

On the conventionalization of impoliteness formulae The case of Trump's *fake news* insult

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Abstract

Insults are a well-recognized form of conventionalized impoliteness, yet little research explores their proliferation and conventionalization. This study analyzes Trump's initial use of *fake news* as an insult during and after a 2017 press conference, followed by a diachronic examination of his usage of it on X (then Twitter) through January 2021. Through these two case studies, *fake news* is shown to have rapidly evolved into a conventionalized insult that can be used as a personalized negative assertion (e.g., "You are fake news!") and as third-person negative references either as a stand-alone insult (e.g., "He is fake news!") or as part of pejorative nicknames (e.g., "Fake News CNN"). Its spread was driven not only by Trump's notoriety but also by the media's amplification of it that inadvertently reinforced its use among Trump, his supporters, and others.

1. Introduction

Insults are one of the most recognizable forms of impoliteness because they constitute particular linguistic forms with relatively stable meanings. Using them is socially taboo in formal settings (see Allan and Burridge 2006, 79; Culpeper 2011, 141–145). Furthermore, using some insults, such as ethnic or religious slurs, is considered a hate crime in places like the UK (see Culpeper, Iganski and Sweiry 2017, 16–18). In the USA, similar insults, often termed "fighting words" (which also include "severe derogations" such as *cunt*, *pussy*, and *motherfucker*), may be punishable by law in extreme cases, such as incitement to violence (see Jay 2019, 90–91).

Common conventionalized insults have received considerable scholarly attention since the 2000s, particularly since the publication of Bousfield's (2008) and Culpeper's (2011) monographs on impoliteness. In Culpeper's monograph, he identifies and categorizes conventionalized impoliteness formulae, including personalized insults, which, together with implicational impoliteness, form his model of impoliteness triggers (see Ch. 4–5). Furthermore, Dynel's work (2017, 2021) shows that creative insults (both genuine and jocular) can be constructed to generate humor in addition to engaging in face attack. Research into insults has been applied to various contexts and types of data including telecinematic dialogue (e.g. Bousfield and McIntyre 2011, 2018), reality television (e.g. Culpeper 2005; Haugh and Culpeper 2018), internet trolling (Hardaker 2020), political rhetoric (Tracy 2017; Wodak et al. 2021), and informal conversation (Haugh 2017).

There has also been heightened interest in how to characterize/differentiate the different phenomena that fit within the broad category of insults in recent years. Padilla Cruz (2019) proposes placing insults, slurs, epithets, and expressive expletives on a conceptual to non-

conceptual continuum, with insults and slurs placed near the conceptual end, epithets towards the middle, and expressive expletives leaning toward the non-conceptual end. There has additionally been increased interest in hate speech (e.g. Vilar-Lluch 2023), particularly concerning the use and functions of racist/sexist slurs and epithets (see Archer 2015; Croom 2015; Haugh and Culpeper 2018).

Despite these advances in insult studies, gaps remain, particularly in understanding how new insults are created and what factors drive their spread and conventionalization. This investigation addresses this issue by looking at one of the most idiomatic insults coined by President Trump during his first term in office: *fake news*. Trump has been a polarizing figure from the moment he entered American politics. In fact, Sclafani (2018 1–5) argues that Trump has a “stereotypically hypermasculine” style that consequently makes him “one of the most (if not the most) rhetorically unconventional, controversial, and divisive candidates in US presidential history”. Contributing greatly to this is his use of disparaging nicknames and other insult formulae against his foes, which have become an almost daily fixture of American politics since his entrance into the political arena in 2015 to the present day (see Bourgeois and Bousfield 2026; Tyrkkö and Frisk 2020).

Although Trump (2017) claimed credit for having “come up with” *fake news* in an October 2017 interview with Mike Huckabee, the Oxford English Dictionary cites examples of its use dating back to the late 19th century that refer to the sensationalist and exaggerated practices of so-called *yellow journalism*.¹ Additionally, Tandoc et al. (2018) provide a typology of its pre-2016 definitions, including news satire, news parody, and manipulative or fabricated news stories that are found primarily online. Regardless of its origins, Trump first uses *fake news* as a compound after he won the 2016 election on December 10, 2016 (see example 1).

- (1) Reports by @CNN that I will be working on The Apprentice during my Presidency, even part time, are ridiculous & untrue - Fake News!
(Donald Trump Tweet: December 10, 2016)²

Interestingly, *fake news* is used here parenthetically to dismiss the news story as deliberately fabricated, not as an insult directed at news agencies or individual journalists. However, he would repurpose it into one a month later to the ire of journalists and amusement of his supporters in a variety of constructions (e.g., “You are fake news!” or “Fake News CNN”), as demonstrated in Sections 3 and 4.

Therefore, this study addresses the following questions. Can we consider Trump’s *fake news* insult as conventionalized or is it simply a creative idiosyncrasy of one individual? If it has become a conventionalized insult, what environmental circumstances made the *fake news* insult resonate with the public and what allowed it to spread and conventionalize so quickly? To answer these questions, this paper takes a qualitative and quantitative look at Trump’s uses of *fake news* through two case studies. The first case study analyzes his first uses of *fake news*

¹ Trump’s claim to have “come up with” *fake news* occurs in the interview at timestamp 09:08. For information on its usage before 2016, see the Oxford English Dictionary entry for “fake news” (added 2019): https://www.oed.com/dictionary/fake-news_n?tl=true.

² This Tweet can be read in its original form online: <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/807588632877998081>.

as an insult during his infamous press conference in Trump Tower on January 11, 2017, and subsequently after via X (then Twitter).³ The second case study analyzes Trump's use of the *fake news* insult on X spanning his entire first term as president. This is followed by a discussion of the status of the *fake news* insult and its spread beyond Trump's personal use.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews previous literature on impoliteness and insults and relates it to Trump's rhetorical style. Section 3 comprises the first case study. Section 4 covers the second case study. Section 5 discusses the theoretical implications and insights of the findings of this article pertaining to the study of insults. Section 6 offers the conclusions.

