

Journal Pre-proof

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.25013.phi>

To appear in: *Journal of Language and Politics*

Received: 06 Jan 2025

Accepted: 28 Jul 2025

Version of Record published : 19 Sept 2025

Please cite this article as:

Phillips, Justin Bonest, and Andrea Carson. "“Thoughts & prayers,” conspiracy theories, and laughing emojis: Facebook comments on the attempted assassination of President Trump." *Journal of Language and Politics* (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.25013.phi>

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“Thoughts & prayers,” conspiracy theories, and laughing emojis: Facebook comments on the attempted assassination of President Trump

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Abstract:

This article examines online responses to the 14 July 2024 assassination attempt on Donald Trump. Using large language model embeddings and machine learning algorithms, we analyze 26 thousand Facebook comments in near real-time reacting to "breaking news" stories from six national mainstream media outlets covering the assassination attempt. The themes we identify are consistent with historical studies on political assassination attempts and death, indicating evidence of public dismay, but also other widespread reactions including conspiratorial thinking, mocking, and trolling. Facebook’s laughing emoji features as one notable troll-like response to this traumatic event, with news of the shooting prompting nearly nine thousand ‘haha’ reactions. Within this online language is a political response apportioning blame, where both the political left and right accuse one another of inciting political violence. Our paper further connects these empirical observations with literature on affective publics, digital mourning, RIP-trolling.

Keywords

Donald J. Trump; US President; assassination attempt; Facebook comments; topic modelling

1. Introduction

Few will forget the iconic images of the 45th United States’ President and 2024 Republican nominee Donald Trump emerging with a bloodied face after an assassination attempt at his election rally in Pennsylvania on 14 July 2024. It adds to the United States’ concerning, long history of attempts on presidents: four sitting presidents assassinated; two surviving a shooting; and dozens of others subject to serious, though unsuccessful attempts. With nearly one in eleven presidents killed, there’s little question about the (violence-induced) mortality rate of the top job

in US politics. That is, of course, to say nothing of the deeply concerning democratic ramifications of political violence more generally.

Responses to political violence aimed at presidents is a topic of perennial interest to communication scholars and political scientists, for example entire volumes have documented the deeply personal impact of news covering the assassination of the 35th President John F. Kennedy (e.g., Russo and Moses 2013) and the shooting of the 40th President Ronald Reagan (e.g., Pillemer 1984). Such work explores the spread of this politically monumental news; its individual and social effects; and the various contours of public discourses responding to these assassination attempts that represent a form of political violence. This research offers critical insights into not only individual responses, but the state of American politics more broadly amid recent speculations of increasing support for political violence (Pape 2024).

Thomas Matthew Crooks' shooting of President Trump during the 2024 election campaign continues America's dark history of attempts on presidents' lives. Though President Trump survived the attack, this political violence nevertheless wounded three and caused the death of two including the shooter. This was not the only attack on Trump since he entered politics either, so far there have been four confirmed attempts on his life since 2016 and several other security incidents (Burman 2024). Moreover, this violence extends to political figures across the political spectrum¹, hinting at a troubling state of American politics where some believe discord is unable to be resolved at the ballot box.

¹ In June 2022, an individual was arrested for plotting to assassinate conservative Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. In October 2022, a man broke into US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's home intending to harm her; finding her absent, he attacked her husband. In June 2023, a man was arrested while surveilling former President Barack Obama's Washington, DC, residence with weapons in his van.

The violence directed at President Trump during the campaign is particularly notable for another reason, though. That is, the attack occurs in the interactive era of social media—in contrast to historical assassinations covered by passive mediums like newspapers, radio, and television. Meaning, the ubiquitous and interactive characteristics of social media present a unique, novel opportunity for researchers to understand how the public thinks about political violence in real-time.

The current paper contributes along these lines, by examining public Facebook comments to breaking mainstream news of an assassination attempt on a (former) President running for office. Using state-of-the-art topic modelling, the results show dozens of different public reactions online to Trump's shooting. Drawing from an array of theoretical groundwork ranging from historical analyses of communicating presidential assassinations to modern media theories of affective publics, digital mourning, and RIP-trolling, the current study connects empirical insights to both theory and history.

For example, in the data to come we not only reveal that news of the shooting was met with nine thousand laughing emoji reactions, but also we identify comments of support and disgust directly responding to this apparent RIP-trolling use of Facebook's 'haha' emoji. Somewhat akin to Marshal McLuhan's (1967) *The Medium is the Massage* such a finding underscores the importance of the medium through which such significant news is communicated, bringing with it new mechanisms to digitally mourn and to troll such grief.

