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## The Forum

# Trump Gave Them Hope: Studying the Strangers in Their Own Land

DANIEL KREISS, JOSHUA O. BARKER, and SHANNON ZENNER 

*This article argues that a set of recent books published in advance of the 2016 U.S. presidential election provides a road map for understanding its outcome and a research agenda for political communication scholars in the years ahead. This article focuses on sociologist Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*, a field study that documents the roles that identity, narratives, and emotions play in shaping the political beliefs and behavior of White Tea Party supporters. Building on these insights, through an analysis of 123 content analyses published in *Political Communication* between 2003–2016, we demonstrate gaps in our field and argue that scholarship can grow analytically and empirically by accounting for the findings of these books. We conclude with suggestions for future research into people's perceptions of identity, group status, deprivation, and political power; as well as the role of media, political actors, and social groups in creating these narratives of American politics.*

**Keywords** Donald Trump, 2016 U.S. presidential election, race and ethnicity, political identity, social status

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild wrote these words about the rise and appeal of the U.S. President Donald Trump in the concluding chapter of her important field study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana. While attending a Trump rally, Hochschild observes the various strains of the stories and emotions of the right merge in the powerful symbol that is Donald Trump. For his supporters, Trump is a remedy for demographic decline and cultural marginalization and a release from the “feeling rules” that require political correctness about Blacks and gays. Trump resonates with the “deep story” of these citizens, which entwines economic anxiety, fears over White, working-class decline in social and cultural status, and mourning for a lost perceived way of life. For people at his rallies, Trump fulfills a collective yearning to be part of a “powerful, like-minded majority” (Hochschild, 2016).

Hochschild concludes that the candidate on the stage fulfilled these voters' *emotional*, not their *economic*, self-interest. In doing so, Hochschild provides keys to understanding an election outcome that surprised much of the journalistic and pundit class who long

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dismissed President Trump's insurgent and norm-breaking candidacy. It was an outcome that was no less perplexing in light of four decades of research on political communication. To take one example, the president flouted many long-established norms of political discourse and behavior, from dispensing with the "dog-whistle" (López, 2015) in favor of explicit racial appeals to bearing the full weight of skepticism from the professional press and political elites (Fridkin, Kenney, & Wintersieck, 2015). And, scholars of campaign effects will undoubtedly go searching for answers for how a Clinton campaign that led in every conceivable metric, from the volume of advertising and number of field offices to staffer expertise, came up short. This is not to say that political communication scholars did not have important pieces of the 2016 story. Lawrence and Boydston (2016) convincingly argue for the validity of our long-held theories and findings regarding the ways that journalists cover candidates. Scholars have demonstrated the intractability of epistemological problems in the context of politics (e.g., Southwell & Thorson, 2015). Researchers have detailed the hybrid media environment and degree to which strategic actors can set the agenda of the public and the press (e.g., Wells et al., 2016). Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes (2012) reveal the passionate depth of partisan feeling and show how it causally shapes political attitudes and ultimately vote choice.

Hochschild provides an explanation of the election that looks different from a lot of political communication literature, however. Arguing instead for the role of stories, identities, and emotions in politics, Hochschild's work joins a number of accounts produced in recent years and published in advance of the election that were markedly perceptive in forecasting the outcome. To help us understand this presidential election cycle, we read a number of these accounts in undergraduate classes at UNC's School of Media and Journalism over the past academic year. These works included Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment*—the topic of a recent *Political Communication* review symposium (see Wagner, 2017)—Jeffrey Berry and Sarah Sobieraj's *The Outrage Industry*, Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash*, Justin Gest's *The New Minority*, Melissa Harris-Lacewell's *Barbershops, Bibles, and BET*, Nicole Hemmer's *Messengers of the Right*, and J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, in addition to our primary focus here, Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*. These books explore phenomena ranging from rural consciousness (Cramer, 2016), the role of media in shaping people's emotions and identities (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013), and the frameworks people draw on to understand politics (Harris-Lacewell, 2010) to the rise of White radicalism (Gest, 2016) and the contours of Appalachian culture (Vance, 2016). While they do so from various disciplinary perspectives including political science, history, and sociology, what they share is a deep engagement with the lives of people as they experience, narrate, feel, reason about, and participate in politics.

