



# Recontextualising partisan outrage online: analysing the public negotiation of Trump support among American conservatives in 2016

Anthony Kelly<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article conceptualises the role of audience agency in the performance of American conservative identities within a hybridised outrage media ecology. Audience agency has been under-theorised in the study of outrage media through an emphasis on outrage as a rhetorical strategy of commercial media institutions. Relatively little has been said about the outrage discourse of audiences. This coincides with a tendency to consider online political talk as transparent and "earnest," thereby failing to recognise the multi-vocality, dynamism, and ambivalence—i.e., performativity—of online user-generated discourse. I argue the concept of recontextualisation offers a means of addressing these shortcomings. I demonstrate this by analysing how the users of the American right-wing partisan media website TheBlaze.com publicly negotiated support for Donald Trump in a below-the-line comment field during the 2016 US presidential election. These processes are situated with respect to the contested, dynamic, and creative construction of partisan identities in the contemporary United States.

**Keywords** Affective polarisation · American conservatism · Hybrid media systems · Identity · Online outrage · Performance · Recontextualisation · Social media · Traditional media · User-generated discourse

## 1 Introduction

This article analyses the public negotiation of support for Donald Trump among American conservatives during the 2016 US presidential election. In so doing, it conceptualises online political talk as a mode of political performance. President Trump's election was a result that few commentators predicted and indeed was viewed by many as an unimaginable outcome (Martin and Krause-Jensen 2017). His election has nonetheless created a new drive to scrutinise the content and articulation of American conservative identity amongst scholars of American politics, particularly as this relates to matters of race, gender, geography, and religion (Hanson et al. 2019; Kreiss et al. 2017). This new interest in the form and dynamics of American conservatism has foregrounded the relation between affective polarisation and the formation of American partisan identities (Iyengar et al. 2019; Mason 2018). Trump's election has likewise underlined the important role played by the mediation of partisan

outrage in shaping negative attitudes towards the opposition and the stereotyping behaviours of partisans (Abramowitz and Webster 2018; Mason 2018). Empirically, in spite of the growing interest in contemporary American conservatism, particularly as this relates to the Trump presidency, there are still only limited treatments of the controversies that existed around Trump's 2016 candidacy among conservatives.

My contention here is that the public negotiation of Trump support in 2016 offers a compelling case study in how American conservative identities have been contested within a hybridised outrage media ecology. Outrage media operate by saliently marking the boundaries between partisan in-groups and out-groups (Berry and Sobieraj 2013). In a hybrid media system, however, users of newer digital media maintain interactive and frequently competitive relations with traditional media and political elites (Chadwick 2017). This permits an active and potentially critical engagement with the representations of institutional media. At the same time, media discourse can serve as a powerful resource for politically significant behaviours (Chadwick et al. 2018). Beyond questions of the virality of populist rhetoric (Gerbaudo 2018), there are urgent considerations to be made in terms of the symbiotic linkages between online incivility and both online and offline practices of political engagement and

✉ Anthony Kelly  
a.p.kelly1@lse.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

activism (Poell and van Dijk 2017). These conditions have substantial social and political implications, encompassing not only the impact of “partyism” on modern democracies (Westwood et al. 2018) but also the entrenchment of out-group animosity in the context of protest movements through the recycling of online discourse (Chan et al. 2019). A qualitative examination of audience responses to media outrage will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these processes.

In order to explore this topic, I conduct a constructionist thematic analysis of 5288 user-generated “below-the-line” (Graham and Wright 2015) comments posted to the conservative news and opinion website TheBlaze.com over a 6-month period preceding and following the November 2016 election. In so doing, I examine the role(s) played by recursive practices of recontextualisation (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Perrino 2017) in the (re)articulation of polarised political identities in the US today. Importantly, through my focus on the public performance of self/other distinctions, my analysis distinguishes between attitudes and discourse. Thus, whilst recognising discourse as socially constitutive, I nonetheless follow Hedrick et al. (2018) in reflecting on the potential “ambivalence” (Phillips and Milner 2018) of online user-generated content, critically addressing a tendency among scholars to focus on the transparency and “earnestness” of online political talk. Instead, I write from a perspective which recognises its multi-vocality, dynamism, and ambivalence—i.e., its performativity (Bauman and Briggs 1990). I argue the concept of recontextualisation offers a powerful means of assessing this performativity, whilst helping to address a number of theoretical, methodological, and empirical shortcomings in the existing literature on outrage media and affective polarisation.