The comments we investigate are also revealing for their narrow thematic range of responses: primarily expressing blame; dismay; trolling, and/or conspiracy theories. Such a result deviates from the general belief that these attacks typically prompt universal expressions of public grief.

Take expressions of dismay as just one example: the comments unquestionably show dismay at the shooting, but some were disheartened that the shooter missed his target.

Notably, partisans on both political sides blame each other for the shooting, with both at times conjuring a variety of conspiracy theories to explain the attack. As the literature below demonstrates, such public reactions are historically consistent with previous presidential assassinations dating back to the shooting of the 16th President Abraham Lincoln. Before detailing these findings further, we now briefly explore the scholarly literature that informs our study.

2. Presidential assassinations and reactions to death on social media

Two sets of literature provide the theoretical groundwork for our study. The first is research into news of, and public responses to, presidential assassination attempts over time. Also offering valuable insights, is a second, contemporary body of communication scholarship that theorizes on affective publics, digital mourning, and online trolling of those grieving.

Starting with the historical literature, some research (and public commentary) tends to assume that news of presidential assassinations prompt a near universal outpouring of public grief (see Edelman and Simon 1969; Fish 1950; Pillemer 1984), but the reality is more complex. As Rebhun (1969) observes, political conditions—and the United States' communication infrastructure—differ across the history of attempts on presidents, and these contexts invariably influence public responses. In turn, public reactions to these assassinations not only reflect an, at times, violently divided country, but also one embedded within evolving communication systems.

The US' political divisions feature as our starting point in this literature. For example, at the time of Lincoln's assassination the Confederacy was in the midst of surrender and the war had weakened America's national communication infrastructure. Given these conditions Rebhun (1969) concludes that not only that "few tears were shed in the South", but news of the attempt (and Lincoln's eventual death) spread slowly. The same political divisions prompt 'guarded' public displays of grief from Southerners in response to Garfield (i.e., a Union General) and even John F. Kennedy's assassination (i.e., Civil Rights Acts). The difference, of course, is that the advent of radio and television made Kennedy's death far more immediate, confronting, and personally impactful for the public. Though, as Rebhun (1969) suggests, the increasing pace of modern life meant public expressions of grief were somewhat short lived.

The existing research certainly documents the deeply emotional responses to news of presidential assassination attempts (e.g. Quarles et al. 1983), but again, those emotional displays can be both positive and negative. In 1865, Rebhun (1969) recounts an outpouring of public grief where "crowds roamed the city almost in a daze"; yet, others joined the same crowds looking to provoke violent confrontations by expressing glee at the shooting, with one being recorded as claiming Lincoln "ought to have been assassinated four years ago."—inferring the Civil War might never have taken place. Similar sentiments, such as "they brought it on themselves," have been observed in response to assassinations of President Kennedy, and other major social and political leaders, like JFK's brother Robert Kennedy, and Dr Martin Luther King (see Appleton 2000).

McLuhan's (1967) technological determinist views (e.g. the tongue-in-cheek entitled: ²)² provides theoretical justification that the medium in which this consequential news is communicated should be considered as deeply important as the message itself. As a wealth of literature demonstrates, the immediacy and parasocial characteristics of radio (e.g., Schwartz 2015) and television (Miller 2010) make these communicative technologies more emotionally potent mediums. In turn, while newspaper coverage of presidential assassination of Lincoln (Turner 1991) and Garfield (e.g. in Britain: Sewell 1991) offered important historical examples of the nature and reach of this news (e.g. of varying sentiment, and—international—public reaction), the record of radio and television's capacity to transmit this news with deep personal impact, sets them apart from the press.

For example, Bodroghkozy (2013) recounts the "television trauma" of "Black Weekend" following Kennedy's assassination, where an estimated 96 per cent of US households tuned into TV news coverage for a collective emotional experience. Bodroghkozy's (2013) exploration of letters to the broadcast editors during this weekend reveals a deeply intimate, yet parasocial relationship with news anchors and the public navigating collective grief via the new medium. The shooting of Reagan echoes this collective, televised journey: though, this time with the technological capacity to 'wheel' televisions to the front of classrooms (Wilber 2011), and to carefully scrutinize the footage—at various speeds—of John Hinckley Jr.'s attempt on President Reagan (Phelan, 1999).

