The Base, the Message, and the Truth: Construction of Social Worlds Amongst Trump Supporters and Tea Party Members

In the past decade, since the latter part of the 2008 presidential election, we have witnessed the increasing fears of conservative Americans about the loss of core American values, their morale outrage about a seemingly oppressive regime of political correctness, and their dismissal of the truth in favor of "authentic" lies. These Americans have found that there are others out there like them, and they have resonated with various messages that have tapped into their vague fears. Furthermore, mass media and social media have aided the promotion of these messages, allowing movements like the Tea Party and figures like Trump to gain popularity and power.

The rise to power of both the Tea Party Movement (TPM) and Trump are illustrative of the ways in which movements and figures gain and maintain enthusiastic supporters (a "base") who show a dedicated attachment to a 'Message,' regardless of what is the 'truth.' To analyze the social worlds constructed amongst Trump supporters and Tea Party members, we turn to two texts that scrutinize a similar American demographic. "Twitter, Trump, and the Base: A Shift to a New Form of Presidential Talk?" by Stolee and Caton is a linguistic-anthropological analysis of Twitter as a social media platform and of Donald's Trump use of Twitter as presidential talk. "Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of Movement" by Westermeyer is an anthropological study of the Tea Party Movement (TPM) that brings to light the ideology and 'figured worlds' of the TPM as well as discourses, symbols, and practices. How are the two social worlds described in each text? What is being circulated, what is the role of mass media and social media, and how do supporters interact with the 'Message' and with the truth? I argue that, in both cases, vague fears are being tapped into, which catalyzes the formation of an enthusiastic "base" that zealously supports a 'Message,' and social media provides a means to circulate that 'Message.'

The TPM came about during the 2008 presidential campaign, a time when many conservative Americans feared that Obama would be a threat to "American sensibilities" and founding principles, such as patriotism, responsibility, and morality (Westermeyer 124). CNBC reporter Rick Santelli's broadcast in early 2009, which expressed his anger toward federal legislation regarding the mortgage crisis, gave these conservatives a form of expression for their fears and anxieties. The speech drew on compelling themes such as personal responsibility, fairness, and patriotism. Furthermore, it tapped into the resentment of conservatives for paying taxes to be spent on "undeserving others" such as welfare recipients and public employees (Westermeyer 125).

Trump's rise in popularity was instigated by similar fears and moral outrage. Americans, fed up with a regime of political correctness and inauthentic politicians, were primed and ready for a "refreshingly candid" and forthright politician who would not censor his remarks and who would actually speak his mind (Westermeyer 157). They were ready to usher in a "new era of transparency in government" (Westermeyer 160). Trump was seen as "authentic" candidate because he spoke off the top of his head. As one supporter said, "He doesn't hold back. You get what he really believes in, even if everything that he says isn't what is the right thing exactly" (Westermeyer 160). Therefore, despite all the lies that Trump has spread during his presidency and all the messes that he has made, he has still maintained his popularity among his base.

The mass media and social media played a large role in the uprising of a movement, in the case of the Tea Party, and of a political figure, in the case of Trump. In both cases, people realized that there were many others out there who felt just like they did about the state of American politics. For the TPM, when conservatives first saw the Tea Party on television, they thought "wow, there are people out there like me" (Westermeyer 125). One person expressed his feelings of resonating with the images he saw on Fox News: "I felt that people were speaking for me. The people were echoing my sentiments" (Westermeyer 125). The spread of ideas, images, and messages, especially through Fox News, instigated people to form groups and communities of "like-minded 'patriots'" (Westermeyer 126) and to organize meetings and protests. The rise of the Tea Party transformed passive people into political actors. Through advertisements in local newspapers, as well as websites and Facebook pages, local-level Tea Party Groups (LTPGs) publicized meetings, during which they circulated information, reported on activities, and educated people, thus sustaining their movement's momentum.

Twitter, additionally, has allowed the Tea Party to thrive by giving users the ability to express potentially controversial views and for them to find other like-minded people who share similar views: "Twitter has allowed the Alt-Right, an ultra-right-wing movement mobilizing for a white supremacist political agent, to constitute a 'counterpublic' in the Twittersphere" (Stolee and Caton 151). Twitter has also served as an organizational tool, "able to organize millions of people across thousands of events and present a true challenge to public figures" (Stolee and Caton 152). Furthermore, Twitter feels personalized; tweets are personally and locally interpreted.

