Narratives of change and citizen participation in modern political campaigning: The origins of the Trump movement

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ABSTRACT
This article offers insights into how the storytelling aspects of the Donald Trump presidential campaign of 2016 contributed to the rise of the Trump movement and paved his way to the White House. With 50 Trump speeches being analysed, the study reconstructs the narrative Donald Trump communicated to the target audience on his way to the highest office. Exploring the idea of Donald Trump as a storyteller, the article discusses how the ideology of the Trump base was constructed and an eagerness to participate was ignited by the narrative. Methodologically, the article derives the seven principles of political storytelling from its theoretical framework and applies them as an analytical frame to the analysis of the narrative structure of the Trump campaign. The seven principles suggest that the political narrative benefits from being targeted, empathic, happy-ending, consistent, well delivered, well communicated and engaging.

KEYWORDS
Donald Trump political campaigns narrative storytelling social groups participation
The function of narrative

Narrative is a method of ‘ordering experience and making sense’ (Bamberg 2011: 79). The idea of a narrative as a sense-making practice highlights its interpretative function that makes a narrative ‘the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful’ (Polkinghorne 1988: 1). In Gudmundsdottir’s view, ‘by using narrative form we assign meaning to events and invest them with coherence, integrity, fullness and closure’ (1995: 31). Narratives turn the discrete phenomena of social reality into a coherent system of events and ‘give sense to the behaviour of others’ (Polkinghorne 1988: 14). Concomitantly, narratives help us to understand ourselves and play a crucial role in creating our self-representations (Bamberg 2011: 2). Along with an individual identity, the sense-making function of narrative contributes to the creation of collective identities or ‘group consciousness’ that are associated with ‘a political awareness or ideology regarding the group’s relative position in society along with a commitment to collective action aimed at realizing the group’s interest’ (Miller et al. 1981: 495), which is well studied on the example of racial minorities for instance (McClain et al. 2009; Miller et al. 1981).

At the same time, a narrative as an interpretative means is not a perfect mirror of reality. According to Shkedi, ‘narratives are interpretative tools that constitute a practical, but also highly selective perspective’ (2005: 11). By ‘moralizing reality’ (Gudmundsdottir 1995), narratives make their interpretations of events subjective. In this regard, Bruner (1991) compares a narrative with the logical scientific mode of reality construction, concluding that the reality portrayed by a narrative as a method of making sense can only achieve ‘verisimilitude’ but cannot be verified in a scientific sense. Even those narrative forms that claim to document events as they were, like chronicles or reports, are distorted by the author’s always-limited knowledge, his or her vision of what is important to the story and what can be omitted, and so on.

However, ‘highly selective perspective’ of narratives confers ‘moral significance’ (Gudmundsdottir 1995) to the reality they portray. That is what Herman and Vervaeck (2013) define as ‘ideology’ of a narrative that is ‘the frame of values’ informing the narrative and installing ‘hierarchical relationships between pairs of oppositional terms such as real vs false, good vs bad and beautiful vs ugly’. Polkinghorne also highlights the ideological nature of narratives, arguing that at the cultural level ‘narratives serve to give cohesion to shared beliefs and to transmit values’ (1988: 14). Empowered with the ethical ‘road map’ of a narrative, people can build their own strategies in the actual world. Thus, narratives can be seen as a means of empowering people as they create clarity for action and give the feeling of moral certainty.

Interestingly, the biased nature of narratives makes it ‘more resonant with the human experience than the traditional mode of communication that is used in positivistic-quantitative studies’ as a method of making sense of the world (Shkedi 2005: 11). That can be explained by the fact that the audience also looks at the world through the filter of their own ideology, and creates clarity in expense of complexity through a certain degree of simplification.

Empowering people with a mechanism to make sense of reality, narratives – and their storytellers -- simultaneously gain the power to change that reality by infiltrating people’s minds with subjective visions of it. Reflecting on Vygotsky’s works, Jerome Bruner argues that ‘cultural products, like language
and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality’ (1991: 3). In so doing, stories may affect people’s actions and change the world we live in. With all that being said, the ability of a narrative to shape reality is not necessarily all-powerful; it can also be heavily constrained by the way narratives are consumed and produced in the actual world. In the sense of consumption, selective exposure discriminates the narratives whose ‘ideology’ lacks ‘verisimilitude’ in the eye of the consumer. As Frederick Mayer puts it, ‘when we use narrative to make meaning […] we are reinforcing our general worldview through the particular’ (2014: 71). As pinpointed by uses and gratification theory, the audience must be conceived of as active, which means ‘an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal directed’ (Katz et al. 1973: 510). Among those goals, or gratifications, value reinforcement and social utility can be highlighted (Katz et al. 1973: 513). Selective exposure implies that stories are selected on the basis of their ability to support our world-view. According to the self-affirmation theory by Claude Steele, individuals resist changing their beliefs and therefore tend to use defensive adaptations, including avoidance of the information contradicting their world-view (Sherman and Cohen 2006; Steele 1988).