While we acknowledge that communications about presidential assassinations can occur through non-electronic means such as parents explaining these events to their children (Orren and

² One 'myth' suggests the title is merely a result of a proofing error (i.e. 'massage'), though a typo that McLuhan enthusiastically adopted. See Forsler (2024) for more details.

Peterson 1967), the historical literature rightly focuses on the media's broad capacity to influence, particularly through news coverage and framing (Hoerl et al. 2009) of these attempts, and public responses to this reporting. For example, studies look at specific population subsets to explore demographic-based reaction to this news such as African American responses to news of Kennedy's assassination (Conrad 2023). Others investigate the spread and diffusion of assassination coverage (see reporting of Reagan's shooting: Bantz et al. 1983), and some researchers look to expose potential attitudes or behaviors provoked by such news such as the media's tendency to prompt conspiracy beliefs (see McCauley and Jacques 1979; Appleton 2000). As communication mediums evolve from radio, to television, and now to predominately social media, scholars have observed the increasing speed at which news of assassination attempts spread, showing that the shooting of Kennedy (Zelizer 1992) and Reagan (Jeffres and Quarles 1983) for example were driven by television's ubiquity in America's social fabric. Accordingly, the primary argument was that the visual and immediacy characteristics of television made this coverage all the more emotionally compelling (e.g., Zelizer 1992; Quarles et al. 1983). The transmission of similar assassination news through a new medium—via social media—prompts the need to re-evaluate such conclusions.

2.1 Social media, and public responses to death and tragedy

While attempts on US president's lives have certainly occurred during the age of social media, none have reached the level of inflicting direct harm. In turn, while we can look at historical responses to presidential assassinations to ground our expectations, we must turn elsewhere for theoretical foundation in the social media context.

Affective publics (Papacharissi 2015) provide a valuable theoretical connection between the historical displays of emotion noted above, and the communal emotional connection expressed

and developed via social media. In this light, online platforms mediate these emotional connections, where networked publics organically form around “bonds of sentiment” with specific impact on collective storytelling of an event (Papacharissi 2016). Within the context of our study’s interest, the concept of affective publics theoretically explains the emotional expression, connection, and storytelling that emerges online in response to a major event such as an assassination attempt. The storytelling component of affective publics is particularly relevant here. Facebook comments present the medium by which intense emotional narratives can be collaboratively developed, negotiated, and debated within an online collective beyond the newsroom, given the nature of these stories emerge without an overarching (gatekeeping) authority often driven by the “potentiality of what tomorrow would bring” (Papacharissi 2022).

Digital mourning literature builds on those theoretical grounds, showing the varied norms and practices (Giaxoglou and Döveling 2018) applied to the display of individual and collective grief online. For example, Gibbs et al. (2015) reveal how photographs and hashtags on Instagram are used to personalize affective funeral experiences within one’s broader social network, thereby evolving traditional memorializing practices under the unique ‘platform vernacular’ of an online medium like Instagram. Anna Wagner’s (2018) systematic review of this literature identifies several normative expectations surrounding digital mourning, including appropriateness of (legitimate vs. illegitimate) motivations and content sharing, and responses to online mourning. Social media’s technological capacity to offer a new—more intimate and instantaneous—forum for collective, platformed grief is unquestionable (Proust 2024). Nevertheless, there also exists a great deal of public speculation, and criticism, about widespread inappropriate public responses to death news on social media (Phillips 2011). Take the defacement of online commemorations as one such example, with the Facebook memorial sites of two Australian children awash with

abuse, hate, and images of pornography and bestiality (Arnold et al. 2017). Less direct forms of deviant behavior exist as well: Wagner (2018) flags the prospect of clicking ‘like’ in response to death news as one such inappropriate response, and suggests that Facebook’s new emoticons might shape digital mourning practices and norms going forward. In fact, Mark Zuckerberg (2014) specifically cites concerns about inappropriate ‘likes’ to death news as a reason for developing other Facebook emoji reactions, like the ‘care’ button. How users engage with Facebook’s new reaction set therefore understandably commands growing academic interest in digital mourning and a variety of other fields (Anwar and Giglietto 2024).

