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Original Article

# Deep stories, nostalgia narratives, and fake news: Storytelling in the Trump era

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**Abstract** Characterizing Trump supporters either as “duped” by Fox News or as speaking from their lived experience misses the fact that both are true. We draw on scholarship on narrative and on the media to trace the ways in which elite-produced stories simultaneously reflect and forge a political common sense. We argue that narrative’s allusiveness (the fact that stories work by calling up other stories) helps to explain why stories produced by media elites come to feel as if they reflect people’s experience. The fact that people often share stories as a way of building collective identity, for its part, helps to explain why stories’ plausibility may be relatively unimportant to those people. Both features of storytelling are intrinsic to the form, but their political effects have been sharpened by two significant changes in the media landscape: the rise of right-wing media outlets and the profusion of user-shared digital news. We trace these developments as a way to make sense of Trump’s electoral support.

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After spending five years with Louisianan Tea Partiers, sociologist Arlie Hochschild was convinced that the appeal of modern conservatism owed to a “deep story” that many Americans believed described their lives. In that story, hardworking citizens were struggling to get by while being bilked in taxes by a grasping federal government. They were told to feel sorry for the parade of claimants who were cutting in line for the American Dream and scorned as “white trash” and “rednecks” if they did not. It was a story that traded in feelings more than confirmable facts, yet when Hochschild told it



to her interviewees, they recognized it. “You’ve read my mind,” said one (2016, p. 145). “I live your analogy,” said another (p. 145).

Donald Trump voiced that story when he not only refused to empathize with immigrants and poor people, but cast white working men as the victims of liberals’ misplaced sympathies. He suggested a different ending to the story when he promised to “Make America Great Again.” For Hochschild’s interviewees and many like them, Trump seemed to be on their side.

This explanation for Trump’s appeal is a plausible one, though it only partly explains an electoral victory that owed also to the continuing power of the abortion issue, Russian interference in the election, ill-timed statements by the FBI director, and a failure on Clinton’s part to mobilize the Obama coalition of millennials and minorities. But the explanation is also partial insofar as it fails to account for where the deep story came from and why it seemed to make sense. Hochschild herself suggested that the deep story corresponded to her interviewees’ experience. “[F]or the white, Christian, older, right-leaning Louisianans I came to know, *the deep story was a response to a real squeeze*” (p. 140; our emphasis). Their economic prospects were being diminished by automation and outsourcing at the same time as they saw immigrants and refugees “sailing past the Statue of Liberty into a diminishing supply of good jobs” (p. 143). Hochschild rejected the alternative explanation, namely that the beliefs of the modern right could be pinned on Fox News or well-funded idea entrepreneurs like the Koch brothers. “[D]uping – and the presumption of gullibility – is too simple an idea” (p. 14), she asserted.

We agree. But there is some analytical ground between the extremes of being “duped” by Fox News and speaking from one’s experience. And in fact, many elements of the deep story should *not* have made sense in terms of the experiences of Hochschild’s respondents or Trump supporters. Many of Hoschild’s respondents, like most Americans, had either been the beneficiaries of federal programs or had friends or relatives who had been. Few had lost out on jobs and opportunities to immigrants or people of color. They said that liberals treated them as backward, racist rednecks, but they seemed to know very few liberals. And one would have had to spend a lot of time reading liberal media to find references to “rednecks” or “white trash.”

Without denying that people’s opinions have some basis in their experience, we need a better understanding of how people integrate information that comes from diverse sources. Trump’s supporters watched TV and listened to the radio; they read, commented on, and shared online stories; and they talked to friends and co-workers. How was a story of middle-class whites pushed aside by a parade of minority groups, abandoned by the government, and treated with disdain by liberals made real?

To begin to answer that question, we draw on what scholars know about storytelling in the media, in online communication, and in offline conversation. We argue that people’s political common sense is shaped by their experience but



it is also shaped by stories they read and hear on TV, stories told by friends and acquaintances, stories that substitute memory for history, stories that make the experience of others seem as if it is their own, and stories whose truth is relatively unimportant to their value. We explore these types and sites of storytelling as they help to account for Trump's electoral support.