For Trump, Twitter was a key tool that aided the spread of his presidential message: "Trump masterfully exploited Twitter to spread his message and gain power" (Stolee and Caton 157). Stolee and Caton point to five characteristics of Twitter, which fostered Trump's rise to power: the 140 character limit of posts, the reverse chronological order of the feed, the retweet function, the anonymity of users, and "trolling" (Stolee and Caton 152-156). As per the first feature, Trump's "short, punchy" tweets show a certain sloppiness and carelessness, riddled with grammatical errors and false punctuation. They make Trump seem genuinely Trump; he doesn't try to censor his tweets or get other people's approval before posting them, thus confirming his "authenticity" to his base, as opposed to other politicians whose messages seem highly mediated. The second characteristic allows Trump to say what he wants without many consequences, because once a tweet has been picked up by the media, it has already disappeared down the feed. The third function, the retweet, is seen by Trump's base as a "great way to reach out to […] constituents and create a give-and-take" (Stolee and Caton 161).

Overall, Twitter has empowered Trump to spread lies, but in a way that has paradoxically helped him gain trust among his supporters, who envision him as "refreshingly candid" and more authentic than other politicians. The fast paced, instantaneous nature of Twitter enables Trump's falsehoods to get buried and allows the president to express his views in an "uninhibited" manner without repercussions. Trump doesn't have to worry about whether people will fact-check his statements or critique his views because once his tweets have been examined, his supporters will have "already moved on to his next tweet on the next issue of the moment." Twitter, therefore, has ushered in a new presidential rhetoric of political incorrectness, sloppiness, and immediacy.

In both texts, social media has enabled the spread of a 'Message.' For Trump, that message is "Make America Great Again." Trump spreads ideas along the lines of 'we need to

help the American working class', 'we can't say anything anymore because of political correctness', and 'our democratic values are being encroached upon.' The Tea Party promotes a similar message, but with more of an emphasis on the "firm boundaries established in the Constitution" and the "moral examples set by the nation's founders and patriotic accounts of American history" (Westermeyer 126). Whereas Trump is far removed from history, to the point where his own tweets do not align with his previous statements (his own personal history), the TPM is extremely attached to history and would like to revert back to a former America. Furthermore, another distinction is that the Tea Party advertises the message that 'we need to take action,' 'we need to do something,' whereas the same call to action does not apply to Trump supporters. Nevertheless, in both cases, the Message is not actually related to the factual 'truth'. In fact, the Message can even contradict the truth. The Message, simply put, is the authoritative word – a decree that supporters blindly follow, that they do not question, for to do so would be akin to questioning the word of God.

The 'Message,' for both Trump and the Tea party, has cultivated a "base" of fervent supporters who blatantly support someone (a figure) or something (a movement) regardless of the truth. As long as a statement they come across is 'on message,' it doesn't matter whether or not that statement is 'true.' The ground against which the truth is verified is, therefore, the 'Message.' This is clearly evident in the way that Trump supporters dismiss his lies. Trump could say one thing one day and say the exact opposite the next. He could carelessly lie: "Trump gets things wrong all the time, pointlessly, about almost everything, and almost never corrects himself. Even if he's not intentionally lying, he's habitually erring" (McGranahan 244). Or, he could say something completely false: "I won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally" (McGranahan 245). For his supporters, these lies do not matter; Trump's base are guided not by objectivity but by emotion, by vague fears, and by moral outrage, and they see Trump as standing up for their ideas. The Tea Party, like Trump, has also spread falsehoods, such as conspiracy theories that its members unwaveringly believe, theories supported by "information gleaned from the Internet" (Westermeyer 131). The untruthfulness of conspiracy conspiracies stems from the fact they assume total coherence; they are formed from disparate pieces of information being connected in a certain way to make it seem like events are orchestrated, like there is someone 'pulling the strings.'

Now, we turn to the question of what is being circulated in each text in order to highlight the similarities in the social worlds described by each author. Firstly, we see the circulation of fear: fear of immigrants, of the 'Other,' of the loss of American values, of a regime of political correctness, and so on. The TPM they harbor "inchoate fears toward specific threats and targets" and thus they continuously prepare for and protect themselves against perceived threats (Westermeyer 129). For the Tea Party, the circulation of fear is intimately related to the circulation of images: "fear merged with compelling images of patriotism from American history" (Westermeyer 124). Fear is also tied to the Constitution; in other words, the perceived loss of constitutional values serves as the basis of fear for Tea Party members. Amongst Trump supporters, fear is provoked by a "prevailing sense of persecution created by a culture of political correctness and increasingly progressive social values that seem to be both forgetting and silencing them" (Stolee and Caton 162-163). The government has let them down, they are vulnerable, they are forgotten; they are fearful of what will happen to them and thus they need to take back America.