While digital mourning literature charts a variety of empirical instances where and how online publics mourn, such literature critically documents instances where users look to actively troll mourners (Thimm and Nehls 2017). Rest In Peace trolling known as ‘RIP-trolling’ is specifically relevant along these lines (Seigfried-Spellar and Chowdhury 2017)—a phenomenon where individuals look to publicly mock and harass the grief and mourning of others online, much like in the Australian example. Such trolls publicly justify their efforts in the name of calling out ‘grief tourists’ (i.e., insincere exhibitionism; see Phillips 2011), though one might just as easily point to other characteristics that could drive this deviant behavior—for such a discussion, see Seigfried-Spellar and Chowdhury’s personality study of RIP-trolls (2017).

Regardless of the motivations, RIP-trolling on social media offers some additional relevant theoretical grounds for the current study. We know that historical responses to presidential assassinations have not always been met with grief. Social media represents a new medium for RIP-trolling-like behavior to occur within the context of a presidential assassination.

As we have written elsewhere (Phillips 2024), RIP-trolling need not only occur in social media comments, but also in the use of emoji reactions to comments on these platforms. Take the well-

known use of the ‘haha’ laughing emoji on Facebook as a trolling weapon: observers have documented the emoji being used to publicly mock others (Walters 2018), particularly in concerning contexts (Ghaffar 2018) including as a means to attack rape victims (Al-Zaman and Ahona 2022). Our previous study of nearly a decade’s worth of death coverage from local US news pages on Facebook reaffirms such conclusions, showing millions of haha reactions in response to the death of others (Phillips 2024). It therefore seems reasonable to conclude that the trolling of presidential assassination attempts during the social media era, be it in comments or via emoji reactions, is theoretically quite likely.

Given the above, though, the literature is also clear that we should expect demonstrations of grief and dismay on social media. While the discussion so far reveals a more nuanced perspective on (varied) historical reactions to news of assassinations, the evidence suggests we should nevertheless expect a considerable outpouring of grief, mixed with a notable body of (RIP-like) trolling content. Regardless of whether news of a presidential assassination attempt is met with shock and mourning, or mocking and trolling, there is a third potential response demanding brief discussion.

2.2 Conspiracies and assassination attempts

The literature so far acknowledges the political environment relevant to this study’s communication context (e.g. ‘talking politics’ in Miller et al. 2015), including where other politicians themselves might engage in such discourse (Enli and Skogerbø 2013). To this point, though, we have not theoretically established how partisans grapple with an assassination beyond mere grief or celebration.

As an earlier example hints, though, scholars have also charted the tendency of news coverage of assassination attacks to prompt public conspiracy beliefs. For half a century, researchers have studied why and how individuals look to conspiracy theories to explain news of a presidential assassination (McCauley and Jacques 1979; Uscinski and Enders 2023). Assassinations by their nature are perverse political events, and so varied political narratives of the motives behind them are to be expected. It is unsurprising therefore that early survey evidence indicates similar conspiratorial thinking quickly emerged in response to the assassination attempt on President Trump: nearly four in 10 had heard “the shooting was planned by Democratic operatives”, over half of whom report seeing this on social media (Ognyanova et al. 2024).

Our study looks to empirically test all of these theoretical assumptions by examining Facebook comments directly responding to breaking news of the assassination attempt on President Trump in July 2024. As we outlined in the literature review, we expect to see comments of shock and dismay, alongside discussion of conspiracies, and likely some degree of RIP-trolling. Though, we do not have enough evidence to speculate on the proportions of these responses. This study addresses the receptive aspect of social media, as the collected Meta data also contains the ‘likes’ for each comment. In turn, we not only can determine the size and nature of Facebook discourses (i.e., topic), but also the popularity of these comments (i.e., likes). Given these theoretical expectations, and the available data, we offer the following three research questions.

RQ1: In what ways (i.e., topics) is the assassination attempt on President Trump discussed in public Facebook comments reacting to breaking news posts from broadcast and cable outlets?

RQ2: What topics are popular (i.e., interactions), and most prominent (i.e., size) among these comments?

RQ3: What insights can this model of Facebook comments offer for future research?

3. Methods

The current study relies on observations from a unique data source: approximately 26 thousand Facebook comments in response to six “breaking news” posts reporting Crooks’ assassination attempt on Trump. The posts originate from the major cable (CNN, FNC, MSNBC) and broadcast news (ABC, CBS, NBC) outlets’ Facebook pages during the first 24 hours after the shooting. The value of Facebook data is twofold: on the one hand, public Facebook use is relatively representative of US society, given recent estimates that as many as 8 in 10 Americans hold an account (NapoleanCat 2024); on the other hand, academic access to Facebook data is now highly restricted—making such investigations increasingly rare, and therefore valuable for the insights it can offer.