In the sense of production, the power of narratives to affect things is limited if production is driven by the marketing logic of a storyteller. Although it has been widely argued – by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002), for instance – that culture is a means of manipulation and oppression, businesses and politicians habitually try to learn and please people’s tastes rather than challenge them, which is the most obvious winning strategy on a competitive market of products and ideas. Narratives, therefore, often originate from an audience. They try to be like the audience, especially if the main goal is to promote a product or a candidate. Narratives – or, rather, storytellers – want to be liked, and that limits their freedom to differ significantly from what the target audience wants them to be.

But if the narrative succeeds in connecting with the ‘ideology’ of its consumers, reflecting on the real issues of its target audience and connecting with their everyday concerns, this turns stories into powerful mechanisms for engaging with individuals on a very intimate level of their personal worldview, generating enthusiasm and triggering engagement, a ‘subjective disposition that motivates realization’ (Dahlgren 2013: 25).

Methodology

Based on the outlined theoretical premise, the following elements of effective storytelling in politics can be specified and applied to the analysis of the narrative structure of the Trump campaign:

1. **Targeted story**: A story for everyone is a story for no one. Narrative has to work with a well-defined target audience.
2. **Empathic story**: A successful narrative resonates with the ‘ideology’ of its audience, addresses the relevant issues.
3. **Happy ending**: A narrative has to give hope and offer solutions.
4. **Consistent story**: Taken together, the messages of a campaign have to form a solid narrative.
5. **Well-delivered story**: A story that no one has heard does not exist. A story has to be delivered to its audience by means of relevant online-and-offline channels.
6. Well-communicated story: A good message requires a good messenger who can be a genuine part of the narrative that he or she communicates.

7. Engaging story: Finally, the story has to include mechanisms of participation and communicate what the target audience can do to help the campaign achieve its goal.

The given principles can be helpful to examine political communication as the type of communication whose goal is associated not just with transmitting a message but making sure that the message resonates with its consumers, is properly delivered with regard to the online and offline channels applied and motivates to become an active part of the story.

The narrative structure of the Donald Trump campaign

Targeted story

There are certain demographics that traditionally constitute the base of a Republican candidate in the modern era of US politics, such as Evangelicals and free-marketers. As the Election Day exit polls show, Donald Trump managed to consolidate 90 per cent of the traditional Republican base (Huang et al. 2016). But in the election of 2016, Donald Trump as a storyteller had a major line for another demographic which he called ‘forgotten men and forgotten women’. According to Jay Connaughton, who led the advertising effort of the Trump campaign, their ads focused specifically on that group of voters (Brown 2017).

The white working class of rural America constituted the base of the group, but an average Trump voter was not necessarily poorly educated or economically struggling as Trump also won 61 per cent of the vote from white college-educated men, for instance (Sasson 2016). To understand the target audience of the narrative Trump created, one should step away from operating traditional demographic categories. Forgotten men and forgotten women are the people who ‘want their country back […] want America back’ (Trump 2017g); the middle-class American people who ‘built our country’ (Trump 2017r); who are ‘the heart and soul of the nation’ (Trump 2017m) and who one day found themselves excluded from the political process, voiceless to affect it. According to a survey by RAND Corporation, voicelessness was the unifying trait within the Trump movement’s self-identity (Pollard and Mendelsohn 2016).

The demographic of ‘forgotten men and forgotten women’ is artificial in the sense that Donald Trump did not simply choose it as his target audience: he created it. Trump supporters of the Rust Belt states did not exist as a distinctive group of voters before they were ‘summoned’ as a group by the narrative crafted by the Trump campaign. The symbolic power of a narrator to reshape social reality and ‘summon’ social groups as if out of nowhere – simply by naming them – was first stressed by Pierre Bourdieu. He attributed ‘symbolic power to nominate’ (Bourdieu 1985: 734) to a ‘spokesperson’ who ‘institutes the group through the magical operation that is inherent in any act of naming’ (Bourdieu 1985: 741). United by the narrative of the Trump campaign, its target audience could make sense of themselves as a distinctive group with shared interests.