Second, interpretive frames for political events are circulated in both texts. The Tea Party's reaction to Agenda 21, a United Nations-sponsored plan for sustainable development, is illustrative of how interpretive frames function for the Tea Party. The TPM constructed a "narrative of Agenda 21 as an international conspiracy to deprive America of its sovereignty" (Westermeyer 130). They framed it as an "effort to take over their picturesque southern town" (Westermeyer 130). These interpretive frames are circulated quickly and widely: "the circulation of and credibility given to the fear of Agenda 21 by Tea Party members in local groups helped propel the issue into the national conservative political consciousness" (Westermeyer 131). Overall, the Tea Party interprets events based on the Constitution: "they used the Constitution as a lens to evaluate government programs, people, and situations" (Westermeyer 127). For Trump supporters, their interpretive frame is based off of Trump's tweets. Trump instantaneously reacts to events on Twitter, so his supporters can easily follow his thinking and they can react to and interpret events in real time along with their president.

Finally, symbols and identities are circulated, which is mainly seen in "Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of Movement." The article describes how some Tea Party members dressed in Revolutionary-era attire for public events to illustrate their attachment to American history. They were "attempting to use symbols to revive forgotten ideas and themes they felt were crucial to the nation's greatness" (Westermeyer 127). These symbols represented the founding principles, and they visually evoked a forgotten era. Additionally, Tea Party members developed identities as a "certain kind of conservative" (Westermeyer 132). These "consistent political identities," locally fashioned, were shared across "space and time," continually strengthened and reinforced, thus helping to maintain the movement's momentum (Westermeyer 122).

There is a large amount of overlap between the two texts in terms of how both Trump and the TPM rose to power, the characteristics of their "base," the elements circulated among the base, and the authority of the Message. However, the authors have very differently analyzed the different social worlds in each text. In "Twitter, Trump, and the Base," the authors' focus is on the characteristics of Twitter and whether or not the platform is "democratic." The analysis of Trump is based mostly within the framework Twitter, which means that we are limited in understanding other aspects of Trump and his base, such as how supporters interact in the real world, how they circulate information amongst themselves, and whether they form movements and organize protests. In "Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of Movement," the focus is not on social media but on the movement itself. Therefore, we see an analysis of social media only in relation to how it helped the Tea Party gain power and maintain momentum. The Tea Party article is thus more comprehensive in its description of a base, focusing on how members of the base interact with each other, rather than just how they interact with their leaders.

In "Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of Movement," there is a greater focus on mass media than on social media, although this may be simply due to the time frame in which the article was written. The author places emphasis on a single event, Santelli's television broadcast, which catalyzed a movement. The other uses of media in the article are related to the spread of information among Tea Party members and the organizing of meetings and protests. There is no analysis of Twitter or other social media as a way to interact with like-minded people online. On the other hand, "Twitter, Trump, and the Base" puts much focus on social media. The authors do not point to one single event that sparked an uprising to power, but rather they point to a single platform, Twitter, as the virtual place

where Trump grew in popularity. Therefore, Westermeyer's article is more event-focused, where mass media aids the spread of messages, while Stolee and Caton's article is more place-focused (that place is virtual), where social media is the origin of messages.

One of the main limitations of "Twitter, Trump, and the Base" is that it does not address the following question: what makes some people so extreme that they become part of the Tea Party, rather than just a Trump supporter? While this question may have been out of the scope of the text, it would have been insightful to look into because there is a lot of overlap between the messages circulated amongst both Trump supporters and Tea Party members. If people resonate with Trump's message, why do they not find a similar connection to the Tea Party's message? "Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of Movement," on the other hand, is limited in its analysis of how social media contributed to the success of the TPM. The author could have done a more thorough investigation of how social media, and not just mass media, functioned in the context of the Tea Party.

"Twitter, Trump, and the Base" and "Local Tea Party Groups and the Vibrancy of Movement" are two insightful texts that bring to light the ideologies of two groups of people, Trump supporters and Tea Party members. Both groups consist of people who were relieved to find that there were others like them when someone spoke up for their ideas and gave a voice to their moral outrage. These people were fed up with the state of American politics: political insiders, political correctness, inauthenticity, and the elite. When Trump began to spread his message on Twitter, conservative Americans were ready for a leader seemingly on the outside, someone who spoke his mind; they didn't care whether or not he spoke the truth. When conservatives heard Rick Santelli's broadcast, they were eager to embrace founding principles, to return to the Constitution, and to have an old fashioned Tea Party. In both cases, vague fears are being tapped into, which catalyzes the formation of an enthusiastic "base" that zealously supports a 'Message,' and social media provides a means to circulate that 'Message.' The 'Message' is the ground against which the truth is verified is, which means that factual, objective truth is irrelevant. We are thus moving towards a paradoxical political era of authentic lying and of messages that do not appear as messages.

Works Cited

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