## 2 Right-wing outrage, hybrid news media, and social identity

Although the election of Donald Trump as US President creates the backdrop for my research, it is important to note at the outset that these current conditions are not exactly new. On the contrary, the rise to national prominence of “radio priest” Father Charles Coughlin during the 1930s serves as a potent reminder that neither media outrage nor right-wing populism are novel phenomena in the US context (Catalano 2020). Nevertheless, the “toxic alchemy of technology and politics” (Ong and Cabañes 2019) that characterises the current era is certainly distinct in terms of its magnitude. It is also something that has been taking shape for quite some time. Over the course of the past several decades, for example, partisan media that seek to elicit audience outrage have had an increasingly powerful influence on American politics and society (Berry and Sobieraj 2013; Rao and Haina

2017). Whilst it is well established that partisan media prime partisan group identities (Levendusky 2013), outrage-based media have been defined by their notable propensity to delegitimize political opponents and opposing viewpoints as a commercial strategy (Sobieraj et al. 2013). The definition of outrage established by Berry and Sobieraj (2013) focused largely on institutional media. Here, I problematise this definition in terms of the contemporary prevalence of online user-generated discourse.

### 2.1 Outrage in a hybrid media system

Outrage media are notable in the extent to which they incorporate highly dramatised, sensationalistic, and misleading formulations of the self/other distinction in the form of outrage discourse (Berry and Sobieraj 2013). This goes beyond the denigration of opposing partisans. Importantly, research on mediated partisanship has highlighted how antagonisms between mainstream and partisan media are also discursively constructed as a rhetorical strategy by media figures (Arceneaux et al. 2012). This draws attention to a prominent tendency among populist figures to characterise mainstream media in antagonistic terms (Haller and Holt 2019). Such strategies have been associated with the propagation of perceptions of hostile media bias (Hansen and Kim 2011) and oppositional media hostility (Arceneaux et al. 2012), with distinct implications in terms of how partisan media audiences perceive political consensus (Schulz et al. 2020). In the domain of outrage, social identity is a fundamental factor in understanding the relation between media and populism (Schulz et al. 2020), pointing to the powerful relations that link media and their audiences.

But outrage can also be user-generated. Whilst Berry and Sobieraj (2013) conceptualised outrage as a commercial strategy, these genres of discourse acquire a new relevance in the context of media that increasingly feature mechanisms for user participation. The notion of a hybrid media system, for example, takes media scholarship from a view of media dominated by logics of transmission and reception to one that is animated by logics of circulation, recirculation, and negotiation (Chadwick 2017). By presenting outrage as a predominantly commercial strategy, Berry and Sobieraj’s model focused to a large extent on the outputs of institutional media (e.g., radio, cable television, but also blogs). Whilst they did focus on political blogs, the growing prevalence of participatory formats indicates a need to reflect on how outrage and incivility function in an online environment characterised by hybrid media logics. More recent research has examined the incidence of outrage in user-generated media (e.g., Middaugh 2019; Rao and Haina 2017). By permitting audiences to voice public (re)alignments with outrageous characterisations of political opposition through techniques of news sharing,

citation, and commentary (Chadwick et al. 2018), hybrid news media present opportunities to challenge the partisan oppositions performed by institutional media.

## 2.2 Media as resources for audience outrage

In a hybrid media system, publics may sometimes occupy the same participatory environments as political and media elites (Chadwick et al. 2015). So-called “below-the-line” (Graham and Wright 2015) comment fields are one such point of integration of elite and public discourse, constituting an important venue for internet-mediated political discussion in the 2016 election (Yacubov and Rossini 2020). They are, however, viewed somewhat ambivalently: on one hand viewed as a potential space for deliberation (Dahlberg 2011), they have also been associated with concerns regarding the implications of incivility and likemindedness for practices of online political talk among Americans (Hmielowski et al. 2014; Sunstein 2018). This has a bearing on online engagements with outrage media. In terms of their social and political relevance, Sobieraj et al. (2013) looked to the culture of avoidance that has long been seen to characterise American political talk in face-to-face contexts (Eliasoph 1998), arguing that engagement with outrage media may allow audiences to mitigate the risk of social stigmatisation by allowing audiences to engage in new kinds of political conversation. The fear of social stigma has more recently been conceptualised with respect to online discourse (Schwarz and Shani 2016).