In doing so, we believe that these works offer an important set of ideas about politics and methods for studying political life that political communication scholars can draw on to help us understand not only the 2016 election outcome, but the deeper currents of identity and culture that shape our contemporary moment. In the pages that follow, we pose the question of what we can learn analytically and empirically if we take the lessons of *Strangers in Their Own Land* and other recent books on U.S. politics seriously and adapted our research accordingly. In addition to noting the lack of field and interview-based studies that get scholars close to the actual contexts within which people experience politics (Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen, & Powers, 2015), to demonstrate gaps in our discipline we analyzed 123 articles utilizing content analysis published in *Political Communication* between the years 2003–2016 (Volumes 20[1] to 33[4]). We conclude by suggesting some avenues for political communication scholars to analyze the workings of political

media and identity, perceptions of cultural affinity and group status, ideas about who has, and should have, power in democracy, and narratives of moral worth in politics.

## Stories

Arlie Hochschild places *stories* at the center of her analysis of Tea Party activists in Louisiana. Her argument, echoed in the other books just mentioned, is that people craft and tell stories about politics and their role in it. These stories might not be empirically accurate (indeed, they often are not), but they are deeply felt, often lie behind political attitudes and action, and reflect, shape, and solidify political, social, and cultural identity. Across these books, readers cannot escape deep stories about self and society, moral and social worth, the deserving (and undeserving) poor and status of the American Dream, and the relationships among individuals, communities, and the state. Next, we document a few of the elements contained in what Hochschild calls the “deep story” of the Tea Party activists she studied.

## Status

As the opening quote of this essay reveals, at the heart of Hochschild’s findings is a “deep story” about White Americans’ declining place in society and how they are losing standing to others who are, in their estimation, unfairly jumping ahead in line. The White Americans Hochschild studied see themselves barely moving toward the American Dream, while undeserving others such as “blacks, women, immigrants, refugees, brown pelicans” (2016, p. 157) have cut ahead. White Tea Party activists saw themselves as part of a defined social group, defined in part in relation to these “underserving” others. This analysis resonates with Gest’s (2016), who through both qualitative and quantitative data finds that many working-class Whites perceive their own relative decline in social, cultural, and economic status compared to other groups, and even more their declining standing relative to their parents. Similarly, Tali Mendelberg (2016) argued the degree to which the resentment Cramer (2016) chronicled can be understood as anxiety over status.

## Race/Ethnicity

Indelibly linked to ideas about status is the notion of White identity. Racial and ethnic identity *requires* an “other” as a marker of difference, and in Hochschild’s book it is clear that Whites not only see themselves as a defined social group at America’s cultural center, they measure their own standing in relation to other groups, especially African-Americans. The images these White Americans had of African-Americans were three-fold, in part gleaned from media: (a) successful celebrities, (b) criminals, and c) on welfare. Because of their strong associations of African-Americans with criminality and welfare, Whites believed these “others” were not morally deserving of their place in line, unlike White Americans who were patiently waiting for their shot at the American Dream. For the Whites who Hochschild (as well as Gest and Cramer) studied, the idea of “hard work” in part serves as a racial marker; Whites portrayed African-Americans as not working and unfairly receiving governmental benefits. As Hochschild (2016, p. 147) argues, “Missing from the image of blacks in most of the minds of those I came to know was a man or woman standing patiently in line next to them waiting for a well-deserved reward.” Politics for these Tea Partiers is defined on White terms and, as the dominant majority, White perceptions of racial and ethnic “others” set the terms for *all* politics. As the

sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom (2016) argued, the first Black president won because of *White* stories about who he was: “White voters allowed Barack Obama because they allowed him to exist as a projection of themselves.”

### ***Economy***

Related were elements of the deep story regarding the economy. Specifically, working-class Whites were anxious about their hold on their economic position and their ability to achieve the American Dream. Hochschild notes that for these White, primarily older Americans, anxiety over the state of the economy and upward mobility is empirically grounded: It *has* become harder for these individuals as a group to make economic gains, and the recent recession has come particularly late in life for these individuals, precisely at the time when they were thinking about retirement. With their own economic stagnation, these individuals were particularly angered by those they perceived were “unworthy” and “cutting in line” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 145); in addition to African-Americans, immigrants and public employees were unfairly profiting off the taxes that these “deserving” White Americans paid. The idea of “hard work” as moral worth extended to contrasts between White laborers working with their hands and government bureaucrats and professionals working with their minds. This, in turn, was linked to their perception that the government does not work for them and rewards the “takers” while punishing the “makers” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 149), which in turn informs their negative attitudes about governmental regulation. Hochschild argues that the Tea Partiers focused on the public sector, and as such were generally unconcerned with and ignorant of the rise of the large commercial interests responsible for declines in many of their businesses and environmental quality of life. Indeed, these individuals saw governmental regulation harming the economy, while abetting their own economic decline.

