

**THE ROAD TO THE US PRESIDENCY: DONALD TRUMP COMMUNICATION
STRATEGY AND DIGITAL DICTATORSHIP
ABD BAŞKANLIĞINA GİDEN YOL: DONALD TRUMP'IN İLETİŞİM STRATEJİSİ
VE DİJİTAL DİKTATÖRLÜK**

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ABSTRACT

In the election held on November 5, 2024, the US people elected Donald Trump as the 47th President of the country. This article analyzes how Trump won the 47th US Presidency despite being behind his opponent in public opinion polls. Trump, who was found guilty in 34 of the lawsuits filed against him and who was said to be “unelectable” according to many authorities, was investigated on what kind of a “communication strategy” he used to ‘win’. Trump used “digital platforms”, the most widespread communication tools of recent times, very well and gained a great advantage over his rival Harris. To this end, Trump enlisted the support of (X), Meta, Amazon and TikTok, the world's most important social media networks. It has been shown that one of the reasons why Trump lost the 2020 election was his inability to reach especially young voters who use these important digital media. However, after Twitter was acquired by businessman Elon Musk in 2022, it changed its name to (X) and virtually put the platform at the disposal of Trump's presidential candidacy. In addition, Musk himself regularly sent several messages every day, supporting Trump in the eyes of the electorate. Because of this behaviour, an interesting concept called “Digitally Enabled Totalitarian Dictatorship” has entered the political literature. Trump has chosen social media networks as his “communication strategy” and has repeatedly participated in the programs of popular social media influencers. In 2024, “Digital Communication” had a major impact on winning the US Presidential elections. “Digital authoritarianism” is seen as a way for governments to control their citizens through technology and is interpreted as reversing the concept of the internet as an engine of human freedom.

Keywords: Trump, Communication, Musk, Digital, Totalitarian

ÖZET

ABD halkı 5 Kasım 2024 tarihinde yapılan seçimde, ülkenin 47. Başkanı olarak, Donald Trump'ı seçmiştir. Bu makalede; Trump'ın kamuoyu araştırmalarında rakibinin gerisinde olduğu halde, 47. ABD Başkanlığını nasıl kazandığı incelenmiştir. Hakkında açılan davaların, 34'ünden suçlu bulunan ve birçok otoriteye göre; “Bir daha seçilemez” denen Trump'ın, ‘kazanmak’ için nasıl bir “iletişim stratejisi” uyguladığı araştırılmıştır. Trump, son dönemlerin en yaygın iletişim araçları olan “dijital platform”ları çok iyi kullanarak, rakibi Harris’e karşı büyük bir üstünlük sağlamıştır. Trump bunun için; dünyanın en önemli sosyal medya ağlarından olan (X), Meta, Amazon ve TikTok’un desteğini yanına almıştır. Trump'ın, 2020 seçimini kaybetmesinin bir nedeni de, bu önemli dijital medyayı kullanan özellikle genç seçmene ulaşamamak olduğu gösterilmiştir. Ancak Twitter, 2022 yılında iş insanı Elon Musk tarafından satın alındıktan sonra adını (X) olarak değiştirip, neredeyse platformu, Trump'ın başkan adaylığının emrine vermiştir. Ayrıca Musk'ın kendisi de, her gün düzenli olarak birkaç mesaj atıp, seçmen nezdinde Trump'ı desteklemiştir. Musk'ın, bu davranışından dolayı, siyasi literatüre “Dijital Destekli Totaliter Diktatörlük” (Digitally Enabled Totalitarian Dictatorship) adlı ilginç bir kavram girmiştir. Trump; “iletişim stratejisi” olarak, sosyal medya ağlarını seçme yoluna gitmiş, sevilen sosyal medya fenomenlerinin programlarına defalarca katılmıştır. 2024 yılı, ABD Başkanlık seçimlerinin kazanılmasında, “Dijital İletişim”in büyük bir etkisi olmuştur. “Dijital otoriterlik” hükümetlerin, vatandaşlarını teknoloji aracılığıyla kontrol etmesinin bir yolu olarak görülmekte ve internetin insan özgürlüğünün bir motoru olduğu kavramını tersine çevirdiği olarak yorumlanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Trump, İletişim, Musk, Dijital, Totaliter

