

# Digital strategy 'a tricky dance' for politicians

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# SELFIE DEMOCRACY

THE NEW DIGITAL POLITICS OF  
DISRUPTION AND INSURRECTION

**ELIZABETH LOSH**



Credit: MIT Press

Elizabeth Losh, the Duane A. and Virginia S. Dittman Professor of American Studies and English at William & Mary, is paying close attention to the social media posts of candidates running for office in the upcoming mid-term elections.

A media theorist and digital rhetoric scholar, Losh recently wrote ["Selfie Democracy,"](#) a book that examines the unintended consequences of politicians' digital strategies. There is no tried-and-true road map for successful [social media](#) strategy by politicians, Losh says. That's why she calls it "a tricky dance."

"You need to be authentic, but you need to also in some ways acknowledge the presence of the platform and the ways that you are self-consciously managing your own image," Losh said. "You have to have the right amount of self-deprecation. And you have to have the right degree of intimacy. The tricky dance influencers have to do is they have to both be special enough that you want to watch them and yet they need to be relatable."

Losh joined W&M News to discuss her book and the upcoming election. The following interview has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q: What is selfie democracy, and what does your book explore?**

A: When people hear the word selfie, a lot of times they think about

narcissism, exhibitionism, a kind of curated personality. I think that's important when we think about the ways that Barack Obama's image was packaged, the way that Donald Trump's image was packaged, but more importantly the way that Obama and Trump's followers are doing identity work online that shows their loyalty and their emotional ties to candidates. This kind of identity work around politics that's happening online is really important. In the past, if you wanted to see a politician, you'd go to a speech or you'd go to a fundraiser. Maybe you'd shake that politician's hand or if you had a baby, the politician would kiss the baby. But now it's selfies with politicians and this sense that not only is politics personal, but it's personalized. The selfie is sort of an ideal way to signal co-presence and to signal that intimacy with a [political leader](#), and that's part of why I called the book "Selfie Democracy" because it's a book that's really about identity politics and how identity performance online is now part of the larger political strategic landscape.

Things like "shares" and "likes" and all of these social forms of communication are often how a political message gets out. In the book, I'm arguing that there are a lot of positive effects from that. People feel more politically engaged, but they're also more politically polarized and are also more likely to consume misinformation.

**Q: What other observations did you make about how Barack Obama and Donald Trump used social media during their campaigns and time in office?**

A: The big argument of the book is that Barack Obama and Donald Trump are often seen as political opposites, but they actually share a lot of essential ingredients. They both rose to power as political outsiders. They both used social media as part of that successful move. They both used the smartphone as a way to facilitate that feeling of direct digital democracy. And that energizes people, but it also gives them this false

sense of intimacy with their political leaders.

**Q: You spoke about the tricky dance politicians have to do when it comes to social media. What have you noticed about some of the current candidates running for office in upcoming mid-term elections?**

A: In the Pennsylvania Senatorial race, Democratic candidate John Fetterman is really smart on the relatability front, like, "You know, I had a stroke. Have you or family members ever had a medical emergency?" He's trying to be relatable, trying to do this kind of everydayness stuff while Republican candidate Mehmet Oz is doing the "I'm an accomplished surgeon, and I had this huge business empire, and I'm a media personality," trying to play up his accomplishments. And when he tries to do an everydayness performance like he did at the [grocery store](#) where he didn't know what the name of the grocery store was and it was like he was there doing his crudité performance, that just totally fell flat. It's a very hard terrain.

**Q: What other 2024 presidential candidates interest you, particularly in how they are using social media?**

A: Most of them are kind of bad at it, which is sort of interesting. People always point to Beto O'Rourke, but I think people who study social media closely are probably less impressed with Beto O'Rourke than maybe journalists are. And obviously someone like Ted Cruz, who famously "liked" the pornographic Twitter post, has had some rough patches. Ron DeSantis has not knocked it out of the park for me in terms of social media strategy. I'm definitely keeping an eye on it. I feel like it's such a fluid pool right now. I think the midterms are going to really be important. They were important for Obama, and the midterms were

important for Trump, too. I think that there are ways that those midterms often kind of set the tone in terms of, I wouldn't say issues, but what kind of themes, what kind of emotions are going to be the ones that are going to be most politically active.

**Q: You have said social media makes people more politically polarized. There's no better example of this than the January 6 insurrection. Where are we headed with this?**

A: That's one of the things I write about in the book that I find particularly frightening. I was working on the book and saying, "What's the ending to it?" And then Jan. 6 is the obvious ending because there you see that mistrust in representative government because this direct digital democracy undermines representative government, so we have the building that represents representative government being attacked and then people are in there shooting selfies. How could it be more demonstrative than that?

But what's also interesting, and one of the things I wrote about in the book, is how many people there were at one time on the political left. So this is a phenomenon a lot of people write about called horseshoe politics where people who are on the really far right or the really far left can actually hop over to the other side. This extremism, this mistrust of compromise, of representation and this hatred of bureaucracy, to me that's a particularly potent Molotov cocktail because those are people who do not believe in rules or norms.

**Q: You say in the book that algorithms are distorting the whole human knowledge system. Is regulation the answer?**

A: I do think [social media companies](#) need to be regulated at the very least, and I think this is something that the people on the right and people on the left agree with. The problem I think comes around the issue of fake news because I think conservatives are concerned about censorship and liberals are concerned about disinformation and misinformation, but I think privacy is something that people on the left and people on the right agree on.

I feel like on the privacy front we could at least try to move toward the European standard where we have mechanisms against tracking across platforms, although legislation takes so long that [tech companies](#) usually figure out some sort of work-around by the time that the legislation actually comes into force. I'm a radical in some ways in that I think that the amount of data that social media companies gather and search engine companies gather should be taxed. I think that there should be incentives to not collect huge amounts of user data, particularly things like location data.

Provided by The College of William & Mary

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