2. Previous studies on insults and Trump's political rhetoric

2.1 *What is impoliteness?*

This study adopts a “third wave” approach to impoliteness that highlights its tactical use by politicians, such as Trump, to both attack their adversaries and project themselves as strong and capable leaders (see Tracy 2017, 742–743). Thusly, it integrates the classic theoretical (first wave) and discursive (second wave) approaches to impoliteness (see Haugh and Culpeper, 2018; Kádár and Haugh 2013, Ch. 2–3). The approach adopted here assumes that impolite language (including the use of personalized insults) can be used by speakers to strategically attack the face of their target(s) and thereby cause “social conflict” (Culpeper et al. 2003, 1546). On the other hand, it also acknowledges that the producer, the target(s), and the overhearing audience(s) collectively determine how to interpret and evaluate impolite language (see discussion in Bousfield 2010, 122–124).

Moreover, third-wave approaches additionally pay attention to the norms and expectations inherent in specific contexts, which includes the greater “moral order” (see Culpeper 2011, 38; Domenici and Littlejohn 2006:7; Kádár and Haugh 2013, 93). This allows for nuanced analyses of individual situations while also accommodating for the possibility of more stable meanings arising from particular linguistic forms, such as conventionalized insult formulae (Culpeper and Hardaker 2017, 208).

Incorporating the norms and expectations and moral order into the analysis of communicative data has already proved to be useful for analyzing Trump's political rhetoric, particularly for the study of cases in which he is verbally aggressive and impolite towards others. In fact, Trump's violations of traditional presidential norms and the mainstream American moral order fuel much of the criticism that he has faced since beginning his political career (see Tyrkkö and Frisk 2020; Wodak et al. 2021).

2.2 *Previous studies on insults*

Allan and Burridge (2006, 79) explain that “(i)nsults are normally intended to wound the addressee or bring a third party into disrepute, or both” by typically belittling or exaggerating supposed negative aspects of the target's “physical appearance, mental ability, character,

³ Twitter was officially rebranded as X in July 2023.

behaviour, beliefs and/or familial and social relations”. Arguing that “(i)nsults are a universal pattern of human social behavior”, Matéo and Yus (2013: 111–112) propose a 24-case taxonomy of insults designed to account for and describe the use of insults in any given “(cross)-cultural context” that combines the following variables: the conventional or innovative nature of the insult, the speaker’s underlying intentionality, the quality of the hearer’s interpretation, and the addressee’s reaction or lack thereof. However, it is also generally acknowledged that the specific content of insults are language and culture specific and that some insult formulae are more conventionalized within a culture than others (see Van Olmen et al. 2023, 25). Moreover, innovations on old insults and new coinages are regularly introduced to the lexicon. In fact, creative insult innovations and coinages have been found to be a common humor generating feature of conversational and social media dialogue (Dynel 2017, 2021).

Using an empirical UK-based dataset, Culpeper (2011, Ch.4) identified a variety of insults (see Table 1) within his larger list of conventionalized impoliteness formulae.

Impoliteness Formulae: Insults			Examples
1. Insult (personalized vocatives)	negative		<i>You fucking dickhead</i> <i>You dirty bastard</i>
2. Insult (personalized assertions)	negative		<i>You are such a stupid bitch</i> <i>You disgust me</i>
3. Insult (personalized references)	negative		<i>Your little arse</i> <i>Your stinking trap</i>
4. Insult (personalized negative references [in the hearing of the target])	third-person		<i>The daft bimbo</i> <i>She’s nutzo</i>

Table 1. Insults from Culpeper’s (2011, 135) list of conventionalized impoliteness formulae.⁴

These categories of personalized insults proved to be applicable to the data analyzed in Sections 3 and 4 and, therefore, are used for the classification of the variants of the *fake news* insult used by Trump.

2.3 Previous studies on Trump’s rhetoric

Much of the current literature on Trump connects him to the rise in right-wing populism in Western democracies. For instance, Muddle (2022) contextualizes the ascent of Trump to the US presidency within what he calls the “fourth wave” of the postwar far-right political

⁴ A reviewer noted that categories 1 and 3 in Culpeper’s (2011) insult taxonomy are similar and hard to distinguish, as many insult formulae can be used in both categories. The difference lies in usage: the negative vocatives are used only in direct address (vocative case), while the negative references appear in other grammatical cases.

movements. Muddle (2022, 102–106) argues that this rise of the fourth wave has resulted in the mainstreaming of far-right ideas and electoral victories for far-right parties and individuals in Western democracies, including Trump’s 2016 and now 2024 presidential wins.

However, many of his Republican competitors and critics questioned his position on the political spectrum upon entering the race for the Republican nomination in the 2016 campaign. In fact, some even accused Trump of “sounding like a Democrat” on many key issues (Blake 2016, para. 9), critiques that were ironically echoed in multiple late-night parodies of him as well (Sclafani 2018, 69–76). Upon entering politics, Donald Trump was certainly not a traditional Republican like established figures such as Mitch McConnell, Jeb Bush, Mitt Romney, Paul Ryan, or Liz Cheney, all of whom have either since left politics or are nearing the end of their final terms in office. However, Trump has since come to personify the Republican party over the past 10 years and has been credited with shifting it significantly further to the right than it was previously (see Muddle 2022: 106)