A significant proportion of the existing work on affective polarisation in the US takes a quantitative approach to seeking out causal relations between media and polarisation (Iyengar et al. 2019). However, media can also fruitfully be viewed as resources for audience conversation rather than merely as the source of direct effects. For example, Chadwick et al. (2018) have proposed a media-as-resources approach to account for the ways in which audiences draw on media content in order to participate in “politically significant behaviours” via social media. Whilst Chadwick et al. (2018) examine information quality, research on disinformation indicates that identity is also an important consideration (Ong and Cabañes 2019). Indeed, such resources may also include “recognised figures of personhood”—i.e., images of social personae or identities—which audiences encounter through media discourse (Koven 2015). A focus on the relevance of social identity also resonates in important ways with the model of affective polarisation that has become increasingly prominent in American political science (Iyengar et al. 2019). Thus, if media can be seen to provide resources for politically significant behaviours, it follows that this can include the production of the self/other distinctions that typify outrage media.

## 3 Contesting mass-mediated images of personhood through practices of recontextualisation

Due to an emphasis on the commercial strategies of media institutions, audience agency is under-recognised in the study of outrage media. Taking this into account, my research contributes to a body of work that seeks to conceptualise outrage in terms of user agency. Here, I argue the concept of recontextualisation (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Perrino 2017) can provide a theoretical mechanism for examining the iterative relation between user-generated content and the discourse of traditional media and political elites within a hybridised outrage media ecology. Whilst recontextualisation was initially articulated in the field of performance studies more than thirty years ago, it has more recently been demonstrated to be relevant to the study of online user-generated discourse (see Marques and Koven 2017; Perrino 2017; Rymes 2012). I focus on practices of recontextualisation within the discursive spaces of online partisan media in order to get a sense of the points of acceptance and resistance that typify audience engagement with partisan media representations of in-groups and out-groups.

Recontextualisation usefully can be employed as a tool for examining how audiences creatively engage with various discursive resources in the public negotiation of self/other distinctions. It also provides a framework for thinking about their dialectical relation with wider modes of political engagement. With respect to more traditional media, Agha (2007) argued that media representations make “semiotically analogous images of self-available to many persons” by establishing mediated participation frameworks. Such mass-mediated images of personhood have been referred to variously as voices (Bakhtin 1981), characterological figures (Agha 2005), or social personae (Keane 1999). Here, I argue that mediated images of personhood may be recursively sedimented as cultural forms through iterative acts of recontextualisation, which entails the disembedding and re-embedding of stretches of discourse in new discursive contexts, creating opportunities for the transformation of their form and meaning (Wu et al. 2016).

By creating “sediments” of signification (Anisin 2017), recontextualisation plays a crucial role in the articulation of politicised collective identities (Perrino 2018). In this sense, participatory frameworks enable audiences to contest and (re)negotiate the boundaries of collective identities in online user-generated discourse. Although the concept of recontextualisation has not yet been applied to the study of outrage media, existing research has demonstrated its capacity to serve as a powerful tool for analysing

creative processes of identification, particularly the performance of identity in online media (e.g., De Fina and Gore 2017). Whilst internet and social media technologies have been associated with everyday forms of linguistic creativity (Vásquez and Creel 2017), research also reveals how that creativity can be deployed with malevolent intent to create communities of exclusion (de Saint Laurent et al. 2020). My contention here is that recontextualisation provides a framework for exploring these digitally mediated forms of exclusion in the contested production of American conservatism. This article presents a qualitative account of these processes of identification in the context of American online political talk through a focus on one side of the polarised political culture in the US.

## 4 Methods and data

In order better to understand how audiences creatively contest mediated representations of personhood through practices of recontextualisation, it is important to examine the kinds of conversations in which people are actually engaging. In this article, I focus my attention on online political talk in user-generated below-the-line commentary, taking TheBlaze.com as a case study.

Originally a venture of the conservative media figure Glenn Beck's production company, Mercury Radio Arts, TheBlaze is situated within an evolving right-wing media ecosystem which amplifies outrage. It is typified by a tendency prominent among populist figures to characterise mainstream media in antagonistic terms (Arceneaux et al. 2012; Haller and Holt 2019). Indeed, Jutel (2013) identifies the site's founder, Glenn Beck, as a major proponent of what Laclau (2005) termed "the antagonistic division of the social field." Beck achieved prominence via his nationally syndicated talk radio show and, from 2009, as the host of his self-titled Fox News Channel show. Beck has been a contentious figure. After he referred to President Barack Obama as a "racist with a deep-seated hatred of white people and white culture" (Kavanaugh 2009), Beck's show was subjected to an advertising boycott orchestrated by left-wing activists. Beck eventually departed Fox News Channel in 2011 to launch his eponymous internet television project, GBTV. After a number of consolidations, GBTV became TheBlaze in 2012, integrating with TheBlaze.com, which had been launched in 2010, creating a unified multi-platform media company led by Beck.