## Stories and Storytelling

Define a story as an account of events in the order in which they occurred so as to make a point (we use the terms “story” and “narrative” interchangeably). Stories have characters that are human or human-like in their traits or perceptions, and they have events that follow along the lines of generic plots (Polletta, 2006). We focus on two additional features. Stories are allusive (Polletta, 2006). In other words, if all stories make a normative point, the point is rarely explicit (we do not often say, “and the moral of the story is...”). If the story is good, events and their dénouement seem themselves to provide the moral. In reality, however, we glean a story's point by reference to stories we have heard before. We hear a story of a little guy going up against a big guy, and we recognize them as David and Goliath. We hope David will win and, if he does, we take the message that cleverness can triumph over brute force. Stories' persuasive power lies in their ability to call up other compelling stories.

Again, if the story is good, we assume that it tenders a “larger” point. We assume that the particulars recounted are not idiosyncratic but rather reflect a more general pattern. This makes it easy for political entrepreneurs to obscure the connection between the anecdote and the larger phenomenon. For example, activists seeking to reform the laws around torts litigation in the 1990s circulated stories of outrageously frivolous lawsuits and the pushover juries who awarded millions to these fake victims. Readers will remember the story of the woman who dropped her McDonald's cup of coffee on her lap and won an award of \$3 million, or the story of the woman who won \$1 million after a CAT scan caused her to lose her psychic powers. The stories were either exaggerated or untrue. The woman who sued McDonald's, for example, did not just burn her leg: She suffered third-degree burns that left permanent scarring over 16 percent of her body and rendered her disabled for the next two years. McDonald's had received over seven hundred complaints about its scalding coffee over the previous decade, but refused to cover the woman's medical costs. And the punitive damages the woman was awarded were later reduced to one-fifth of the original amount (Haltom and McCann, 2004). But the exaggerated stories gained wide publicity, and were told and retold in newspapers, magazines, television talk shows, sit-coms, and movies (Haltom and McCann, 2004). The allusiveness of the stories meant that tort reform activists did not have to make the case that Americans' litigiousness was driving



up the cost of medical malpractice (which it was not). They did not even have to prove that Americans were more litigious than they had been (which they were not). The outrageousness of the stories was enough to confirm the larger point: if not all stories were quite so outrageous, there must have been many more of them.

Stories' allusiveness makes it easy to muddy the line not only between little stories (the frivolous lawsuits) and big stories (the hobbling of American business by burgeoning litigation) but also between history and memory. Maly *et al* (2012) refer in this vein to "nostalgia narratives," which build collective identity by way of a selective version of one's personal past. In the nostalgia narrative, history is elided with memory: an earlier era has the warm glow of childhood remembrance. To continue with the example of tort reform, the stories that were told about Americans' litigiousness were probably also persuasive because they were heard against childhood memories of adventures in the playground and roaming the streets on bicycles until nighttime – memories of unconstrained fun that reflected the fact that they were memories of *childhood* more than of a pre-litigious era.

Finally, if stories' power comes from their allusiveness, then the most powerful stories may not even need to be told. They can simply be referred to, often by way of their protagonist. For example, to refer to the "welfare queen" calls up a story, or stories, of women on welfare taking advantage of the system to live in the lap of luxury. References to "anchor babies," "climate change deniers," and "K Street lobbyists" work similarly (Polletta, 2015). Audiences know the story without having to hear it fully recounted. Indeed, audiences may have the pleasurable sensation of being in the loop since they know the referenced story and know that others may not know it (Polletta, 2006). In the case of the tort stories, then, the McDonald's story could be told in shorthand, with its point so clear as to not even require its telling.

The second feature of storytelling we highlight is that it is a *social activity*. We miss that if we think of stories as texts, governed by norms of content. But stories are governed also by norms of performance. There are genres, not only of story, but also of storytelling. In some genres, the accuracy of the events recounted may be important. But in others, the emphasis instead may be on the sincerity of the teller (as in the storytelling that takes place in refugee hearings), and in still others, on the teller's ability to hew to an expected storyline (as in storytelling that takes place in self-help groups; Polletta *et al*, 2011). Storytelling in everyday conversation often is about building status, bonds, and a sense of collective identity (De Fina, 2003). Thus, to share a story of an absurdly frivolous lawsuit was to signal that one recognized the problem and that one was decidedly not among those people who believed in coddling self-proclaimed victims. The belief that people should be legally prevented from suing followed from the group identification rather than preceded it.