Given the highly restricted nature of Facebook’s data since the closing of CrowdTangle—its previous data access portal—in August 2024, few approved researchers across the globe have access to this material through its inhouse replacement (Scire 2024). This access comes via Meta’s new Content Library (2024), which—full disclosure—requires oversight in to how scholars use, analyze, and present the data via SOMAR, the Social Media Archive housed in the inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan (Somar 2024). While Meta’s conditions of use restrict exploration of an individual’s comments (meaning we cannot directly quote comments under the current data and ethics agreements), it approved our presentation of the following topic model (i.e., Table 1), which largely explains the thematic spread of online comments on major television networks’ Facebook pages responding to breaking news of the assassination attempt on Trump within the first 24 hours.

For those interested in technical details, the model was created using soft clustering of dimensionally reduced sentence embeddings from a large language model. That process follows BERTopic’s standard pipeline, first by embedding individual sentences from these Facebook comments via an off-the-shelf large language model (i.e. all-MiniLM-L6-v2); next reducing that 384 dimensional embedding down to 5 dimensions via UMAP; and soft clustering the results via HDBSCAN. For a more general description, the process involves leveraging large language models along with machine learning algorithms to categorize (similar) sentences into clusters. This process (Grootendorst 2022) represents the state-of-the-art method in efficiently categorizing vast collections of text. While Facebook’s cleanroom environment does not permit us to share the exact code used for our study, similar versions of our code can be found in Open Science Framework repositories listed in our other recent work (e.g., please see Data Availability statement in Phillips 2025b).

A final word on the examples to come is necessary. Again, our agreement with Meta to publicize data is restricted entirely to Table 1. Meaning, we are not permitted to publish exact quotes as further examples in the results to come. Instead, we provide linguistically similar examples drawn from external public accounts (e.g. X/Twitter public posts or comments in the media) as a means of further exemplifying the comments we see modeled in this Facebook data. These externally-sourced examples also serve as a useful reminder that such responses to the assassination occur both in and outside Meta’s platforms.

4. Results

Table 1 offers the topic model results for our study of Facebook comments responding to Trump’s shooting. The table displays the topic names (derived from statistically representative

sentences and words), the proportion of ‘likes’ the topic received (as a percentage), and the category’s relative size. Several immediate themes emerge from the data—though at times they overlap between topics. For example, as expected, we see expressions of dismay, trolling, and the public’s conspiratorial thinking from both the left and the right sides of the political spectrum. Perhaps unexpectedly, a fourth theme emerges—blame—a predominant trope rife throughout the data. We return to the significance of this finding shortly.

Starting with comments that thematically express dismay at the assassination attempt, we see topics that display emotions like sorrow (topic GG) and shock (YY); offer prayers for the victims (WW) and for Trump (NN); declarations of ‘pure’ evil (SS); and frustration about the sacrifices Trump has personally made during his political career (EE). Take Senator Mike Crapo’s (R-ID) public X/Twitter post as an externally located thematic example of this sentiment expressed in these comments:

“I continue praying for the innocent victims & their families killed or injured by the assassination attempt at Donald Trump’s rally today. Acts of political violence are those of cowardice, evil and weakness. They are devoid of humanity. ” (Crapo 2024)

A closer look at the table reveals other types of responses that tend to attract far more attention (and discussion) than expression of dismay. For example, the top five like-provoking categories specifically place *blame* at the Democratic Party (A), its past and present leadership (Obama, Biden, Harris: B), and the promotion of violence (C). President Trump’s own public comments on the attack echo, if not perhaps spearhead, this concept of blame:

"When this [assassination attempt] happened, people would ask, whose fault is it? I think to a certain extent it’s Biden’s fault and Harris’s fault. And I’m the opponent. They were

weaponising government against me, they brought in the whole DoJ to try and get me, they weren't too interested in my health and safety." (Trump as quoted in Tait 2024).