Moreover, several studies have linked Trump’s rhetorical style to far-right populism, particularly regarding his rhetoric concerning (illegal) immigration (e.g., Demata 2017) and his consistent engagement in brash and argumentative behaviors both on social media (e.g., Kreis 2017) and in televised talking events (e.g., Schubert 2020). Wodak et al. (2021) investigate the rhetorical strategies of far-right politicians by comparing controversial press conferences involving Trump and Silvio Berlusconi of Italy and demonstrate how they both engage in the “shameless normalization” of taboo subjects and impolite behaviors, which they identify as a key feature of populist rhetoric.⁵ Concerning Trump, they highlighted that he insulted a female journalist via a personalized negative assertion by stating, “I know you’re not thinking...you never do,” in October 2018. Wodak et al. (2021, 384–385) observed that while the press and entertainment outlets largely criticized this insult, most of the top 100 YouTube commenters who responded to a video clip of the incident reacted positively to it. They concluded that Trump and Berlusconi alike were able to capitalize on their shamelessly impolite personas in order to project themselves as successful alpha-male businessmen-turned-political-strongmen to their supporters. Furthermore, by provoking the journalists to react against their impolite utterances (see “impoliteness reciprocity” in Culpeper and Tantucci 2021) they were also able to frame their targeted journalists as overly sensitive or even foolish.

Similar discursive traps have received attention in Bousfield (2007) that discusses the ‘verbal traps’ set up by perpetrators of impoliteness who exploit specific turn-taking mechanisms in order to force their targets into participating in further face-damaging utterances involving themselves. Such a baiting tactic is reminiscent of classic ‘school yard bullying’ as experienced by many children and frequently depicted in fiction. However, such actions have intriguingly not received significant attention in the current literature. Trump’s use of such discursive traps will be analyzed in detail in Section 4.2.

This multifunctionality of impoliteness formulae discussed above highlights the difficulty in classifying such utterances, particularly those which have multiple audiences. These audiences include the actual target(s) of the impolite utterance and the observing audience(s) be it from a live in-person event (witnessed in person or via televised footage) or from social media communications (see Bourgeois and Bousfield 2026, Ch. 2). Archer (2011)

⁵ Moffitt (2016, 29) similarly identifies “the demonstration of bad manners” as a key feature of the populist political style.

accounts for similarly complex circumstances involving lawyers strategically using questions that are multifunctional in courtroom settings in ways that are designed to discredit a witness's narrative (and, therefore, damage their face) in the eyes of the jury members (their priority audience in this activity type) while avoiding doing so in a way that could be characterized as "spiteful" or "malicious", thus allowing them to maintain adherence to courtroom protocol. To account for this, Archer (2011, 3220) proposed a face-aggravation scale that adds an additional "strategically ambivalent" zone to sit in-between Goffman's (1967) "intentional" and "incidental" face threat levels. She argues that the strategically ambivalent zone is necessary in courtroom contexts because lawyers have multiple goals when questioning witnesses during cross-examination (Archer 2011, 3228). This face aggravation scale, which was subsequently expanded by Archer into a larger facework scale, has been applied to various activity types using data from police interviews, fictional dialogue, and reality TV dialogue (Archer, 2015).

Such strategic ambivalence appears to be in play in the press conference data involving Trump and Berlusconi mentioned above. In fact, Wodak et al. (2021, 387) also argue that their use of non-polished straight talk projects "authenticity" and "genuineness" that their supporters identified with and found entertaining (see also Cameron 2020, 165; Montgomery 2017).

In fact, Culpeper (2011, 220–221) discusses how impoliteness can be used in such ways by proposing three major functions of impoliteness: affective, coercive, and entertaining. These three categories are not mutually exclusive, and Culpeper stresses that it is "quite possible to pursue all of them simultaneously" (2011, 221). In the example involving Trump and the female journalist above, I argue Trump is being strategically ambivalent concerning the primary function of his insult. It is coercive because it puts the journalist into a vulnerable position and entertaining to his base because they enjoy watching him spar with members of the so-called "liberally biased" media (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009). However, which of these functions is more important for Trump in this circumstance is not clear based on the evidence available, nor is it clear that there is, in fact, a primary function at all. Questions surrounding the (primary) functions of Trump's *fake news* insult will be addressed in detail in Sections 3 and 4, particularly when used on X, which Trump used as his preferred method of communication with the public and, most importantly, his base of supporters during his first term in office (see Ott and Dickenson 2020, 630–636).

3. Case Study 1: Trump's tirade against *fake news* on January 11, 2017

Trump complained from the start of his campaign that he was unfairly covered by the "mainstream press", as is well documented in Schubert's (2020) analysis of Trump's performances in the 2016 Republican primary debates. However, Trump did not use the *fake news* catchphrase until after he won the 2016 election (see example 1). Moreover, it was not until January 11, 2017, that he used *fake news* as a personalized insult against an individual journalist and news agencies generally. The circumstances around Trump's coinage of the *fake news* insult are discussed in detail in the rest of this section.

3.1 January 11, 2017: The introduction of the Trumpian fake news insult

Though the term *fake news* has been analyzed in numerous publications, the primary focus as of yet has been on its conflicting definitions (e.g., Farkas and Shou 2018, Li and Su 2020), on

how Trump uses it to deflect challenging questions and unflattering reporting about him (Davis and Sinnreich 2019; Quan and Ma 2023), and as a disaffiliating device that breaks up the population into an *us vs them* dichotomy (Smith 2019). Apart from a few observations that Trump and his followers sometimes use *fake news* as an anti-journalistic epithet or epistrophe (Davis and Sinnreich 2019, 205) or that he uses it “as a slur against mainstream media outlets” (Steinmetz 2017, para. 4), very little (linguistic) inquiry has been given to how *fake news* is used to genuinely insult journalists and news outlets.