As in the 1990s litigation reform, we can see in Donald Trump's victory the promotion of stories by political entrepreneurs, stories' allusive power, and their capacity to build collective identity. But the effects of these storytelling dynamics were heightened by two important changes in the media landscape: the growth of an industry of conservative political commentators and the spread of user-shared digital information. We turn first to the rise of conservative commentary, taking up the proliferation of user-shared digital stories later in the article.

### Right-Wing Opinion Media

In the 1990s, tort stories appeared in newspapers, magazines, and network TV news and talk shows. The blogosphere was in its infancy, there were fewer than half the number of talk radio shows that there are today, and, for half the decade, Fox News did not even exist. In 2012, by contrast, more Americans relied on cable channels for information about elections than on network news (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014, p. 73). Four months before the November 2016 election, two-thirds of Trump's support came from people who said that Fox News was their most-trusted source of news (Bump, 2016).

Behind the growth of conservative opinion media lie legal and economic changes as much as cultural ones (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014). Deregulation that began in the 1970s and accelerated under Reagan led to the concentration of media ownership, the centralization and reduction of newsgathering, and the integration of news and entertainment. The new emphasis was on news as a commodity. The Fairness Doctrine, which required "balanced programming," was eliminated in 1987 and "personal attack" and "political editorial" corollaries were removed in 2000. In combination with the dramatic growth of cable stations, the stage was set for hybrid news/entertainment programming targeted to niche audiences. Whereas networks had sought to recruit a broad audience by presenting the least objectionable content possible, there was now incentive to produce provocative, indeed, deliberately objectionable content.

Before Donald Trump won the Republican nomination, many conservative commentators were critical of the nationalist populism that Trump promoted. Still, long before the election, one could hear all the elements of the deep story in conservative media. Commentators railed against a government that helped the undeserving while leaving the deserving to fend for themselves. They described widespread practices of reverse racism, in which qualified white men were routinely passed over for positions they should have won. They treated Barack Obama as of dubious origin, and as in cahoots with liberals, intellectuals, environmentalists, feminists, George Soros, and the United Nations, all bent on chipping away at American freedoms. They characterized the mainstream media as firmly controlled by liberals, and as disdainful of their audiences. "Generally



speaking, they look down on the folks, they think *you are dumb*,” said Bill O’Reilly, whose nightly audience exceeded three million (Spargo, 2017). And they mourned an America that had moved unalterably away from its white Christian roots. Radio host Michael Savage told his audience of 5 million (Byers, 2014): “In the past people would come over and become Americans. Now they come over and they want you to become them. They want you to speak Spanish. They want you to act Muslim” (quoted in Berry and Sobieraj, 2014, p. 126).

Commentators rarely told the deep story in full. Just as stories of people making outrageous legal claims could be assumed to be representative of a larger problem of litigiousness, a problem that involved perhaps less ridiculous, but no less unethical, breaches of the social contract, small stories worked similarly here. Stories about the siting of a mosque in Lower Manhattan, the fact that the Obamas’ holiday card (yet again) failed to mention Christmas, and a California teacher who banned the practice of saying God Bless You after someone sneezed could all be read in terms of a larger story about liberals’ attack on Christianity. A story about a fatal school bus crash involving an undocumented immigrant driver made the case for the dangers of illegal immigration. Stories’ occlusion of the relationship between the particular and the general made them effective in communicating a larger message.

Storytelling by conservative commentators was allusive in other ways. As Ellison (2014) shows in his analysis of conservative TV and radio programs in the 2010s, commentators drew on a mythic story of America’s past, in which a nation forged in freedom was imperiled by those who would betray the founders’ commitment to individual liberty: variously, intellectuals, government, media, and left-wing movements. The tone was apocalyptic, with the battle portrayed as one between radical good and evil (Smith, 2005). The host and audience manned the bulwarks of freedom. Hosts regularly called on listeners as characters in this mythic story. “You must choose to stand for the truth against the forces of chaos,” Glenn Beck told his more than eight million listeners (Ellison, 2014, p. 98).

