

12 The Media Are about Identity, Not Information

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“How can you tell straight news from opinion?” I ask. “By the *tone of voice*,” she explains. “Take Christiane Amanpour. She’ll be kneeling by a sick African child, or a bedraggled Indian, looking into the camera, and her voice is saying, ‘Something’s *wrong*. We have to *fix* it.’ Or worse, *we* caused the problem. She’s using that child to say, ‘Do something America.’ But that child’s problems aren’t our fault.”

This exchange took place between Berkeley sociologist Arlie Hochschild and a Tea Party supporter in Louisiana in the course of her fieldwork for the book *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016, 128). Hochschild uses the exchange to reveal how the conservatives she traveled among view the professional press as profoundly biased, with the notable exception of Fox News. The celebrated CNN international correspondent was implicitly telling this Tea Party supporter how to *feel* about global suffering, which the woman responded negatively to: “That’s *PC*. That’s what liberals want listeners like me to feel. I don’t feel like it. And what’s more, I don’t want to be told I’m a bad person if I don’t feel sorry for that child.” The social validation and release from liberal “feeling rules” is precisely why, to many of the individuals that Hochschild studies, “Fox is family.”

And it is why so many of these people were elated when President Trump came along and validated their identities as white Christian Americans, and affirmed their historical place at the center of American social, economic, and cultural life. Trump told stories about how these white Americans received the short end of the stick, a consequence of bad trade deals, porous borders, affirmative action, and welfare policies that rewarded undeserving African Americans and cosmopolitan Washington and cultural elites who sneered at flyover country. As Hochschild points out, Trump, along with Fox News, gave these strangers in their own land the hope that they would

be restored to their rightful place at the center of the nation, and provided a very real emotional release from the fetters of political correctness that dictated they respect people of color, lesbians and gays, and those of other faiths.

Many of these things are surprising in light of the standard stories journalists tell themselves about the role of their trade in American democracy. Journalists, and much of public discourse more broadly, posit that citizens are rational deliberators, weighing the information the media provides to make informed decisions at the polls according to the general interest, not the narrow concerns of parochial social groups. While most practicing or studying journalism would admit that this is an ideal rarely achieved, journalists, the foundations working to save journalism, and many scholars do see a public starved of quality information as a central issue in contemporary democracy. Even more, while their theories of democratic citizens are rarely made explicit, journalists and others concerned with the profession generally assume that citizens are autonomous and independent, somehow separate and apart from the internecine battles of partisanship in Washington, DC, and conflicts over social identity more broadly.

And yet, this Tea Party supporter seemingly cared little about receiving information. She saw Amanpour, a decorated journalist who has won eleven Emmy awards for television news, as *liberal*. She also seemingly rejected the very premise that a journalist should see an overseas humanitarian crisis as important for an American to care about or even as particularly newsworthy. Indeed, in the view of Tea Party members, Fox News was less about “information” than “family.” The metaphor is telling. A family provides a sense of identity, place, and belonging; emotional, social, and cultural support and security; and gives rise to political and social affiliations and beliefs.

The idea that Fox is “family” casts the role of media in social life in a new light, different from standard, informational accounts of journalism and media in America. While this Tea Party supporter described Fox in terms that emphasized a quite literal “living with” the network and compared its hosts to family members, the broader point is that the network shared an identity with her. As Hochschild argues, Tea Party supporters believe that the network’s personalities share the same “deep story” of political and social life, and therefore they learn from them “what to feel afraid, angry, and anxious about.”

While this account of media might look odd to a journalist or even a journalism scholar, it accords with much scholarship within political science. For over sixty years, political scientists and political communication scholars have consistently found that citizens know and often care little about politics. Citizens have little in the way of developed ideological frameworks for understanding politics or consistent policy preferences. As political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue in their 2016 book, *Democracy for Realists*, summarizing this literature, citizens do not rationally weigh policy information in the course of an election. They vote based on their social identities, or how they perceive themselves and others, their partisan identities, and their sense of the groups they believe the two political parties represent. As Donald Green, Bradley Palmquist, and Eric Schickler document in *Partisan Hearts and Minds* (2004), people perceive the Democratic Party as the party of the poor, working class, and people of color, and the Republican Party as the party of business, upper classes, and whites. Citizens come to perceive themselves in relation to these groups as they grow into their own social identities and partisan affiliations, especially through their family lives, and it largely shapes their lifelong political identities and ultimately vote choices.