From the early morning of January 11, 2017, through the early hours of the next day, then President-elect Trump went on a tirade against the media, though specifically against BuzzFeed and CNN, for reporting the unverified findings of the Steele Dossier that alleged that Trump had ties to Russia prior to and during his presidential campaign (Jamieson 2017). Over this roughly 24-hour period, these outbursts occurred during both a press conference held at Trump Tower from about 11am – 12 pm and via X both before and after the press conference occurred. Of the many notable things that Trump said that day, his utterances of *fake news* were heavily commented upon and analyzed by the press and on social media (Sutton 2017a). In fact, he uttered *fake news* seven times during the press conference alone and of the eight X posts that he sent out that day and into the early morning of January 12th, he used *fake news* in four of them. While the press conference dialogue and X posts from that day indeed constitute two different types of communicative data, they are analyzed together here because they constitute an extended expression of Trump’s outrage against the press concerning their coverage of him. Moreover, Sclafani (2018, 23) argues that Trump has a “branded” rhetorical style that is “produced and consolidated as a coherent form across various speaking contexts”, thus making a combined analysis of his rhetoric in a press conference and on X a worth-while enterprise.

Table 2 presents a taxonomy of Trump’s eleven uses of *fake news* during the press conference and on X during this time.

Fake News Variant Forms	Occurrences	Example	Function
i. Parenthetical at the periphery of the sentence	1	Fake News – [...]	Verdictive dismissal of news story
ii. Sentence integrated NP with compositional meaning	7	[...] should never have allowed this fake news to “leak”	Dismisses news story as fabricated
iii. Insult (personalized negative assertion)	1	You are fake news!	Functions as a personalized insult
iv. Insult (personalized third-person negative reference)	2	FAKE NEWS organizations	Functions as a stand-alone insult or a component of an insulting nickname

Table 2. Variants and functions of *fake news* preceding and following the press conference on January 11, 2017.

Table 2 additionally shows examples of the multiple variants of *fake news* that he used. The data includes non-insult variants and insult variants. The non-insult variants include: (i) a parenthetical that serves an accentuating or even verdictive function that dismisses the targeted news story (Davis and Sinnreich 2019, 208–209) and (ii) cases in which *fake news* is integrated into the sentence with a meaning derived from the components of the compound (i.e., a

fabricated news story). On the other hand, (iii) and (iv) show how *fake news* was first used as an insult according to Culpeper’s taxonomy of insults (see Table 1). In (iii), it is used as a personalized negative assertion insult: i.e., “You are fake news!”). In (iv), Trump uses *fake news* as a stand-alone third-person negative reference insult (i.e., “the media outlets [...] are fake news”) and as part of personalized third-person negative reference insult that takes the form of a dysphemistic descriptive nickname (i.e., “FAKE NEWS organizations”). The latter example follows Trump’s idiomatic convention of creating nicknames for people and organizations. When creating his nicknames for people or organizations, Trump often adds a modifier before the name of his target that comments on their personality, intellect, behavior, appearances, or references an event or relationships that they have (Tyrkkö and Frisk 2020, 116). In the case of *FAKE NEWS organizations*, for example, Trump is commenting on their morality and competence by dismissing the organizations as biased and untrustworthy.

3.2 Coinage, reactions, and innovations of the fake news insult used on January 11-12, 2017

As name calling is not typical in a presidential press conference (see Wodak et al. 2021, 377; Ekström 2009), Trump’s behavior was widely commented upon in the press (Sutton 2017a). Despite general condemnation from most major news outlets, other outlets tried to rationalize it, such as on Tucker Carlson Tonight on Fox News (Carlson 2017). Sub-sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.2 provide a detailed analysis of two instances of Trump’s *fake news* insult from this event that attracted particular attention in the press and on social media.

3.2.1 *You are fake news!*

Trump’s first utterance of the *fake news* insult came out during the press conference at the end of a contentious exchange between him and a CNN journalist, Jim Acosta, as shown below:

(2)

- i. Acosta: Since you're attacking us, can you give us a question? [Since you're, no,] Mr. President-elect.
Trump: [Go ahead.]
- ii. Acosta: Mr. [President-elect], since you are [attacking] our [news organization]
Trump: [Go ahead.] [No] [Not you]
- iii. Acosta: [Can you give us a chance?]
Trump: [Not you. Your organization is terrible.]
- iv. Acosta: You are attacking our news organization, [can you give us a chance to ask a question], [sir?] Sir, can you (..)
Trump: [Your organization is terrible. Let's go.] [Quiet]
- v. Acosta: [Mr. President]-elect, can you [say...]
Trump: [Quiet] [She's asking a question. Don' be rude!]
- vi. Acosta: Can you give us a question since you're [attacking us?] Can you give us a question?
Trump: [Don't be rude!]

- vii. Acosta: [Can you give us a question?]
 Trump: Don't be rude! [No, I'm not going to give you] a question. I'm not going to give you a question.
- viii. Acosta: Can you state [categorically that nobody]
 Trump: [You are fake news!] Go ahead.
- ix. Acosta: Sir, can you state categorically that no[body](...)
 Audience: [APPLAUSE]
- x. Acosta: No, Mr. President elect, that is not appropriate.

(CNN 2017)

There are numerous accompanying elements in this excerpt that support the interpretation that *fake news* is used by Trump as an insult. In addition to explicitly refusing to accept a question from Acosta, Trump delivers other conventional impoliteness formulae against him, such as pointed criticisms towards him (i.e., “Your organization is terrible!”) and silencers (i.e., “Don't be rude!”). This impoliteness is additionally accentuated by Trump through the use of various prosodic elements (e.g., loudness of voice, exaggerated sentence intonation) and non-verbal gestures (e.g., pointing, hand waving, turning away).

The immediate evaluation of Trump's creative *fake news* insult by the press conference audience and Acosta himself also provides evidence that *fake news* was also understood by those present as a genuine insult. Some members of the audience demonstrated their approval by applauding. A few audience members even whooped. On the other hand, Acosta clearly considered Trump's behavior in this exchange to be offensive, as made evident by his reciprocation of Trump's impoliteness with a pointed complaint (i.e., “No, Mr. President-elect, that is not appropriate”) before conceding the floor to another journalist.