Audience members also figured in stories about their own lives. Beck began a monologue against Al Gore’s environmentalism by saying “You’re all working hard right now to raise your kids right and it seems like everything is stacked against you...Now you’ve got the former vice president of the United States – and a Nobel Prize winner – looking *your kids* in the eye and telling them, you know what, *you* know things that your dad and mom don’t” (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014, p. 48). Commentators often referred to a period before the tumult of the 1960s as one in which America was truer to its promise. It was a world that audience members may have remembered, since the median Fox viewer was 68 years old, but a world that they experienced as children. History was filtered through the rosy lens of memory.



Finally, conservative commentators used catch phrases that worked metonymically both to reference a story and, at the same time, to signal that audience members were in the know because they caught the reference. Phrases like “the liberal media,” “Fannie and Freddie,” “the establishment elites,” “class warfare,” the “ACLU,” and “political correctness” were often “strung together in long associative chains that conceal[ed] much of their richness to the uninitiated” (Ellison, 2014, p. 100; see also Norton, 2011).

Audiences undoubtedly did not accept all the claims made by right-wing commentators. Still, research has shown that conservative media has effects. Fox News viewers, *net of their partisan preferences*, were more likely to believe that health care reform would create death panels (Meirick, 2013), doubt the existence of climate change (Feldman *et al*, 2012), and believe that American Muslims wanted to establish Shari’a law in the United States (Serwer, 2011).

## Experience and Interpretation

Did Fox and the broader industry of conservative commentary really have this much power? If shows like *The O’Reilly Factor* and *The Sean Hannity Show* were popular, their viewership was dwarfed by that of the network news, which reached 24 million viewers a night (Pew, 2016). Moreover, conservative opinion shows did not do any newsgathering; they were devoted solely to “news analysis.” So presumably people were exposed to other sources of news (Ellison, 2014). In addition, people talked to one another. Both of these should have provided the material for audiences to assess conservative commentators’ assertions critically.

However, features of conservative commentary may have diminished the critical power of other news sources as well as that of personal conversation. As Ellison (2014) shows, political commentators adopted a *pedagogical* role in instructing their audiences how to interpret mainstream news (see also Jamieson and Cappella, 2008). The beginning of each programming hour was usually devoted to a news story taken from the mainstream news. The host either read the story or played an audio clip and then interpreted the story, sometimes providing a line-by-line reading. The interpretation supported the larger narrative by exposing, variously, the threat liberals posed to Americans’ fundamental freedoms, President Obama’s questionable allegiances, or the countless inroads being made on the nation’s Christian character.

This feature of conservative political commentary may explain why a perception of liberals’ disdain was so central to the deep story that motivated Hochschild’s interviewees and, we argue, many Trump supporters. If conservatives did know liberals, it was unlikely that those liberals were calling them rednecks or racists. And if conservatives read or watched mainstream news, they



would be unlikely to encounter such characterizations. But right-wing commentators told conservatives that liberals saw them as racist rednecks and commentators provided the evidence for that claim in the quotes from liberal figures and the press they featured. Viewers and listeners likely felt that they had been exposed to the mainstream media and had learned for themselves how to expose its biases and outright deceptions.

Conservative media commentary may also have *substituted* for conversation with real people. Americans generally are reluctant to talk about politics (Conover *et al*, 2002), but research suggests this is especially true of conservatives (Mutz, 2006). When Berry and Sobieraj (2014) asked consumers of conservative and liberal opinion media how they felt about talking about politics, every single conservative respondent said without prompting that they feared being called a racist. Liberals worried about being bullied, Berry and Sobieraj report, but they did not worry about being shut down in the way that conservatives did. In this context, conservative commentators offered their audiences not information but an *experience of being in conversation* with people who accepted their views. The fans interviewed by Berry and Sobieraj felt that they had a personal relationship with Sean Hannity, Michael Savage, Glenn Beck, Bill O'Reilly, Rush Limbaugh (and Rachel Maddow on the left). One fan contrasted Walter Conkrite, who was "reporting to his audience" with new hosts like Maddow and O'Reilly, who "are all talking to their audience... they are having a conversation, even though obviously it's one way, it's conversational and it's not a presentation. They're talking to me." "They're talking to you?" the interviewers asked. "Yeah" (p. 133).