Politics, then, is primarily an identity-based phenomenon. One way of thinking about it is akin to sports fandom, albeit with much higher stakes—citizens want their partisan and social group teams to be “winners” and the other teams to be “losers.” The political ideologies or policies at stake are largely unimportant for most Americans compared with the success of the teams they affiliate with—look no further than the way that the vast majority of Republicans in the electorate were unfazed by Trump’s social spending proposals on the campaign trail. When citizens tune in at all, the role of media is to provide a running account of a political, and often moral, contest, whether it is candidates vying on the campaign trail or the president battling adversaries in Congress. Citizens interpret and evaluate these contests and the media that provides stories about them through the lens of their own identities, and they especially understand politics in partisan terms, which at our contemporary moment accords with other social cleavages such as race and ethnicity. Legacy journalism conveys narratives about politics that shore up political team identification, such as being a Republican or a Democrat, helping people care about the wins and losses of their team. This is far more consequential in political life than substantive

information about things such as policy, which few people care about save from learning what their own team believes.

Meanwhile, people tend to believe the elites of their team over journalists, who play for no team and are therefore suspect. This is why scholars such as Jonathan Ladd (2011) have found that elite criticism of the press leads people to distrust journalism. Again, the sports analogy is apt—are you more likely to trust the star player on your team or the referee after a controversial call? And, in politics, facts are hard to determine, predicated on the work of many different institutions, and premised on interpretation, as scholars such as Lucas Graves (2016) have pointed out.

Despite these dynamics, journalists, a network of foundation funders, and academics alike generally see the profession of journalism in the narrow and ideal terms of providing quality information to rational, general-interest citizens fulfilling their solemn duty of making informed decisions at the polls. The ideal public is such a deep-rooted myth in the United States that efforts of civil repair following failures of democracy, such as electing someone dangerous to the highest office in the land, focus on someone or some thing such as media manipulation that leads democratic citizens astray through no fault of their own. The ability of the public to self-govern is never questioned.

Look no further than the dominant story coming out of the 2016 US presidential election campaign: the concern over “fake news.” Elite journalists, trade publications such as NiemanLabs and the *Columbia Journalism Review*, foundations such as Knight, and media scholars collectively raised their concerns about fake news to the level of a moral panic after Trump’s election. The idea of fake news being consequential for the election outcome not only lacks much in the way of empirical evidence and overlooks the identity-basis of politics; it recalls first-generation media theory, which saw powerful media messages as hypodermic needles that turned people fascist. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, many seemed to believe that voters were collectively duped into pulling the lever for the Republican by farcical stories of the Pope endorsing Donald Trump—instead of acknowledging that white cultural and social anxiety and racism lay at the root of the president’s appeal as the representative of a white political party (a claim for which there are mountains of evidence). In many ways, this makes perfect sense as the collective response of the industry and its academic interpreters to the election. It is the easier explanation, and one that

preserves the myth of the ideal democratic citizen, what Achen and Bartels (2016) call the “folk theory” of democracy. Even more, our field sees the world through the lens of media and information problems, not political problems. And, journalists’ tenuous hold on jurisdiction means that they and their networks of supporters have a lot to gain in re-establishing the basis for their own legitimacy and authority to produce credible accounts of the social and political world. Academics, meanwhile, gain access to mountains of grant money to tackle the problem of fake news.