Furthermore, information from the YouTube video clip of the exchange in example 2 indicates how iconic this exchange has become. At the time of writing this article, this video, which is available on CNN's YouTube Channel, has over 1.3 million views and over 4.5 thousand comments. Reading through the top comments, it is clear that the vast majority of the top commenters responded favorably to Trump's behavior towards Acosta as well as his utterance of *fake news* as an insult. Moreover, it is also apparent that many posters also found it entertaining. Similar results were found in Wodak et al.'s (2021, 284-85) analysis that is summarized in 2.3. Intriguingly, there are also numerous commenters who also adopted Trump's *fake news* insult and used it in similar functions within their own comments. This important point is discussed in detail in 3.3.

3.2.2 FAKE NEWS organizations

In example 3 below, Trump coins a pejorative descriptive nickname for the news organizations that he considers dishonest and unprofessional via an X post.

- (3) We had a great News Conference at Trump Tower today. A couple of FAKE NEWS organizations were there but the people truly get what's going on

(Trump Tweet, January 12, 2017)⁶

Making dysphemistic descriptive nicknames is a common insulting strategy for Trump. In fact, he has openly discussed using disparaging nicknames as an integral part of his 2016 campaign strategy (see Leibovich 2016). Moreover, Tyrkkö and Frisk (2020, 127) investigated Trump's nicknaming practices and found that they were used to negatively paint his adversaries as morally questionable and incompetent "laughing stocks".

Though this nickname is not explicit about what news organizations he is talking about, the reactions to this post demonstrate that the X community understood that the nickname was meant to be insulting towards the supposed *mainstream media*. The post itself has over 74 thousand likes and 22 thousand replies. The top X replies are significantly more hostile towards Trump compared to being in favor of him. Regardless, the replies demonstrate that the viewers/readers understand that his use of *fake news* is insulting, and some even use it themselves as an insult. These examples are used by people who responded positively to Trump's Tweet as found in memes that change the CNN logo to FNN (i.e., Fake News Network,) as well as those who responded negatively to it and subsequently used Trump's *fake news* insult against him by calling him "fake news".⁷

Regarding the opposing trends between the YouTube and X commenting communities, they likely reflect the platform demographics at the time rather than the general public opinion. In 2017, YouTube had a more diverse user base across demographics such as age, gender, and ethnic background, while X's user community at the time had a user base that was skewed towards younger adults who were college educated and white (Hutchinson 2017; Shearer and Gottfried 2017). Regardless, further detailed research on platform-specific evaluations of impoliteness is needed in future studies.

3.3 Discussion of case study 1

Trump's use of the *fake news* insult clearly struck a nerve with those who were targeted by it, delighted his supporters, and caught the attention of the public at large. Had it not been for Trump's surrounding impolite behaviors and angry affect, his use of *fake news* as an insult against CNN and other news organizations might have seemed so hyperbolic that it could be interpreted as a jocular insult or teasing in a different context (see Dynel 2017; Haugh and Bousfield 2012). Trump is no stranger to using exaggeration to both lift-up himself (and his supporters) and punch-down his opponents. In fact, the notion of "truthful hyperbole" is one of the major elements of Trump's approach to "deal making" as outlined in his book, "The Art of the Deal" (Trump and Schwartz 1987). Looking at these initial uses of *fake news* as an insult, it is apparent that it has multifunctional impoliteness aims. In the case of example (2), the

⁶ This Tweet can be read in its original form online:

<https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/819393877174087682>.

⁷ In addition to the doctored CNN logo (FNN) going viral on social media, it is also sold in various forms of merchandise. An example is provided here: <https://www.cafepress.com/+fake-news-network+gifts>.

functionalities of the *fake news* insult is primarily a combination of affective and coercive impoliteness, while the function of entertaining was backgrounded or even, arguably, unintentional.

However, always keen to continue using catch phrases that get his base excited, the enthusiastic response to the *fake news* insult, along with the widespread attention that it received in the press, is probably what pushed Trump to continue using it afterwards. In fact, the hype around *fake news* became so great that Collins Dictionary later named it the word of the year in 2017 (Collins Language Lovers Blog 2017). Furthermore, the comedic value of the *fake news* insult was soon extended to late-night comedy shows (e.g., The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon) and internet memes (see Smith 2019) that were created and posted by his supporters, his detractors, and people falling in-between.⁸

Concerning why the *fake news* insult resonated with the public the way it did, there are multiple factors to consider. Trump's contentious relationship with the press during the 2016 presidential campaign certainly helped set the ground for its creation. However, mistrust in the media had been growing for decades, particularly since the ascension of 24/7 cable news programs in the 1980s/1990s, such as CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News (see Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2009). Concerning Trump's particular focus on CNN, he may have been tapping into pre-existing prejudices held by some against the network. In fact, CNN had endured an "arduous struggle" to earn respect in the news broadcasting community since its inception in 1980 (Erikson 2025, para. 2). However, prejudices against it remained in the 2010s from people across the political divide. For instance, in 2016 at his final White House Correspondents' Dinner, President Obama (2016) jokingly teased Jake Tapper, a prominent former White House correspondent for ABC News, by stating that he had "left journalism to join CNN".⁹ Therefore, Trump's *fake news* insult against CNN is not entirely original, and the reputation of CNN at the time offers some explanation for why Trump's attack against it resonated with the public so strongly.

4. Forms and functions of the *fake news* insult in Trump's X posts during his first term as president

Until his erstwhile permanent suspension from X (then Twitter) on January 8, 2021, X was Trump's preferred method of interacting with the public.¹⁰ Ott and Dickinson (2020, 633) investigated Trump's X use spanning from his time as a businessman through to his first term in office and found that his posts consistently had a "tendency to bully, demean, and discredit others" while additionally serving to promote an image of his own competence and engage in self-ingratiation. Ott and Dickinson (2020, 632) similarly found that Trump's persona on X consistently reflected and reinforced the underlying structural logic of the platform: simplicity, impulsivity, and incivility. Demata (2018: 88) similarly argues that X provides fertile ground

⁸ See the following link for Jimmy Fallon's parody of Trump calling the press "fake news":
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkoVHY43HkU>.