Hannity, Limbaugh, and the others cultivated that relationship. They encouraged fans to call into their shows; members of BillOReilly.com were rewarded with "backstage conversations" in which O'Reilly took questions; Limbaugh's fans were given access to "Rush's super-secret e-mail address" (p. 134); they hosted websites and group events. Hosts routinely contrasted their audiences to others who were stupid or naïve, especially the consumers of mainstream media.

If Berry and Sobieraj are right, the line between elite-produced opinion and the everyday conversations by way of which audiences assess elite-produced opinion had become less clear well before the election. Audiences felt that they were in conversation with conservative personalities. Indeed, they felt that Hannity, Limbaugh, and the rest were friends. This was the parasocial identification that media scholars have identified as an important condition for the persuasiveness of media messages (Moyer-Gusé *et al*, 2011). The brilliance of commentators' *mise-en-scene* (Alexander, 2004), in this respect, was that it seemed like conversation with friends – but friends who were witty, informed, engaged, and operated within expected formats (Norton, 2011).





## Sharing Stories

When Katherine Cramer (2016a, b) asked people in rural Wisconsin – people who overwhelmingly voted for Trump – where they got their news, their answer was usually, “each other.” Cramer found among these residents the same sense of cultural insult that Hochschild did, the same experience of being ignored by distant government bureaucrats who were more concerned with racial minorities and elites. Like Hochschild, however, Cramer was reluctant to attribute her interviewees’ views to the conservative opinion industry. “Conservative media gets input into these groups,” she explained, “but it’s not because everybody is watching Fox News or is devoted to this or that talk radio host. It’s that one or two of the people in the group come with something they’ve heard, and it gets passed around” (in Guo, 2016). This is an important point. Even if the fans of conservative commentary felt that Limbaugh, O’Reilly, and Hannity were akin to friends, they undoubtedly also talked about what they heard on conservative media with other friends, and they undoubtedly also assessed what they heard against their own experience.

However, both dynamics are complicated. As scholars of public opinion have shown, where people have little information about the issue in question, they often interpret their own experience in terms of what they have heard in the media. So for example, people who consume more media tend to feel more at risk of becoming the victim of crime (Roche *et al*, 2016), and people who have strong feelings about the issue of climate change – whether for or against – tend to interpret their personal experience of global warming in line with their partisan beliefs (Myers *et al*, 2013). In other words, personal experience does not determine people’s opinion separate from what they hear from partisan media.

Sociological accounts have revealed another dynamic: that people’s sense of personal experience may *encompass* experiences that are not their own. This is what Jacomijne Prins and colleagues found when they listened to groups of young adults of Moroccan descent in the Netherlands telling stories of discrimination they had encountered (Prins *et al*, 2013). Certain stories were common: being passed over for a job or seeing old ladies clutch their purses when they walked by. Over and over again, though, narrators used the personal pronouns “we” or “you” in relating such accounts. The implication was that the personal story was a collective one. Sometimes narrators recounted events using the term “we,” but the events were not ones they had actually experienced. It was if the narrator was saying that this *could* have happened to me, since I am a member of the group and it happened to another member of the group. Similarly, when Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and his colleagues interviewed white Americans in the early 2000s, almost a third spontaneously used what the authors call the “I did not get that job because of a black man story line.” One



student explained his opposition to providing special opportunities to minorities in college admissions:

I had a friend, he wasn't – I don't like him that much, I think it's my brother's friend, a good friend of my brother's, who didn't get into law school here, and he knows for a fact that other students less qualified than him did. And that really – and he was considering a lawsuit against the school. But for some reason, he didn't. He had better grades, better LSAT, better everything, and he.... Other people got in up above him (Bonilla-Silva *et al*, 2004, p. 567).

Bonilla-Silva *et al* say that this formulation was common. The story was not about the narrator himself or herself or even about close relatives or friends, but rather about a distant acquaintance. Yet, the authors say, it was “narrated as a personal experience” (2004, p. 567), presumably in the context of a conversation about what the interviewee had experienced. Similar to Prins *et al*'s Moroccan storytellers, the experience here was at the level of the group; it was not “my” experience, but the experience of people “like me.”

This suggests that the deep story may have been lodged not in *directly* lived experience, but in the shared stories of the group. Sharing stories, for its part, may have helped to constitute the group: to reinforce its values and to demarcate its boundaries (De Fina, 2003). Recall once more the stories about frivolous lawsuits. Exchanging stories of grasping Americans and the gullible juries who helped them gave tellers and listeners a sense of common perspective. *They* were not among those greedy litigants, even though the latter seemed to be everywhere. So the stories exchanged in conversation may have political effect by drawing lines between us and them. They reinforce collective identities, and in particular, partisan identities.

