Lübeck University and co-author of the study.

While the embarrassed Twitter users can't control Trump's actions, they can control how they react. Meshi said that the findings tie back to their theory of emotional genesis—why we feel second-hand embarrassment—but hopes people can begin to separate themselves from their feelings of embarrassment.

"If you have a negative emotion, understanding where it comes from helps to not let it affect you as much," Meshi said. "People are having these emotions not only because Trump is their representative, but also because he seems to intentionally violate social norms as the leader of their in-group. Hopefully, by understanding this situation, it can help U.S. citizens avoid experiencing these negative emotions over such a prolonged period."

More information: The Politics of Embarrassment: Considerations on How Norm-Transgressions of Political Representatives Shape Nation-Wide Communication of Emotions on Social Media, [DOI: 10.3389/fcomm.2019.00011](https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2019.00011) , www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2019.00011/full

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