⁹ Obama makes this dig against Jake Tapper and CNN during his speech at timestamp 08:00.

¹⁰ Trump's X account was reinstated on November 20, 2022, but Trump has never reverted back to using his old account like before.

for the sort of extreme views and provocative populist language that Trump regularly used on the platform. These characteristics of Trump’s social media persona, which Ott and Dickenson (2020, 613) argue reflects “his style of communicating more broadly”, help explain Trump’s unprecedented ability to successfully use social media like X (and now Truth Social) to galvanize his political base and attract significant attention from the press. As Ott and Dickenson conclude, this ability to attract significant attention online assisted him greatly in securing the Republican nomination and then the presidency in 2016 (and more recently 2024), despite remaining a controversial figure throughout (2020, 635–636). This makes his X feed an ideal source for exploring how he used the *fake news* insult from his initial uses of it until the end of his first term in January 2021.

Using the Trump Twitter Archive (Brown 2016-), I searched for all posts containing *fake news* from the time he started using X to January 8, 2021. As evidenced in Table 3, Trump uses *fake news* consistently over the course of his first term in office, though with a notable proportional peak in usage in 2017. After coding all these concordances for their forms and functions, I found that Trump continued to use *fake news* in the insult forms that were highlighted in Table 2. In fact, of Trump’s total 855 uses of *fake news* on X, 445 of them (approximately 52%) are used as insults, as shown in Table 4.

Year	<i>Fake News</i> Tweets	Total # of Tweets	%
2016	1	4224	0.02%
2017	149	2593	6%
2018	174	3557	5%
2019	246	7784	3%
2020	283	12239	2.50%
Jan.2021	2	156	1.50%
Total	855	30553	3%

Table 3. Trump’s use of *fake news* on X

Looking at the insults only in Table 4, the data shows that Trump uses *fake news* as part of third-person negative reference descriptive nicknames the most (e.g., “Fake News Media” and “Fake News @CNN”). He also uses it as a stand-alone third-person negative reference insult (e.g., “He is fake news!”), though to a lesser extent.

Insult Types	# of Tweets
Third-person negative references: descriptive nicknames	414
Third-person negative references	31
Total uses of <i>fake news</i> as an insult	445

Table 4. Trump’s use of *fake news* insults in his Tweets

Sub-sections 4.1 and 4.2 present examples from the two categories of the *fake news* insult found on Trump’s X account and provide an analysis of their impoliteness functions,

their gravity of offense, and how they were evaluated by the public. This is followed by 4.3 that gives a general discussion of results of the analysis of the X data.

4.1 Fake News nicknames

It has been argued that Trump uses simple language and high repetitions of key terms to project a familiar and non-politician image of himself to his base (see Björkenstam and Grigonytė 2020, 58). I argue that his frequent and repetitive use of dysphemistic nicknames for people and organizations is one such example of this tendency. During his 2016 campaign, he explained that his strategy of developing nicknames consisted of trial and error with his base – the ones that were chanted at rallies or repeated on social media were kept, while he quietly abandoned those which were not received enthusiastically (see Lakoff 2017; Leibovich 2016).

The diachronic analysis of Trump’s *fake news* nicknames shows a high level of creativity over the course of his first term. Table 5 categorizes the nicknames Trump used by the agencies being targeted.

Agency	Examples	#
Generic	Fake News Media, Lamestream Fake News Media, etc.	330
CNN	Fake News CNN, Fake News @CNN	58
New York Times	The Fake News @nytimes, The Fake News New York Times	8
Washington Post	FAKE NEWS WaPo, Fake News Washington Post	8
NBC	Fake News NBC, Liberal Fake News NBC and Comcast, The Fake News Practitioners at NBC	6
ABC	ABC Fake News, Fake News @ ABC	3
60Mins	Fake News @60Minutes	1
Total		414

Table 5. Trump’s Pejorative descriptive *Fake News* nicknames

It is notable that Trump attacks the generic mainstream media the most. However, it is also clear that CNN continued to be the most singled out individual news agency by far. In addition to calling these news agencies *fake news*, he also developed other pejorative nicknames for mainstream media organizations using similar descriptive qualities, such as the “Failing New York Times”, and creative rhyming strategies as well, such as “Lamestream Media” (mainstream media), “Concast” or “Commiecast” (the Comcast Corporation that owns NBC), and “MSDNC” (MSNBC).

- (4) So pathetic to watch the Fake News Lamestream Media playing down the gravity and depravity of the Radical Left, looters and thugs, ripping up our Liberal Democrat run (only) cities. It is almost like they are all working together?

(Trump Tweet, June 3, 2020)¹¹

Adams (2009) notes that nicknaming carries a verdictive force: it judges, assesses, or ranks. Trump's major aim in using these nicknames is to paint these organizations as dishonest, disreputable, and enemies of his presidency and his movement (Tyrkkö and Frisk, 2020, 127). However, due to his high rate of repetition, the *fake news* component alone likely lost its shock value over time (see Smith and Higgins 2020, 560). In fact, this would explain why he became increasingly creative with his *fake news* nicknames over time (e.g., "Fake News Lamestream Media" (see example 4), "FAKE NEWS SUPPRESSED MEDIA" and "Fake News Media Conspiracy").

4.2 Other personalized third-person negative references

There were also 31 examples where *fake news* was used as a personalized third-person negative reference insult in ways other than nicknames. Similar to the other cases discussed above, the *fake news* insult is often used in tandem with other forms of impoliteness, such as pointed criticisms and other insulting nicknames (see example 5). Additionally, *fake news* is frequently written in capital letters for emphasis.