### ***Cultural Marginalization***

While these White Americans grappled with their perceived decline in economic status, as poignant was their sense of lost cultural status. Gest (2016) tells a similar story, detailing the ways White, working-class Americans in Youngstown, Ohio (as well as White Londoners) no longer saw themselves at the center of their country’s cultural life, despite their perceived historic role in making their country great. Hochschild (2016, p. 144) reveals how her subjects saw themselves portrayed in the media as “ignorant,” “white trash,” and “bible-thumpers.” They see Hollywood liberals, liberal media, and even legacy journalists as looking down on them (see also Isenberg, 2016). In a world of economic stagnation, this adds insult to injury: “Their views about abortion, gay marriage, gender roles, race, guns, and the Confederate flag all were held up to ridicule in the national media as backward” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 221). This is also related to *demographic* decline among these White Tea Partiers, the perceived sense, and empirical fact, that as a group, these people are on the wane in America.

### ***Media***

Where do these elements of stories come from? As Hochschild extensively documents, in no small part from media, and in particular Fox News. This fits Berry and Sobieraj’s (2013) finding that Fox News provides conservatives with psychological comfort,

validation, and rhetorical ammunition that they can employ in their own lives. Hochschild (2016, p. 126) further documents how “as a powerful influence over the views of the people I came to know, Fox News stands next to industry, state government, church, and the regular media as an extra pillar of political culture all its own.... To some, Fox is family.” Hochschild finds that Fox literally defines politics for many of the Tea Party supporters that she lives among, telling people how to identify with one another and political parties and understand and *emotionally relate* to politics on issues ranging from governmental regulation to immigration. And, these individuals view other networks, such as CNN, as looking down on people such as them, un-objectively stating how these White Americans *should* feel about African-Americans, homosexuals, and immigrants.

### Going Forward

Into this context walks Donald Trump. Hochschild’s conclusion is that Trump gave people *hope*: hope for White, Christian cultural restoration, economic gains, social validation, and emotional well-being. Trump acknowledges, validates, and rhetorically celebrates these White strangers in their own land. This is what “Make America Great Again” means symbolically: restoring this group to their rightful economic, cultural, and symbolic place at the center of the country.

If this characterizes the worldview of Trump supporters, and the overlaps between Hochschild’s work and Cramer and Gest’s accounts in particular suggest that this “deep story” is correct, how can political communication scholars gain purchase over these contemporary political dynamics? We documented the manifest sources, methods, and codes utilized in 123 articles using quantitative or qualitative content analysis published in *Political Communication* during the years 2003–2016 in order to identify dominant approaches in the literature. Given the limited space of this article, we focus here on one significant subset of the literature that encompasses the primary methodological approach to analyzing media. Analyzing content analyses afforded us a purposive sampling of 39.5% of the total articles published in the journal during this time to identify approaches to media and politics that are underrepresented in political communication research. Given the centrality of media, and especially Fox News, to Hochschild’s account, it also enabled us to sketch some possible paths forward in light of this research. While *Political Communication* is not the sum of our literature, as our field’s flagship journal it is an important barometer of the state of research.

First, the field has an urgent need to diversify the sources that it considers in political communication research. Scholars are still oriented toward newspapers. Of the 123 articles, 51% ( $N = 63$ ) coded newspapers, and 23% ( $N = 28$ ) used them as their sole source of data (six of these articles used *The New York Times* and no other source). A much smaller percentage, 11% ( $N = 13$ ) utilized right-leaning media such as Fox News, the Drudge Report, and editorials in the *Wall Street Journal*. A paltry five articles (one article each in 2009, 2011, and 2012, and two in 2016) dealt specifically with Fox News. This comes despite the fact that Fox News is the most watched and lucrative cable news network (Pew Research, 2016) and it has outsized importance in shaping political identity, attitudes about government, and beliefs (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013; Hochschild, 2016). Conservative talk radio is also under-represented in content analyses ( $N = 3$ ), despite its power along similar lines (e.g., Scannell, 1991).

Second, in light of the books just discussed, political communication scholars have considerable room for growth in analyzing the development and expressions of group

identity in media and interpersonally. We found that 19% ( $N = 23$ ) of the content analyses in the data set dealt with identity issues in some way, and among these 10% ( $N = 12$ ) addressed national/regional identity, 3% ( $N = 4$ ) and 3% ( $N = 4$ ) addressed race and gender identity, respectively, 4% ( $N = 5$ ) religious identity, and .8% ( $N = 1$ ) addressed sexuality. Of the four articles that discussed race and ethnicity, two analyzed how whites perceive campaign appeals in the context of race (Krupnikov & Piston, 2015; Nteta & Schaffner, 2013). Entman (2013) used a frame analysis to determine whether the press blamed the same people for 9/11 as the George W. Bush administration. Only Johnson (2004) provided an explicit analysis of how racial identity is constructed and expressed by people through media on the order of Hochschild's fieldwork in her outstanding analysis of Los Angeles Black radio. Considering the lack of studies on race and ethnicity in general, itself a problem in the literature, it is not surprising that there were few studies that focused on White Americans, or any subset of White Americans, as an identity group.