### Sharing Stories Digitally

There was a layer to conversational storytelling before the election that did not exist at the time of the 1990s tort stories. Social media platforms allowed people to share stories far more swiftly and widely, and to share stories from more diverse sources. In 2016, six in ten Americans got news via social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit (Pew, 2016). What counted as news, moreover, was not always obvious. In the last three months of the election, “fake news” stories on Facebook were liked or shared more often than real news stories (Davies, 2016).

Discussion of fake news has focused on why people believe such stories (see, e.g., Sundar, 2016). But this discussion may miss the *pleasure* that comes from reading and sharing surprising news, pleasure that may be more important than



believing the story. An avid reader of conspiracy blogs explained after the election, “It’s like a hockey game. Everyone’s got their goons. Their goons are pushing our guys around, and it’s great to see our goons push back” (Tavernise, 2016).

The literature on rumors is useful here. Jean-Noel Kapferer argues that rumors are a kind of conversational capital. The person sharing the rumor “provides information that is scarce, exciting, and moving: he has at his disposal an object of value to exchange. In return, he reaps the pleasure of pleasing others and of being attentively listened to” (2013, p. 47). Whether the rumor is “true or not is of little importance.” Or as Gary Alan Fine puts it, rumors are “too good to be false” (2007, p. 6). Sharing rumors also produces solidarity for the group. If rumors reflect a distrust of social institutions, they also reflect trust in the rumor-sharer (Fine, 2007). Again, sharers do not expect to have to assess the validity of the story. Indeed, to *not* assess the validity of the story is a way to signal one’s membership in and commitment to the group. As Kapferer writes, “to believe a rumor is to manifest one’s allegiance to the group’s voice, i.e. to collective opinion. Rumors provide a group with the opportunity to stand up and be counted” (2013, p. 104). These dynamics may not be limited to a small core of the truly committed. Scholars of conspiracy theories point out that believers tend to range from the committed to the casual (Campion-Vincent, 2005).

In spreading outrageous stories – that Obama had banned the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools, that candidate Trump was offering free one-way tickets to Africa and Mexico to those who wanted to leave, that the leader of ISIS had endorsed Clinton (Silverman, 2016) – people may have been seeking less to persuade recipients (by way of the plausibility of the story) than to strengthen their membership in the group (by way of their disinclination to question the plausibility of the story). The use value of the story in reinforcing a partisan political identity was more important than its truth value.

## Enter Donald Trump

A deep story of economic loss and cultural insult was “lived,” as one of Hochschild’s respondents put it, long before Donald Trump threw his hat in the ring. But he certainly appealed to the deep story in campaigning. He told allusive stories about an American Dream that was lost to America’s most deserving and a federal government that had thrown in its lot with outsiders (Trump, 2016a, b). He referred frequently to “the forgotten men and women of our country. People who work hard but no longer have a voice” (Trump, 2016c, d); “the great majority” (recalling Nixon’s “silent majority”). He castigated his opponent and other “politicians [who] have heaped scorn and disdain on these wonderful Americans” (Trump, 2016c).



Many of the stories Trump told elided history, memory, and even myth. One of his most popular on the campaign trail was “The Snake,” a blues song whose lyrics he recited. The song was about a woman who nursed a snake back to health and then was bitten by it. Trump instructed his audiences to catch the allusions, saying “think of this in terms of terror,” “think of this in terms of the people we are letting in by the thousands, especially from Syria”; or saying, in between the lines of the poem, “the border,” “the famous Trojan Horse;” and then emphasizing, as if recounting an Aesop’s fable, the woman’s comeuppance for her misplaced tenderheartedness (CNN, 2017).