Interestingly, the promotion of violence topic (C) reveals a partisan split in how blame is attributed: namely, comments demand others condemn political violence in all its forms, and blame either Democrats or Republicans (MMM)—and even Trump specifically (III)—for specifically promoting violence, and in turn causing the shooting. For example, some comments (Fifth Avenue: UU) responded to news of the assassination attempt by merely quoting a previous campaign assertion from President Trump, implying that the President himself incited—if not normalized—political violence:

“I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn't lose any voters, OK?" (Trump as quoted in Blumenthal 2024)

A similar split in attributing blame occurs in several other topics, from debating whether the attack was (un)deserved (I), to those who preach/'spew' hate (i.e., Democrats, Republicans, and again Trump himself: MM). Partisanship featured as a primary component in this blame, including laying the responsibility for the shooting at the hands of media (Y), particularly for parroting (Democratic) discourses that Trump was a 'threat to democracy' (HHH). Though, again, others attribute blame to Republicans, including highlighting that the shooter himself was a registered Republican (MMM). Nevertheless, to some on both sides, the attack was 'bound to happen' (PP), likely as a result of the above concerns.

We see further evidence of this aggressive partisan response with what we assume to be RIP-like-trolling use of the laughing emoji. In total, the six Facebook news posts we analyzed prompted nearly nine thousand laughing emoji reactions—a response which would seem

normatively deviant at face value. In fact, the comments themselves responded directly to this curious, disproportionate display of laughing emojis. This laughing emoji topic in the model (see topic D) was the fourth most like-attracting comment in our sample. In this topic, comments typically express repulsive shock—though some support—to others clicking the laughing emoji (D) in reaction to the attack.

Similar RIP-trolling can also be seen in the sarcastic deployment of “thoughts & prayers” (M), which represents another example of these troll-like comments. Here, much like existing digital mourning literature has documented (Bleakley and Sailofsky 2023), genuine conservative expressions of thoughts and prayers are hijacked by trolls as pithy sarcastic responses to events involving gun violence. If nothing else, more overt expressions of explicit disappointment (E) that the shooter missed (XX), perhaps further reveal similar instances of such trolling. In fact, people in both public and private employment who expressed similar views online at the time saw their jobs terminated (e.g. “damn, they missed” and “Shoot -- If only he would've had his scope sighted in correctly” as quoted in Rahman 2024)—perhaps reinforcing how such troll-like discourses deviate from normative behavior.

Conspiracy theories are also clearly present as self-contained topics in the data. From characterizations of the shooting as a publicity stunt, (W) and as a hoax (CCC) to criticizing Trump’s ‘fake blood’ (JJ) and what some consider to be the President’s ‘Oscar-worthy performance’ (OO), there plainly exists a considerable range of discourses espousing conspiracy theories to explain the shooting. However, we also note conspiracies beyond just the shooting itself saturate many of the other topics—much like the academic observation that one conspiracy belief tends to reinforce the next when in need of epistemic evidence (Douglas et al. 2019). For example, several topics suggest ‘they’ (e.g., Democrats) were unsuccessful in using the legal (II)

or electoral system (VV) to defeat Trump, and so ‘they’ now conspire to murder him instead. There were, of course, questions about which other actors were involved, willingly or not (e.g. Secret Service: U), and demands for further official investigations (BBB). To some (though not all commentators), the actions of the conspirators all but ensured election success for Trump come November (F, CC, LL); whether that was the strategic intention of such a potential conspiracy was also debated within the comments, see Table 1.

Table 1. Topic model of comments reacting to assassination attempt on President Trump