1. INTRODUCTION

Presidential elections in the United States of America, held every four years, are an important political process that is followed not only in the country but also around the world. In 2017, Donald Trump became the 45th President of the United States, and his re-election as the 47th President of the United States in 2025, after a period of ineligibility (2021), was greeted with surprise and some trepidation by much of the country and the world. Before explaining in detail Trump's re-election and the communication strategy that led to his success, it would be useful to take a look at his political life. Donald Trump, who first entered politics in the US in 2000 to 'become president' from the Reform Party, did not succeed. From those years until 2017, Trump did not have a serious presence in politics. However, Trump, who is a real estate tycoon, dollar billionaire, businessman and television programmer, did not give up the idea of running for president until he entered the race again in 2017. (bbc, 2024) Donald Trump switched parties this time and ran for the US Presidency from the Republican Party. On November 8, 2017, Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States with a surprise victory over Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party's candidate, at a time when he was never given a chance. According to US law, each president can only serve 2 terms (8 years). Donald Trump ran again for a second term in 2021, losing the election to the Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden. However, Trump did not accept this defeat, claiming that the election was rigged. On January 6, 2021, at Trump's instigation, his supporters attacked the Capitol. In this provocation, five people lost their lives, four demonstrators and one police officer. (pewresearch, 2021) Trump was found guilty and convicted in 34 cases for the Congressional Raid and a number of crimes he had committed in the past. Trump also became the first US president to have his mugshot taken in Georgia, where he was subpoenaed to appear in court to face charges of election rigging. (nyu, 2025) Meanwhile, Trump made history as the first sitting president to be convicted of a felony after being found guilty of falsifying business records. (bbc, 2024) The case against Trump, the first US President to be impeached twice for attempted coup d'état, was dropped in the House of Representatives when the Senate failed to reach a quorum. Trump, who was on trial for the congressional raid and "could have been legally prevented from becoming president again", overcame this obstacle and entered the 2024 presidential race.

In the 2024 presidential election, the Republican Party's Trump ran against the current Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden. In this race, "political polarization" manifested itself more and more. Some authorities interpret this as; "political polarization between the parties in

this race, which has begun in a tight race, has been an ongoing theme in American politics for some time” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts, 2018). It is interpreted as such. But despite all these negativities, the candidates still appear on TV together and discuss their ideas in a civilized manner! They discuss their ideas (debate). In the first debate between Trump and Biden on June 27, 2024 in Atlanta, Biden performed poorly and disappointed those who trusted him. In the following days, Biden could not run a successful campaign due to his age and health problems. Therefore, President Biden, unable to withstand the intense pressure from his party and the public, withdrew from the nomination on July 21, 2024, and was replaced by Vice President Kamala Harris. Harris started her presidential campaign very quickly. To win the race, she raised more donations than Trump and received the support of many newspapers and celebrities around the world. Donors reportedly gave \$4.7 billion to presidential candidates in the 2024 general election. During the race, these funds were deposited in the campaign accounts of Donald J. Trump, Kamala Harris, and Joseph R. Biden until he withdrew from the race. (nytimes, 2024) It was announced that presidential candidates Harris and Trump spent a record total of 3.5 billion dollars on their campaigns. The 2024 election was recorded as the most expensive election in US history. (nbcnews, 2024) The second presidential debate was broadcast live on television on September 10, 2024 between Donald Trump and his running mate Kamala Harris. In the presidential debate held in Pennsylvania, Harris, just like Biden, did not perform well against Trump.