- (5) His is Fake News, will always be Fredo to us. I should release some of his dishonest interviews? Coupled with bad ratings, he'd be out!

(Trump Tweet, December 30, 2019)¹²

Example 5 provides a clear example of the entertainment element of his *fake news* insult. Here, it is not only used to taunt the then-CNN journalist Chris Cuomo, who had long been critical of his presidency, by attacking his journalistic integrity, but it is also used to engage with a viral news story that had caught the attention of his supporters and the general public alike. This explains why he combines his own *fake news* insult with the disparaging nickname used against Cuomo at this time: *Fredo*. While American conservative political commentator Rush Limbaugh is credited with first calling Chris Cuomo *Fredo* (Garcia 2019), Trump adopted it and amplified the so-called "Fredo-Gate" scandal after a recorded confrontation between Cuomo and a pro-Trump heckler went viral online (CBS New York 2019). By combining *fake news* with *Fredo*, an intertextual nickname referencing the ineffectual Corleone sibling from The Godfather films, Trump attacks Cuomo in multiple ways. For the reasons discussed above, *Fake news* attacks his professional integrity as a journalist. By using *Fredo*, on the other hand, he is attacking Cuomo's relational standing among his family (i.e., "relational face", see

¹¹This Tweet can be read in its original form online:

<https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1268037166946553856>.

¹²This Tweet can be read in its original form online:

<https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1211774730258264066>.

Culpeper 2011, 29–31; Spencer-Oatey 2008, 14–15) by implying intertextually that he is the ineffectual sibling compared to his older brother, then-Governor Andrew Cuomo of New York. This also targets his ethnic background (i.e., “social identity face”, see Culpeper 2011, 28–29; Spencer-Oatey 2008, 14–15) via the mafia stereotype of Italian Americans.

Trump’s use of *fake news* and *Fredo* in the same post, continues his trend of using the surface-level conventions of teasing to genuinely insult his targets (see discussion about genuine and jocular insults in Dynel 2021, 27). As hyperbolic harshness often cues “inoffensive intent” (Dynel 2021, 30), Trump’s delivery of these types of insults sends out a mixed message, albeit in a manipulative manner. By disguising his insults as witty humor, he sets up a discursive trap that pre-empts the reaction possibilities of the targets. For example should the target of such a taunt reciprocate the impoliteness, as they will be pressured to do in order to attempt to repair the damage caused to their face(s) after being insulted (see Bousfield 2007; Culpeper and Tantucci 2021), they will be vulnerable for further ridicule for being overly serious and not able to “take a joke” (see Culpeper, Haugh, and Sinkeviciute 2017, 335). Not taking oneself “too seriously” is a highly valued characteristic in multiple English-speaking societies, including the US, particularly in informal male dominated communities of practice (Haugh 2017, 111; Haugh and Bousfield 2012, 1110).

In the case of Chris Cuomo, he did take offense to being called *fake news* and *Fredo*. Furthermore, his responses to the taunts that he received by Trump and others in the Fredo-Gate scandal resulted in continued ridicule from Trump and his supporters and criticism from other members of society for his alleged *overblown* response (for details see CBS New York 2019). Ironically, it was only Cuomo who offered an apology for his behavior in the aftermath of the Fredo-Gate story breaking out. By contrast, the ridicule from Trump and his supporters continued, as evidenced in the barrage of *fake news* and Godfather themed memes involving Cuomo that were posted online (see Lenthang 2019).

4.3 Discussion of case study 2

Between 2016 and 2021, Donald Trump used *fake news* as an insult on X regularly. Trump’s *fake news* insults are used to attack the integrity and professionalism of news organizations generally and individual journalists as well. He uses *fake news* most often as part of dysphemistic descriptive nicknames. In the majority of cases, he uses these nicknames to attack mainstream media outlets in general (e.g. “Lamestream Fake News Media”). However, he also has nicknames for individual news outlets, with CNN being the most frequently targeted individual organization (e.g. “Fake News CNN”). This suggests a continuation of Trump’s specific animosity towards CNN in the years following his initial utterance of the *fake news* insult against CNN reporter Jim Acosta. The X data also contained examples of Trump using *fake news* as a stand-alone third-person negative reference insult (e.g. “He is fake news!”), though to a much lesser extent.

It has also been noted that the entertainment aspect to the *fake news* insult appears to be increasingly important in the X data in addition to its coercive punching-down functions. In fact, similar observations were made by Bortoluzzi and Semino (2016, 178) concerning Beppe Grillo, the leader of Italy’s 5-Star Movement, who strategically uses “humorous and but insulting epithets” for political rivals. This style of humor generated by impoliteness is highly appreciated by Trump’s supporters, as evidenced by their comments about it on various social media platforms. Moreover, there is also evidence that the *fake news* insult is increasingly used

by regular people as well, though especially those sympathetic to right-leaning political ideologies. For instance, *fake news* is featured in numerous internet memes, the more popular of which are still sold by various online vendors on clothing, posters, coffee mugs, and smartphone/tablet covers.¹³

The X data also demonstrates how Trump became increasingly innovative in how he used the *fake news* insult over the years. Moreover, his powerful position as the president of the United States also led to this insult being frequently repeated and reconstructed in the press and on social media throughout his first term in office and after. The fact that this insult was so highly discussed in the metadiscourse and adopted by both his supporters and others in the United States and internationally also contributed to its rapid adoption by the greater population and its consequent conventionalization as an insult.