Topic	Likes	Size	Topic	Likes	Size
Blame Democrats (A)	5.86%	3.1%	Gun control laws (HH)	0.65%	1.33%
Obama, Biden, Harris (B)	5.05%	3.17%	Legal persecution, so kill (II)	0.64%	0.53%
Condemn/promote violence (C)	4.61%	1.65%	Fake blood (JJ)	0.63%	0.59%
Laughing emoji (D)	3.99%	2.47%	Shots fired (KK)	0.47%	0.89%
Pithy disappointment (E)	3.73%	4%	47th POTUS (LL)	0.45%	0.82%
Ensured victory (F)	3.47%	1.35%	Preach/spew hate (MM)	0.42%	0.47%
Bible Versus (G)	3.26%	2.56%	Sending Prayers (NN)	0.34%	0.63%
Divided/United America (H)	3.12%	2.22%	Oscar worthy performance (OO)	0.34%	0.6%
Un/deserved (I)	3.1%	0.79%	Bound to happen (PP)	0.34%	0.5%
Staged (J)	2.84%	3.13%	Bullet (QQ)	0.33%	0.57%
Disgusting comments (K)	2.52%	1.62%	Bystanders (RR)	0.32%	0.45%
Planned setup (L)	1.82%	0.84%	Pure evil (SS)	0.29%	0.4%
Thoughts & prayers (M)	1.8%	1.03%	Gunshot sounds (TT)	0.25%	0.62%
Project 2025 (N)	1.76%	0.57%	Five shots/Fifth avenue (UU)	0.25%	0.66%
Crowd (O)	1.59%	1.1%	Can't beat, so kill (VV)	0.2%	0.71%
Fight, fight, fight! (P)	1.41%	0.7%	Prayers for victims (WW)	0.19%	0.53%
Trump's strength (Q)	1.35%	0.61%	Too bad they missed (XX)	0.17%	0.57%
Asking questions (R)	1.21%	0.47%	Crazy (YY)	0.13%	0.46%
Assassination attempt (S)	1.09%	1.82%	Iconic photo (ZZ)	0.12%	0.55%
Praying for Trump (T)	1.08%	0.92%	Shooter dead (AAA)	0.1%	1.07%
Secret Service (U)	1.02%	1.57%	Investigation (BBB)	0.07%	0.38%
Keep fighting (V)	1.02%	0.68%	Fake hoax (CCC)	0.07%	0.82%
Publicity stunt (W)	1%	0.43%	Civil war (DDD)	0.06%	0.35%
Trump's recovery (X)	0.91%	0.64%	MAGA (EEE)	0.05%	0.48%
Blame media (Y)	0.87%	3.17%	JFK/RFK/MLK/Reagan (FFF)	0.05%	0.51%
Failure vs. success (Z)	0.85%	1.14%	The libs (GGG)	0.05%	0.43%
Trump 2024 (AA)	0.81%	1.51%	Threat to democracy (HHH)	0.04%	0.5%
Headline criticism (BB)	0.73%	0.34%	Blame Trump/Republicans (III)	0.04%	0.79%
Vote intentions (CC)	0.72%	0.43%	Spanish (JJJ)	0.03%	1.93%
Radical left extremists (DD)	0.71%	0.92%	Rally security (KKK)	0.02%	0.38%
Trump's sacrifices (EE)	0.7%	0.88%	FJB (LLL)	0.02%	0.43%
Ear damage (FF)	0.68%	0.95%	Registered Republican shooter	0.02%	0.4%

			(MMM)		
Sorrow (GG)	0.67%	0.71%			
<i>Note: Number of comments (N = 26844)</i>					
<i>Note: Number of unique sentences (N = 37326)</i>					
<i>Note: Total noise sentences (N = 14376)</i>					
<i>Note: Total sentences (N = 44655)</i>					

Source: Authors analyzing data from Meta Content Library.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study explored online language and communication at a key political moment in US history by examining 26 thousand public Facebook comments responding to breaking news of the assassination attempt on President Trump, during his rally in Pennsylvania on 14 July 2024. This study's purpose was to understand how social media is used to convey and discuss monumental political news events such as a president's assassination attempt by connecting with existing literature about historical reactions to prior presidential assassination attempts, whilst also updating our expectations of such responses within the contemporary media literature such as affective publics, digital mourning, and RIP-trolling. To clarify these insights, the article offered three research questions, which we now answer.

To answer the first question, *in what ways (i.e., topics) is the assassination attempt on President Trump discussed in public Facebook comments reacting to breaking news posts from broadcast and cable outlets?* We identify numerous topics and dominant themes.

Using state-of-the-art topic modeling, this study located and categorized 65 specific discourses reacting to the shooting. The model clearly outlines four primary themes within the topics: (1) blame; (2) dismay; (3) trolling; (4) conspiracy. Much of the literature discussed earlier suggests that we should expect the last three themes. However, the emergence of the first theme (blame) is

less prevalent in historic literature, but resonates in recent studies on public attitudes to political violence. Our almost real-time findings of dismay that the shooter failed are consistent with survey work of political scientists focused on US public attitudes to political violence who argue it is becoming both mainstream and bipartisan in nature. For example, scholars at the University of Chicago's Project on Security and Threats (CPOST) have found since 2021 that rising support for political violence is a feature of both the right and the left side of politics "at disturbingly high and stable levels" (Pape et al. 2024). Pape and colleagues conclude that political violence has become part of mainstream American thinking and a "normalized tool to achieve political goals when peaceful means fail" (Pape et al. 2024).

