

Truth as Shibboleth in the multimedia arena of populist politics

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Abstract

It is a common belief that politicians lie. To some extent, that criticism is probably due to politicians saying things that their opponents dislike. It does not have to be lies in the crude sense of incorrect facts. Rather, controversial proposals, ideological values, partial interpretations. Even so, it has drawn attention among die-hard critics that President Donald Trump lies so much and so shamelessly and in so many forms: non-facts, wild exaggerations, and freewheeling imaginations. It has also surprised that Trump's supporters do not seem to mind his lies. One reason for this lack of outrage may be that the president's supporters actually see his statements as factually accurate. Another explanation (which in turn does not exclude the "first") could be that Trump's "alternative facts" serve the same function as his slogan "Make America Great Again" – they become shibboleths that signal the group's cohesion vis-à-vis other groups. That would mean that truthfulness is subordinate to Trump's importance as a politician.

In this paper I will discuss Trump's rhetoric in terms of a mediated spectacle, a form of ritual arena similar to American football (cf. Führer 2020), where an emotional audience shows a cultic loyalty to its tribe (the home team) in a mediated process of immersive participation with strong elements of aggression and violence. Here we see a parallel to Trump's personality-centered and emotion-driven arena politics (via mass meetings and a large flock of followers on Twitter). Central to this revival interplay between choir and leader is the mobilizing function of language and other sensory and semiotic resources, not their truth function in the usual sense of the word as faithfulness to empirical reality. Actually, there is only room for a *Truth Claim* and it is not about truth but about trust: trust in one's own leader and one's own team.

Keywords

Donald Trump, Truth, Trust, Pathos, Enargeia

Bio

Lisa Källström, holds a PhD in rhetoric from Lund University and is current employed at Södertörn university. Her recent projects "Putte och Pippi i världen" (with Petra Bäni Rigler) and "Pippi beyond the border" (with Ines Soldwisch) are granted research funding (from Ridderstad versus Baltic Sea Foundation).

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