In the US Presidential elections, the number of delegates is important, not the number of votes. The total number of delegates nationwide is 538. In the presidential election held on November 5, 2024, Trump, who received 312 of the delegates, was entitled to become the 47th President of the USA. His opponent Harris was left with 226 delegates. Trump had previously won the presidential elections in 2017, becoming the 45th President of the United States. Because of this feature, he also made history as the second US President to serve as President in different terms. Previously, Grover Cleaveland served as the 22nd and 24th President of the United States. After the election, both in the US and in many parts of the world, there is confusion that a man (Trump) who was found guilty and convicted in 34 cases has become the President of the United States. Much of the country and the world see a second Trump term as a blow to democracy in the US. According to Foa and Monk, with Trump's re-election, democracy and democratic ideals were already under pressure, and it has only deepened (Foa & Mounk, 2021). (Foa & Mounk, 2021) In addition, according to some authorities, American

society has already been increasingly polarized since the 1980s in terms of economic, identity change and socialization patterns (Iyengar & Shanto, 2021).

2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to investigate the communication strategies of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, who will be the president of one of the most powerful countries in the world, in the 2024 US Presidential Elections. In particular, it is to look at the effects of direct communication strategy through social media platforms on Trump's election campaign. It aims to analyze his interaction with the electorate and his role in shaping the political agenda. To examine how Trump strategically used digital media, ignoring traditional media, during his US presidency. It aims to analyze how the interaction with voters shaped the media's impact on him and his political success. To investigate whether Trump's harsh, racist and sarcastic language is accepted by the public. To analyze the results of these communication strategies.

3. METHOD

Critical discourse analysis, which constitutes the methodology of this study, is an interdisciplinary field that centers on the critical examination of discourse. The study investigated why presidential candidates use social media rather than traditional media. This analysis aims to understand how Trump's communication strategy is shaped through digital platforms rather than traditional media and how it serves his political goals. In this study, content analysis methods were used to analyze Donald Trump's use of digital media. As data, Trump's discourse language was analyzed and his communication strategy was examined. It was analyzed what kind of attitude, stance and communication language Donald Trump used in the television debates he faced first with President Joe Biden and then with Kamala Harris, who was the candidate to replace him. The language in Trump's use of digital media was analyzed. In addition, the relationships between the interaction rates on digital media and their social and political repercussions were evaluated.

4. THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY THAT PUSHED TRUMP TO VICTORY

From the business world to the US presidency, Donald Trump has always managed to stay on the agenda. For this; he has always been in the media world. He has also starred in television programs, commercials, movies and series.

Movies, TV. and Commercials in which Trump has acted

Saturday Night Live	2015
World Wrestling Entertainment	2007
The Apprentice - Tv. Program	2004 – 2015
Two Weeks' Notice	2002
Zoolander	2001
The Associate	1996
The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air	1994
Little Rascals	1994
Home Alone 2: Lost in New York	1992
Talk show appearances	1980-90-2000
Television commercials	1980 - 1990

Donald Trump has always been a prominent public figure, especially in the world of entertainment and business, before his first run for the US presidency in 2017. By taking small and large roles in movies and television programs, he started laying the ‘recognition’ stones on his way to the White House. (thesun) In the 2024 election, the experienced Trump implemented an electoral strategy based on the wishes and needs of the US public. How Trump, whom the US electorate sees as unlucky for a second term in office, managed to do so is interpreted by political analysts as a “communication strategy”.