Our study finds expressions of support for political violence in both the public Facebook comments, and emoji reactions to breaking news of the attack on Trump. We suggest social media might not be the catalyst for these expressions of political violence, which we have established is an historic feature of US politics, but it does enable the widespread sharing of the public's reactions to violent political events. Expressions of support for the attack, be it in comments or emojis, risks normalizing political violence in public discourse. If nothing else, such deviant behavior realizes the fears of digital mourning scholars like Wagner (2018), who speculate that Facebook's emoji reactions might be used to actively troll the pain of others in tragedies.

In the second research question, we ask *what topics are most popular (i.e., interactions), and most prominent (i.e., size) among these comments?* Again, we find comments attributing blame represented a considerable block of popular comments in response to the shooting. However, as the prior discussion demonstrated, both sides of the political spectrum engaged in this narrative and blamed each other for the shooting. The act of trolling—particularly via the laughing

emoji—was also one of the most popular (and perverse) concerns expressed in the comments. Such a response suggests a public indifference or normalization to political violence, given the six breaking news posts amassed almost nine thousand laughing emojis. We also saw further empirical evidence for RIP-trolling, including satirical ‘thoughts & prayers’ comments.

Conspiracies were also rife throughout the data. Such conspiracy beliefs seemed to help partisans explain the violence and blame the other side for the tragedy, though conspiracy-specific topics were found lower in the table (i.e. less popular). A point should be made here on the storytelling capacity of affective publics (Papacharissi 2016): the organic (and real-time) development of conspiracy theories as a means of explaining, and retelling the attack represents a collective emotional bonding over the event on social media.

Partisanship is no boundary here. Democratic Party supporters conjured conspiracies about a staged event with fake blood, and a performance worth of an Academy Award. Conversely, conservatives speculated that the government, media, and Democrats who had failed to remove Trump political (e.g. via legal action) resorted to a conspiracy of violence to achieve their goals. In fact, the storytelling of these conspiracy theories on both political sides implicitly reflects Papacharissi’s (2022) promise of tomorrow with affective publics: that is, the future will reveal this conspiracy to be true and bring down the political opposition.

In answer to our final question, *what insights can this model of Facebook comments offer for future research?* in our view, the most immediate finding is the historical consistency between these Facebook comments and reactions to earlier presidential assassinations irrespective of the medium. While the social medium matters (McLuhan 1967), in terms of the speed and potential scale of online dissemination, and the new mechanisms (e.g. reactions) it provides to communicate ideas, the range of sentiment within messages is largely unchanged. As answers for

the previous two research questions suggest, affective publics, digital mourning, and RIP-trolling literature can all provide similar insights into the communication (and behavior) we see in the data, though the unique circumstances of the event and the current study's data provide new grounds to stretch these theoretical frameworks.

Ultimately, we expect this is the first time that real-time responses and social media interactions feature in a study of reactions to a US presidential assassination attempt. The current paper therefore contributes initial, empirical and theoretical insights into the variety of responses to a presidential assassination attempt and reveals how these public responses are supported online. But there is still much more work to be done.

For instance, the current study charts new ways of trolling digital mourning and (contested) storytelling that organically emerge in response to political violence. We also see blame function as a notably bipartisan response and a primary driver of interactions as the most prominent topic, though whether that blame subsequently erupts with future political or social consequences should be a focus of research going forward. Consistent with past studies, we also found that conspiracy theories were embedded across various categories—again a bipartisan phenomenon. We know a host of negative, macro level consequences of conspiracy beliefs, and emerging research now investigates the troubling interpersonal effects of such beliefs (Phillips 2025a). As a result, future research should investigate the potentially broad consequences of conspiracy beliefs involving this assassination attempt. In our view, the findings hint that much more is to be learned from social media data such as this—particularly in understanding individual-level consequences, but also more broadly, the social state of American politics and potential mainstreaming of public acceptance of political violence.

The comments themselves somewhat demand a renewed focus on data such as this, pointing to each other's Facebook comments as further evidence of a divided nation (H) on the brink of civil war (DDD) giving us direct views into public concerns over the state of—violent—polarization in US politics and a tolerance for the articulation of political violence. Our hope is that this preliminary work contributes to and advances the literature and methods into understanding public responses to presidential assassination attempts. Additionally, we hope our study highlights the crucial importance of academic access to social media data in an era of hard-to-access (and typically expensive) proprietary data and inspires much-needed further research.

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