Given the centrality of White, working-class, and religious identities in Hochschild's account (and Gest's) and Cramer's (2016) idea of rural identity, in addition to masculinity and gender (see Hochschild, 2016, pp. 147–148), we need more studies that explicitly take up questions of how these identities are articulated, made salient, maintained, and linked to partisanship and political issues, through media and interpersonally. For example, the recent attention across disciplines to partisan identity (e.g., Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002) and partisanship (Hayes, 2008) is welcome, but we know little about the ways partisan identity is constructed, communicated, and maintained, and how it is linked to race, perceptions of moral worth, and social status. Recent work that takes a more interpretative approach in analyzing differences in Democratic and Republican rhetoric and appeals to values (Arbour, 2014; Marietta, 2009; Neiman, Gonzalez, Wilkinson, Smith, & Hibbing, 2016) takes steps in this direction and can be extended in the future. We found only 10 articles that dealt with U.S. partisanship as an identity in our data set.

Future analyses into political identity especially should consider the role of ideological and identity media and interpersonal communication in constructing and maintaining perceptions of relative deprivation among social groups, as described in Cramer (2016), Hochschild (2016), and Gest (2016). In all of these books, narratives of social identity and economic status shape political attitudes, beliefs, and ultimately vote choice. We need more qualitative and quantitative studies that discursively analyze ideology in media and everyday life, along the lines of what Harris-Lacewell's (2010, p. 19) brilliant mixed-method study concludes: "For the individual and the group, ideology interprets truth, reduces complexity, links individual experiences to group narratives, identifies friends and foes, defines what is desirable, and provides a range of possible strategies for achieving desired outcomes." Future work can combine content analyses of narratives in conservative media with studies of how those stories are interpreted, challenged, or accepted by individuals on social media and in everyday life. Scholars can also draw inspiration from Gest's (2016) use of ethnographic methods to develop surveys that analyze perceived declines in social status.

Third, and related, we need to include a broader array of political subjects, actors, frames, and communicative styles as objects of analysis in our research. This includes the way various media outlets, political elites, and advocacy organizations portray governmental effectiveness, attribute responsibility for economic, social, and political ills, and make identity-based and emotional appeals. To take one example, given Hochschild's and Berry and Sobieraj's work, researchers utilizing content analysis could analyze a diverse array of media sources for how they portray who is deserving of governmental aid, who has power in government, and who benefits from government. And, scholars can analyze

how citizens themselves perceive government in the actual contexts where they express themselves. This is a large gap in the literature. Only eight (7%) of the studies in our data set coded for citizen (non-elite) assessment of political issues, culled from call-ins to a Black community radio show ( $N = 1$ ), letters to the editor ( $N = 2$ ), posts to an online forum ( $N = 2$ ), e-mails ( $N = 1$ ), online petitions ( $N = 1$ ), and face-to-face interpersonal conversation ( $N = 1$ ).

Some recent research articles broaden the conventional objects of analysis in political communication research. Berry and Sobieraj (2013) provide a typology for exploring outrage discourse in blogs, talk radio, and cable news. Schreiber (2010) analyzes how journalists portray the identity of feminist and conservative women's groups in terms of gender representation and ideology. Richardson and Franklin (2004) reveal widespread mistrust in the ability of either party to "fix" social problems and emotional partisanship in newspaper readers' letters to the editor. Westwood's (2015) work on small-group political discussions provides an example of utilizing content analysis to get at political meaning making among peers. Johnson (2004) analyzes how "community" is constructed by media outlets in times of crisis, which could be replicated among conservative outlets to examine how group boundaries are created, affirmed, and negotiated.

## Conclusion

We believe that the 2016 U.S. presidential election offers a clear challenge to political communication scholars. There is a set of pressing questions that the books discussed in this article only begin to help us answer, but that should be the purview of political communication scholars in the years ahead. Why do so many members of the public have little trust and faith in the legacy press, government, and democratic institutions? Why are the issues of epistemology, disinformation, and acceptance of scientific facts more problematic on the right rather than the left on things ranging from voter fraud to climate change? What lies behind the stunning resurgence of the White nationalist movement, aided and abetted by the Republican nominee? How does identification with particular social and cultural groups take shape? How do perceptions of status take root? Why and how do Americans come to perceive their economic and social lives in the ways they do? And, while we have a good grasp on the importance of partisanship, where do these identities, feelings, and passion stem from, how are they created and sustained, and why do they take the expressive forms that they do?

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