It is both telling and sad that “fake news” was discussed after the election far more than identity and racism, sexism, or even partisanship, which were far more important factors in Donald Trump’s elevation to the presidency. As scholars such as Hochschild and Justin Gest, as well as survey evidence, tell us, it was the deep cultural anxiety that many whites feel over pluralistic, multicultural American society and their own standing in it that fueled Trump’s rise. Many whites fear changing demographics and the loss of their perceived, and deeply nostalgic, “American way of life” and their rightful place at the center of it. As historians continue to tell us, these are recurrent themes in our country since its founding and are, at root, whites as the dominant social group defining and debating the borders of civic incorporation: what *should* being an American mean, who *should* be able to be a citizen, who *should* be deserving of governmental assistance and equal protection under the law.

There is a simpler answer for Trump’s surprising victory than fake news, although it forces us to confront the fact that for most people politics is about identity, not rational decision-making. Although it seemed inconceivable to many coastal elites and academics, including myself, many people applauded Trump’s violations of the rules of respectful political discourse and his explicit racial appeals. For many whites, Trump’s message of security, law, and order resonated, especially the calls to close the border to Mexican immigrants, combat “Islamic extremism,” and crack down on Black Lives Matter protesters. Many of Trump’s supporters saw the potential for American cultural and economic renewal through white nationalism, and prayed for a return to the day when white Christian Americans could speak as they wished without the scourge of being accused of being racist, sexist, homophobic, or anti-Islamic. They simply wanted to “Make America Great Again” or, in the parlance of Trump’s race-baiting nationalist predecessor on the presidential campaign trail Pat Buchanan, “take their country

back”—and restore their place at the political, social, economic, and cultural center of the United States.

And it is no surprise that media outlets such as Fox News and the white nationalist Breitbart were highly influential during this election, precisely because they understand their role in terms of identity, not information. What is clear from Hochschild’s account, but also contemporary media dynamics more broadly, is that Fox News is the identity media outlet du jour not only for the Republican Party, but also whites more generally who perceive themselves as the victims of Christian persecution and reverse racism. It is the identity of being at the center of *their* nation’s history. Former senior Trump advisor, and current and former executive chairman of Breitbart, Stephen Bannon called the media the “opposition party” of the administration, but it is clear that this animus did not extend to Fox News, which enjoyed favored access to candidate and now President Trump. Fox’s appeal lies in the network’s willingness to explicitly entwine reporting and opinion in the service of Republican, and white, identity. For example, Hochschild finds that Tea Partiers perceive that they are asked to have sympathy for “oppressed blacks, dominated women, weary immigrants, closeted gays, desperate refugees....” And yet, for Tea Partiers, who perceive that they have suffered declines in social and economic status in recent years as a group, “it’s people like *you* who have made this country great.” This is part of the deep story of Tea Party members, and as Hochschild points out, this “deep story is also the Fox News deep story.”

This is not to say that information is not important. It is, especially information that journalists provide about matters that are not already politicized. It is to say that identity comes *prior* to information. Identity shapes epistemology. People filter their understandings of information through their political and social identities. Trump was likely the most factually-scrutinized candidate in American history (undoubtedly because he lied so much) and still, he hardly suffered at the ballot box: 90 percent of Republicans voted for Trump and 89 percent of Democrats voted for Clinton. We explain this through the lens of identity. In a world where partisan identity comes prior to information, fact-checks against one’s team fall on deaf ears. In a world where Republicans, in particular, see legacy journalism as biased against them and have spent eighty years building a conservative media infrastructure, Fox News becomes a safe redoubt to voice outrage. This identity-based account of media helps explain everything from the



stunning failure of journalistic scrutiny to impact the election and the credibility of Trump's lies to many of his supporters. Many citizens understand politics and accept information through the lens of partisan identity, and on the right, this has largely become unmoored from legacy journalism.

The failure to come to grips with a socially embedded public and an identity group-based democracy has placed significant limits on our ability to imagine a way forward for journalism and media in the Trump era. As Fox News and Breitbart have discovered, there is power in the claim of representing and working *for* particular publics, quite apart from any abstract claims to present the truth.

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