The demographic of forgotten men and forgotten women crosses the lines of social, ideological and racial groups. As has just been said, people can make sense of themselves through narratives and thus are capable of redefining
themselves and entering political alliances of a more reflective nature than based merely on their racial identity, gender or social status. The appeal to ‘the forgotten Americans’ as an attempt to extend the traditional Republican base was made with regard to the people of colour, for instance. On reaching out to the black and latino communities, the Trump campaign made an attempt to portray them as a genuine part of the forgotten men and women group and ‘invite’ them into the new demographic by saying:

You’ve got nothing to lose […] They [Democrats] come in for your vote. They get your vote. Then they do nothing. I’m also going to fight to help millions of Latinos trapped in poverty and to help their children grow up in safety and in peace.

(Trump 2017)

One might say that the strategy paid some dividends, since Trump captured 29 per cent of the latino vote – 2 per cent more than Mitt Romney did in 2012 – and 8 per cent of the African American vote, compared to Romney’s 6 per cent (Munro 2016). Considering the racial controversies haunting Donald Trump throughout the campaign, this was the remarkable success of his narrative. Trump did not try to turn those demographics into Republicans, instead he used his narrative to reorient the group self-identification of those people from racial to that constructed by Trump.

**Empathic story**

The narrative reflected the concerns of its target audience and gave its own explanation for what caused the problems. According to the narrative structure of the Trump campaign, America is in decline and the challenges America faces today threaten its ‘very way of life’ (Trump 2017). The anti-American ideology that makes America ‘not so great’ is globalism, ‘shipping your jobs, your factories, and your wealth to other countries’, promoting open borders so that Americans ‘don’t have a country anymore’, welcoming immigration from ‘terror-prone regions’, and so on (Trump 2017w). The narrative structure unfolded, putting the blame on those by whom the forgotten Americans were forgotten: ‘the entire corrupt Washington establishment’ (Trump 2017u).

The message of anti-globalism resonated with many working class people of Middle America. The rural areas of the old industrial states have been witnessing a mass exodus of manufacturing jobs through the last few decades (Ohanian 2014). The negative tendency was intensified – according to Trump (2017) – by the United States signing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, which created a free trade zone between the United States, Canada and Mexico and encouraged thousands of American manufacturers to seek a cheaper labour force beyond the southern border.

While some attribute the problems of the Rust Belt workers to their limited ability to adjust, Trump’s narrative made a clear choice between individual and system blame approaches, ‘the belief that the responsibility for a group’s low status in society is attributable either to individual failings or to inequities in the social system’ (Miller et al. 1981: 497), suggesting that the ‘rigged system’ was responsible for what he later called the ‘American carnage’ (Trump 2017).

According to the narrative, ‘crooked media’ is a ‘part of the rigged system’ (Trump 2017c). Donald Trump enthusiastically pushed the idea of an illegitimate media, labelling professional journalists ‘the most dishonest people’
(Key 2016). His campaign systematically questioned the right of the professional media to speak for the people (Trump 2017a). It was supported by the overall low confidence of Americans in the mass media. In 2016 that confidence dropped to the lowest level ever recorded based on the Gallup poll. As of September 2016, mainstream media was trusted by 32 per cent of Americans, which indicates the fall by 8 per cent vs 2015. Among Republican voters the trust in ‘elite’ media sank to 14 per cent to compare with 33 per cent only a year before (Swift 2016). On this point, Trump blamed the media for being arrogant and money-centred:

The media is entitled, condescending and even contemptuous of the people who don’t share their elitist views. And this is all for money. This is for money, largely, money and power. I see you and I hear you. I am your voice.

(2017t)

**Happy ending story**

Trump’s narrative provided solutions to the concerns of its target audience, repeating that he was not running ‘to be President of the World’, but rather ‘to be President of the United States’ (2017x). The Trump team coined catch-phrases for each of their proposals and turned them into popular memes, so that everybody might easily see what the campaign stood for:

1. ‘Make America Great Again’, the official slogan of the campaign.
2. ‘Build the wall’ between Mexico and the United States to stop illegal immigration, insisting that ‘Mexico will pay for it’.
3. ‘Drain the swamp’ to get rid of the anti-American globalist establishment.
4. ‘America first’, opposing the globalist policies of his political opponents.
5. ‘I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created’, with regard to the main topic of the campaign: unemployment and low pay.
6. Loosening ‘job-killing regulations’ to help businesses to create new jobs.
7. ‘Biggest tax cuts since Ronald Reagan’ would create jobs and economic stability, etc.