The economy, unemployment, immigration, nationalism, racism, unemployment, immigration, nationalism and racism, which President Biden and Vice President Harris failed to find a solution for during their term in office, were constantly criticized by the public. Trump emphasized these in every speech. He delivered these messages mainly through digital media rather than traditional media. Because Trump did not have a good relationship with the media from his private life to his political life. In the 2024 Presidential elections, knowing that he could not get the support of traditional media, Trump turned to new generation (digital) media. The idea of ‘Public Sphere’, which was the biggest dream of Jurgen Habermas, one of the theorists working in the field of communication, has manifested itself as a communication strategy in Donald Trump's 2024 US Presidential Elections. The ‘one-way communication’ model advocated by Habermas and maintained by traditional media for centuries has been

transformed into a 'two-way communication' model with the invention of the internet and its rapid and inevitable rise in digital media. During the 2009 election campaign of Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States, digital media and social media, which provided him with a great advantage on the road to success, were used to the fullest extent by Donald Trump in the 2024 US Presidential election campaign. After Elon Musk, the owner of (X), one of the most important social media networks in the world, supported Trump with all his might, an interesting concept called "Digitally Enabled Totalitarian Dictatorship" entered the political literature. (freedomhouse, 2018)

Trump's advantage in social media is that he took the world's biggest strategists and owners of social media platforms (Elon Musk-X, Mark Zuckerberg - Meta, Jeff Bezos - Amazon and Shou Zi Chew - TikTok) and took advantage of their communication power. (Trump honored these 4 entrepreneurs who supported him by inviting them to the Presidential Inauguration Ceremony). Also, in the last weeks of the race, Elon Musk, the billionaire owner of social media (X), invested more than 100 million dollars in his political action committee (PAC) to help Trump in swing states. Meanwhile, Musk camped out in Pennsylvania, seen as a 'key' state for both candidates, and handed out checks for \$1 million to registered voters who pledged to support Trump. Musk also turned his social media platform X into a "cauldron of conspiracy theories". In the final weeks of the elections, the far-right conspiracy theory that the Democrats were "importing" illegal immigrants to flip states and irrevocably tilt the electoral map in their favor was perpetrated. Musk spread the fear that "if Trump doesn't win, this is the last election." (nytimes, 2024) Some experts argue that it is increasingly common for authoritarian regimes to exploit digital technology. According to them, they use technologies to spy on, suppress and manipulate their citizens. "Social Media, whose reliability is debated in many countries around the world, has made it difficult to access reliable information and led many to claim that we have entered a post-truth era" (Hannan & Jason, 2018). It is said.

According to many authorities, Trump's victory was the product of a strategy developed by two of his campaign managers, Susie Wiles and Chris LaCivita. In July 2024, Wiles hired a 27-year-old consultant, Alex Bruesewitz, to her staff, drawing on his experience. One of the recommendations of this consultant as a 'communication strategy' was to reach out to 'podcasters'. Trump referred his advisor to his 18-year-old son Barron Trump for this unfamiliar communication strategy. With Barron's approval; the "podcast communication strategy" was put into action. These podcasts, which Trump participated in many times and

gave messages to male voters and young people, were watched by millions of people on live broadcast. (time, 2024)

Not forgetting the female voters, Trump found a way out of this problem by leaving the issue of 'Abortion', which is sensitive to them, to the responsibility of each state. A little over a week before Election Day, he organized an event at Madison Square Garden in New York. The event was marked by hateful, xenophobic and racist rhetoric from Trump's speakers. Trump has brought with him a string of foul-mouthed celebrities, including Tony Hinchcliffe, who has called Puerto Rico a "floating garbage island". (ap, 2024) Such racist discourses and approaches have been met with reactions from various quarters. According to McClain, "Trump has further entrenched racial inequality in the American social structure." (McClain, 2021) Although not overtly so, some of the white section of the US public often shows some inner feelings of racism and non-acceptance of immigrants. This can be easily understood from the lines of the authors. Referring to this injustice, Sorensen stated that "before Trump took office, there was a rich body of work describing the structural inequalities and injustices in American society that had existed for a long time." (Sørensen, 1996). "After Trump's election, there was an increase in the number of hate crimes against people of color and immigrants reported to police." (Edwards & Rushin, 2018). He emphasized that there has also been an increase in hate crimes in counties that host Trump rallies (Feinberg, Branton, & Martinez-Ebers, 2019). Other actors have contributed to racial inequality (Giani and Méon, 2021). "These ran along dimensions including race, gender, class and intersectionalities" (Crenshaw, 2017). He argued that Trump has extended this by using borders to polarize ideas, appealing to far-right groups in the US who are concerned about immigration and worried that immigrants pose a threat to traditional (White) culture. This is also reflected in Trump's approach to the Republican party (Espinoza, 2021).