The entertainment value of the *fake news* insult has undoubtedly contributed significantly to its rapid proliferation and conventionalization. In fact, Trump's *fake news* insult was the inspiration for multiple pro-Trump satirical videos that went viral online throughout this period (e.g., the "Church of Fake News" parody video, see TMZ 2019).¹⁴

Finally, journalist Chris Cuomo and others have argued that *fake news* is an anti-journalist slur (see Steinmetz 2017; Sutton 2017b), sparking broader debates on Trump's creative insults over the years. The precise definition of what distinguishes a slur from a personal insult varies in the existing literature. Generally, slurs are defined as insults that denigrate so-called "protected characteristics" of groups of people, including race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, and sexual orientation (Allan and Burrige, 2006, 83–84; Culpeper 2021, 5). Jay (2019, 83) further states that "(s)lurs are particularly offensive because they focus on aspects of targets that are not changeable". Croom (2014, 233) similarly argues that slurs have both expressive and descriptive aspects and usually derogate, ridicule, or demean aspects of groups of people such as race, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and other sensitive demographics.

While it is certainly true that the *fake news* insult attacks the morality and professionalism of large groups of journalists, it is also important to note that he more frequently uses this insult against the news organizations themselves, not necessarily people. Even in cases where an individual is targeted, the aspect of their social identity face that is under attack concerns their profession and employers, not any of their protected characteristics mentioned above (see discussion of the more face-laden aspects of the "ego" in Culpeper 2011, 25). Therefore, equating *fake news* with slurs is problematic and even proved to be controversial for those who argued that they were (see Sutton 2017b). However, Trump's creation of an anti-journalism insult highlights his ability to use language creatively for multiple purposes – both to attack his perceived adversaries and to engage his supporters via "disaffiliative humor" (Dynel 2021, 27). By pushing the boundaries of acceptability in creative ways, his language sparks discussions about how we define different types of face-aggravating behaviors.

This demonstrates how Trump has managed to push the limits of transgressing social and political taboos without resorting to using the sorts of slurs, curses, or other insults that are

¹³Follow the link for one such online vendor: <https://guineashirt.com/product/president-trump-you-are-fake-news-meme-trump-shirt/>.

¹⁴Another example comes from 2017 and features Trump body-slammng a personified CNN in a doctored clip of his *WrestleMania 23* appearance in 2007: <https://x.com/realDonaldTrump/status/881503147168071680>.

more strongly sanctioned in public life. Furthermore, by creating his own insult, Trump was able to benefit, at least for a time, from strategic ambivalence (Archer 2015) to sugarcoat the harshness of his *fake news* insult by “thinly veiling” it as “joking around” (see Bourgeois and Bousfield 2026, Ch.4). This allowed him to avoid the harsher and more consequential condemnation from society at large that is sometimes imposed on people who post messages that use more established and socially sanctioned forms of controversial speech, as illustrated in the case of Steven Salaita who suffered the rescindment of his Associate Professorship job offer in 2014 because of a series of controversial X posts he wrote that contained what many considered antisemitic hate speech (see Terkourafi et al. 2018). Although Trump’s self-coined insults are widely criticized as problematic by many segments of American society, he has avoided complete social ostracism, thus far, by retaining sufficient support from a sizeable portion of the American voting population.

5. Discussion: Is *fake news* a conventionalized insult?

Concerning the first research question: is *fake news* a conventionalized insult? I argue that it is. However, I do not propose that it is as conventionalized as those on Culpeper’s (2011, 135) list, such as *moron* and *bastard*, which have long been part of the standardized insult repertoire. The discussion so far has demonstrated that the *fake news* insult has gone from a creative coinage during a heated press conference to a frequently used and increasingly versatile insult against individual journalists, entire news organizations, and sometimes even non-journalists (e.g., Trump himself, see Section 3.2.2). Furthermore, the *fake news* insult has been widely used since by Trump and many others in the US. *Fake news* has also been adopted internationally, as seen in Brazil in 2019 when *#Bolsonaro is Fake News* became the highest trending # on X for a time (Phillips 2019). Moreover, the offense taken by the targets of the *fake news* insult across various contexts, combined with discussions about it possibly being an anti-journalist slur, highlights the significant gravity of offense that it can cause victims.

There are several factors to consider before answering the second research question: what made the *fake news* insult resonate with the public and what allowed it to spread and conventionalize so quickly? Culpeper (2011, 126–133) argues that conventionalized impoliteness formulae arise from regularities in discourse (Terkourafi 2005) and from groups of people drawing on indirect experience, the metadiscourse particularly. However, he also stresses that the degree to which these formulae conventionalize depends on three scales, of which the degree of overall conventionalization is only one part. The other two scales are the degree to which they are context-spanning and the degree of gravity of offense they are associated with (Culpeper 2011, 137). As discussed above, the *fake news* insult has shown signs of expanding into new contexts and has been effective in causing offense. Moreover, its usage continues to be highly controversial to the present day, particularly because of its association with the far-right. Section 4 has also highlighted how the entertainment value of the *fake news* insult has played a role in its rapid spread and conventionalization among the public, especially among those who are sympathetic to Trump. As the data has shown, the humorously entertaining impoliteness function of the *fake news* insult takes on an increasingly important role in its usage, at times becoming just as important, if not more so, than the act of attacking the face of the organizations and people being targeted.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, I have argued that *fake news* rapidly developed from a unique creative insult uttered at a heated press conference to a conventionalized insult as defined by Culpeper (2011, 135). There are several elements that worked together to contribute to its rapid spread and conventionalization. The notoriety of Trump is certainly one element, but the role of the press in reproducing and scrupulously analyzing it certainly played a major role also. Moreover, the condemnation of the insult by journalists appears to have amused Trump and his supporters and inadvertently encouraged them to continue using it. This demonstrates that the entertaining impoliteness function can play a role in accentuating the proliferation and conventionalization process of what are initially creative insults to the wider public, particularly with the aid of social media. While this study has concentrated on the *fake news* insult only, it is apparent that future research on similar recently created insults, in political rhetoric and elsewhere, would greatly contribute to our understanding of the proliferation and conventionalization of new insults more broadly.

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