A fact that sometimes goes unnoticed is that Donald Trump’s rhetoric of bringing back jobs was market-oriented and included measures of deregulation and tax cuts. What is almost unprecedented here is that the surge in support for this platform came from the working class that, traditionally, was deemed the fiefdom of the left, champions of boosting government expenditure. By pointing at the causal relationship between the right-wing economic policies and job creation, Donald Trump brought the working class into the conservative tent.

However, the most important feature of Trump’s narrative was that it went beyond addressing specific issues and created a story of the people Trump called the ‘forgotten men and women’. In the narrative, forgotten men and forgotten women did not just want their jobs back, but the dignity they deserved. In Trump’s words, it was a movement about ‘restoring respect for America’ (2017p) and ‘the dignity of all Americans’ (2017k). ‘You are the people that built our country and we are going to give you the respect that you
deserve’ (Trump 2017s) was the message addressing the people who viewed themselves as ‘the heart and soul of the nation’ (Trump 2017m), and who felt that they deserved a voice because of that status. With respect to the narrative, a general eagerness for change rather than any specific vision of political shift was the driving force of the campaign.

‘Forgotten men and forgotten women will be forgotten no longer’ was the message of change that mattered most to the people who voted in 2016. According to the New York Times exit poll of 8 November, 90 per cent of those who said the country was doing well voted for Hillary Clinton, while 83 per cent of those who highlighted the ability to bring change as the most important quality in the candidate voted for Donald Trump (Huang et al. 2016). The ‘forgotten men and forgotten women will be forgotten no longer’ catchphrase encapsulated what kind of difference the Republican candidate would bring to Washington. As Trump put it, ‘my message is that things have to change – and they have to change right now’ (2017e).

Consistent story

In Mark McKinnon’s view, ‘[w]inning campaigns create a narrative architecture that ties it all together into something meaningful and coherent’ (McKinnon 2016). The narrative the Trump campaign produced was consistent throughout the election period. The ‘Make America Great Again’ slogan became an umbrella demand for all the claims the campaign made to defend Americanism. The narrative was consistent in portraying the American decline in all spheres of social, economic and cultural life.

The most important messages of the narrative were repeated dozens of times, one speech after another, so that the narrative stayed consistent geographically along the ‘road tour’ of the candidate. For instance, his story about making America win was one of the most popular at Trump rallies:

We’re going to start winning again. We’re going to win so much if you people are going to be angry at me. You’re going to say, Mr. President you’re winning too much. We’re not used to it, we cannot take it anymore. Please stop winning. And you know what I’m going to say? Sorry, folks, we have a lot of ground to capture.

(Trump 2017h)

Depending on the state, Trump would change his catchphrase: ‘the people of Pennsylvania […] they’re sick and tired of winning. They can’t stand winning so much’ (Trump 2017i) or ‘the people of North Carolina are sick and tired of winning. You’re winning too much […]’ (Trump 2017q).

Well-delivered story

The Trump campaign used multiple platforms to disseminate its narrative, both online and offline. Brad Parscale, the Trump campaign digital director, pinpointed the multiplatform approach by stressing that the ‘science that was missed in the previous [Republican] campaigns was to take the digital, and mix TV, ground game, door knocking’ (2016).

While the Trump campaign was not necessarily an example of successful transmedia storytelling, it did comply with some of Henry Jenkins’ ‘Seven Principles of Transmedia Entertainment’, e.g. immersion and extractability. As Jenkins writes,
Concerning the principle of immersion, Donald Trump made more than 200 stops, giving speeches across the country over the course of his campaign (Presidential Campaign Travel 2016). Days before the vote, the Trump campaign focused on the Midwest region by rallying in Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan and Pennsylvania, the home states of the Rust Belt’s forgotten men and women (Finnegan 2016). High turnouts at Trump rallies proved how enthusiastic Trump supporters were about the campaign (Gibson 2016).

The famous red Make America Great Again cap exemplifies the extractability principle of transmedia storytelling. It became the true symbol of the Trump movement. The popularity of the Make America Great Again hat contributed to building the Trump movement’s self-identity, since possessions play an important role in ‘the construction of a coherent identity narrative’ (Schembri et al. 2010: 624).

Trump’s communication strategy was in-line with his claim of mainstream media being a part of the ‘rigged system’. By 20 September 2016, the Clinton campaign had spent $143.2 million on TV ads while the Trump campaign had spent only $6.8 million (Struyk 2016). By prioritizing targeted social media promotion over big spending on TV in the last few days before the election, ‘the campaign and Republican Party spent about $5 million in get-out-the-vote digital advertising’, targeted to Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Florida (The Associated Press 2016).