Trump also traded on the collective identity-building functions of sharing outrageous stories. When he tweeted conspiracy stories, he did not profess belief in their truth. Rather, he often said something like, “A lot of people have said...” [that Bill Ayers wrote Obama’s *Dreams of My Father* (Tashman, 2016)], “Now somebody told me...” [that Obama’s birth certificate listed him as Muslim (Tashman, 2016)], “I’m hearing ...” [that Antonin Scalia had been murdered (Tashman, 2016)], or “many people are saying...” [that Hillary Clinton was responsible for the execution of an Iranian scientist (Golshan, 2016)]. He cast himself as sharing stories that others had shared with him, just as ordinary people did. At the same time, he implied that the conspiracy stories were just the tip of the iceberg, a metonym for liberals’ duplicity.

Conservative commentators, for their part, while initially critical of Trump’s brand of nationalist populism (which was associated more with Breitbart News than Fox News), shifted to supporting the candidate when he won the Republican nomination (Johnson, 2017). Commentators too told allusive stories of one candidate who was responsive to intellectuals, media elites, and Wall Street simultaneously; and another who was trying to put middle-class Americans at the front of the line for the American Dream. And they too celebrated a style of talk that eschewed careful scripts and political correctness in favor of blunt expressions of anger.

## Conclusion

Donald Trump did not win the election because he told a single story that knitted together Americans’ fears, hopes, and anxieties in a compelling way. Rather, the stories he told, along with the arguments he made, slogans he floated, and facts he claimed all drew on and reinforced already existing stories of cultural loss that, we have argued, owed as much to what people heard about on TV and radio, remembered from childhood, and perceived their group as having experienced as it owed to what they directly experienced themselves.

Stories are always allusive, and storytelling’s capacity to build collective identity makes it an enduring feature of politics. However, we have argued that developments in the contemporary media landscape made these features of



storytelling even more important in the 2016 election. The growth of an industry of conservative commentary made denser the “echo chamber” (Jamiesen and Cappella, 2008) of stories told, retold, referenced, and alluded to. Conservative media commentators often styled a personal relationship with the viewer or listener, in which allusive stories reinforced the bond between speaker and audience. The growth of user-shared digital “news” stories also worked to reinforce bonds of political partisanship. However, here, what was important was a *style* of storytelling. By sharing, liking, and commenting on outrageous stories – and by determinedly *not* questioning their factual accuracy – people signaled that they were savvy, scrappy, and clearly on one side of the partisan divide.

To conclude, then, we return to the people in Hochschild’s account: the white, Christian, conservative, middle-aged men and women who subscribed to the deep story. If they had not seen their own wages or economic prospects diminish, then they had seen evidence of decline around them. As Hochschild argues, broad economic shifts lowered their expectations of what they or their children could realistically achieve. At the same time, they also listened to Rush Limbaugh and watched Sean Hannity, and heard about the scourges of multiculturalism and political correctness. They heard that affirmative action was destroying our meritocracy, that there was a war on Christmas, and that the liberals who were running the country thought they were stupid.

These facts were often distant from their own experiences in the sense that they had probably never lost a job in competition with a black candidate, and still received cards wishing them a Merry Christmas. But they could find evidence to corroborate these claims in their own lives. A friend of a friend was passed over for a job, she said, in favor of a less qualified black person. Someone they knew at City Hall was instructed by her supervisor to take down the nativity scene she had erected. They themselves had been required to participate in a “diversity” course at work, or had seen a co-worker chastised for telling a racy joke. The small stories added up to the larger story, and direct experiences meshed with the experiences of others in a way that made them all seem personal.

The people who believed in the deep story and who voted for Donald Trump heard compelling stories on conservative media, but they also heard a style of talk that was engaging. It involved a raucous repudiation of political correctness. It was in-your-face and unapologetic, variously playful, wry, or angry. By joining in – by using the style of talk and by sharing the outrageous stories – people signaled who they were and who they were not. And by using those forms of storytelling himself, Donald Trump signaled that he was part of the group too. On the other side were all those who hewed to the liberal, oversensitive, arrogant status quo.

This interpretation is speculative, of course. But it does have the virtue of drawing connections between what people assume to be true about the way the world works, what they learn from TV, radio, and the blogosphere, what they hear in conversations with friends, and what they directly experience. We miss



these connections when we see the options only as people being duped by Fox News or speaking from their lived experience. We miss the fact that people often interpret outrageous stories as evidence of a broader phenomenon; that stories about the way the world used to be often conflate history and nostalgia; that people's relationship to media commentators affects what they take from the stories they hear; and that stories may have political impact less by persuading than by reminding people which side they are on.

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