One of the most debated topics in recent years has been the rise of 'authoritarian populism' around the world. In the United States, Donald Trump's xenophobic and racist rhetoric and practices during his election campaign and after his election as president have inflamed the debate. Fuch states that "Trump won the 2016 presidential election with a nationalist campaign with the slogans 'America First' and 'Make America Great Again'" (Fuchs, 2018a, p. 1). Behind the promise to make America great again is the idea of strengthening "white America" by recapturing the political and economic supremacy that he thought he had lost to blacks, Hispanics and immigrants (Appadurai, 2017, p. 21).

5. FINDINGS

The findings of this study can be listed as follows:

- Trump has used digital media and social media extensively rather than traditional media.
- By taking the power of the world's most important social media platforms and the communication tools of their owners (Elon Musk - X, Mark Zuckerberg - Meta, Jeff Bezos - Amazon and Shou Zi Chew - TikTok), he gained a great advantage over his opponent.
- Trump reached the younger generation and internet users quickly and effectively through social media networks.
- Trump has been a frequent guest on podcasts and similar programs, which have millions of followers and are watched with interest by young people, and has conveyed his messages.
- Trump has managed to stay on the agenda by bringing back the television series, programs and commercials he starred in the past.
- In addition to the large amount of financial help he received from Elon Musk, the owner of the X social media network, which he used in his campaign, he also made good use of his network and was able to reach the digital generation of users in a safe and less costly way.
- Musk personally contributed greatly to Trump's election by sending several messages every day. (X) He did not see most of the negative things about Trump, he brought the positive aspects in front of the voters.
- According to the findings of critical discourse analysis, Trump frequently brought up national security, nationalism, economy, health, immigrants, racism and issues that the US public is sensitive to. This was also accepted by the public.

6. CONCLUSION

Donald Trump, the 47th President of the United States, has applied an unorthodox communication model on his way to the presidency. Trump, who has not been in good relations with the 'Traditional Media' for years, knew that he would not get their support when he started his last presidential election campaign. For this reason, Trump paid special attention to the 'Communication Team' while forming his campaign team. Trump, who was unfamiliar with the 'Digital Communication Model', one of the proposed communication models, directed his advisors who suggested it to his 18-year-old son Barron Trump. Because Trump is aware that

the followers of the 'Digital Age' are generally the young generation and internet users. As a result of the 'approval' of the model proposed to his son by his Communication Advisor, Donald Trump has focused on the "Digital Communication Model". He also received a large amount of financial and "Digital Communication Tool" support from Elon Musk, one of his most important supporters in the presidential elections and the owner of the (X) social media platform. In addition, by taking the power of worldwide social media platforms such as Meta, Amazon and TikTok with him, he gained a great advantage over his rival. With "Digital Communication Tools", he reached young and middle-aged voters more easily, safely and inexpensively. By participating in the programs of "digital media celebrities" that they follow, he established effective communication with the public. In US politics, digital communication has been used before by President Obama. However, thanks to today's rapidly developing communication tools, it has reached a peak with President Trump. Looking at his statements and rhetoric during his first days in office, it is seen that this communication strategy and discourse language of Trump, who is in his second term as President, will not be harsh, racist, cynical and friendly. It is even threatening and intimidating towards many countries of the world. After "X, Meta, Amazon, TikTok" supported Trump, a new concept that had not been used much before entered the political literature. It shows that with Trump, the concept of "Digitally Supported Totalitarian Dictatorship" has entered our lives as a communication model! How effective Trump has been in changing the "language of communication" has been debated by today's authorities for some time. It seems that it will continue to be debated in the coming periods.

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