Following the multiplatform approach, Donald Trump turned to online advertising and the use of his personal social media accounts to address people directly. With three million Twitter followers on the day he announced his candidacy for the presidency, Trump ended up with thirteen million by Election Day. His notable use of Twitter early in the morning and late at night helped him to affect the news agenda for the day ahead (Keegan 2016).

**Well-communicated story**

Trump’s campaign manager, Kellyanne Conway, claimed that the 2016 US presidential election proved the importance of ‘a good message and a great messenger’ (Conway 2016). As a narrator, Donald Trump equated himself with his audience of forgotten men and women, asserting that, ‘for those who feel like they don’t have a voice, I have a simple reply: I am your voice’ (Trump 2017n). In so doing, Trump shattered the invisible wall between the narrator and his audience. Presenting himself as ‘just a messenger’ (Trump 2017f), Trump portrayed himself as an ‘ideal conductor’ for the ideology of his movement, not distorted by his own interests or biases. It also allowed him to ascribe the origins of the group ideology to the group itself, not the campaign. This increased the trustworthiness of the message.

This narrative channelled the image of Donald Trump as an agent of change, qualified to deliver. In TV ads, Trump accentuated his business success and promised ‘to bring the same leadership of success to the presidency’ (Parry-Giles et al. 2016). At the same time, Trump took advantage of...
positioning himself as an outsider to politics who sacrificed his glamorous way of life to change the lives of hard-working Americans for the better. On this matter, Trump emphasized: ‘I’m an outsider. I’ve become an outsider fighting for you. I’m not a politician. You, the American people, are my only special interest’ (2017s). One should not underestimate how greatly the Republican hopeful benefited from being a famous TV personality and celebrity person for decades.

Engaging story

To a great extent, the Trump campaign was successful because its narrative practices motivated its target audience to participate. The importance of being an active supporter and participating in the campaign was stressed by the candidate himself:

Our movement – and this is our movement – will take our country back. But we have to do this together. You have to knock on doors. You have to pick up that phone. Go to the website. Learn more. Become a volunteer. That’s what we need.

(Trump 2017v)

In his speeches, Trump coached and motivated his audience, trying to instil confidence in them and create a positive self-image: ‘You are the smartest people. We’re the strongest people. We’re the most loyal people ever to be involved in a campaign’ (2017o). Encouraging and creating a positive self-image within subordinate groups may lead to a greater turnout on election day, as Miller et al. suggest:

Voting may have been depressed among the elderly because they have accepted the generally negative image of old people in U.S. society and have no visible activist wing to help them reinterpret their social attributes into a positive self-image (e.g., ‘black is beautiful’) and subsequently to motivate them to engage in activities on the group’s behalf.

(1981: 501)

The group consciousness constructed by the narrative could lead to higher participation rates among the group of forgotten men and women, as some researchers argue with respect to the African American community, for instance (McClain et al. 2009: 478). Voting is probably the most important kind of political participation – at least for a candidate. Miller et al. point out that

[m]embers of subordinate strata will turn out at higher rates if they perceive their self-location within a particular social stratum (i.e., think of themselves black, poor, or female), regard their group as relatively lacking in societal influence compared with an opposing group (whites, businessmen, and men, respectively), and at the same time attribute their deprived condition to social barrier.

(1981: 500)

As has been discussed, the Trump campaign successfully created a movement with a distinctive and well-outlined group identification, fiercely
criticized the polar power of the globalist elites and put system blame at the centre of the narrative, attributing the problems of the working class to the negligence and incompetence of the Washington establishment. Through the triadic model of group identification, polar power and system blame, the strong enthusiasm of the Trump movement may be explained.

Conclusion
As a result of the study, it may be argued that Donald Trump managed to foresee the target group that did not fall into traditional demographics patterns; one that required an insight to be seen. The Trump campaign formulated and channelled a consistent message of change to its target audience, the group of ‘forgotten men and forgotten women’. It was crucial that Trump’s narrative of change went beyond addressing specific issues of social, economic and cultural life, and created a story of the people who did not just want their jobs back but their dignity, too. The narrative resonated with the very personal feelings of the people who viewed themselves as ‘the heart and soul of the nation’, but found themselves powerless to affect the destinies of their country. By constructing a group identity for his target audience, Trump boosted enthusiasm amongst his base and promoted participation, from rallies to the actual Election Day turnout. A multiplatform approach to disseminating campaign messages made the campaign more vibrant and supported the part of the narrative that portrayed mainstream media as part of an untrustworthy establishment. Along with constructing an identity for forgotten men and women and building the image of the polar power, the narrative put system blame at its core, attributing the problems of its target audience to the negligence and incompetence of the Washington elite.

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