Although it has been argued that Beck's specific brand of populism laid the groundwork for Trump's presidency (Young 2019), Beck was a prominent voice against Trump during and after the 2016 US presidential election—a stance which saw Beck become the target of audience outrage through forms of attack usually reserved for political

out-groups. Nevertheless, Beck would later come out in support of President Trump in May 2018, publicly stating he would support Trump's 2020 re-election bid whilst donning a red "Make America Great Again" hat. This revision of Beck's stance has specifically been related by some commentators to declining viewership and difficult financial conditions that challenged the viability of TheBlaze as a media outlet (Gallagher 2018). Indeed, TheBlaze would in December 2018 be merged with another conservative media outlet, CRTV, led by erstwhile "NeverTrump" conservative commentator, Mark Levin, who had himself eventually expressed support for Trump after he received the official nomination as the Republican party candidate in 2016.

Against the backdrop of these transformations and realignments, my data illuminate the manner in which TheBlaze served as a space of contestation in 2016, providing a snapshot of a media space in transition at that pivotal historical moment. My data consist of a corpus of 5,288 user-generated comments drawn from a sample of articles posted to TheBlaze.com during a six-month period from July 2016 until January 2017. For ethical reasons, all empirical examples drawn from the data have had usernames removed. In the analysis that follows, excerpts are reproduced verbatim—with no correction for spelling, grammar, or punctuation—in order to "retain the specificity of textual communication" (Gibson and Trnka 2020). These decisions have ethical implications that are not discussed here, but it is important to note that my approach was framed by the ethical guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al. 2020). My analysis centres largely on controversies surrounding Beck's stance which, by extension, was frequently claimed to characterise the editorial position of TheBlaze.

I employ the method of constructionist thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), which focuses on the sociocultural contextualisation of discourse. Through my focus on the public performance of self/other distinctions, my analysis distinguishes between attitudes and discourse. That is, I focus on the performance of partisan oppositions through user-generated content, without making any claims as to the authenticity of the positions that may underlie them. I thus follow Hedrick et al. (2018) in problematising the assumption of an "earnest internet," orienting instead towards the potential "ambivalence" of online engagement (Phillips and Milner 2018). Constructionist thematic analysis is a useful tool in this regard, insofar as it does not construe people's talk as "a transparent window on their world" (Braun and Clarke 2006).

This paper is thus an examination of how online partisan media users talk about political identity and difference in user-generated below-the-line commentary, with a particular focus on how commenters discursively engage with and/or challenge right-wing discourses of outrage online. Although my arguments do not seek to claim broad generalisability,

insofar as they are based on the qualitative analysis of a single case, they do offer a perspective on the complex dynamics through which categories of self and other are discursively constituted in a particular context. In that regard, with respect to the mediated cultivation of broad-ranging partisan antagonisms, my approach is motivated by the argument that qualitative analyses of this kind can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of wider right-wing partisan media ecologies (Faris et al. 2017). Such approaches become increasingly meaningful at a time of entrenched partisan animosities.

## 5 Renegotiating polarised political identities in the US

Taking TheBlaze.com as a case study, I here employ the concept of recontextualisation as a framework for examining three particular dimensions of audience engagement with the discourse of political and media elites: how self/other distinctions are given voice orthographically in digitally-mediated discourse, how Glenn Beck's positioning as a conservative is contested by commenters, and how the media choice of users is classified by commenters as a mode of political action. Although they are distinguished here for the purposes of my analysis, I see these as three interrelated elements of the same performative processes that typify user-generated responses to media representations. Whilst partisanship amongst media elites may have distinct foundations and motivations when compared with the partisanship of publics, media figures and audience "producers" (Bruns 2016) can nevertheless each draw on similar cultural resources in articulating self/other distinctions. Here, I focus on a variety of ways in which a hybridised outrage media audience openly contested those representations in their online political talk during the 2016 election.

### 5.1 Giving voice to identity/alterity distinctions through text

To begin my empirical discussion, I first look to the linguistic and textual form of my data. As noted earlier, the forms of linguistic creativity specific to digital textuality have a particular relevance when studying the performance of self/other distinctions. For example, Twitter has been characterised as a "vernacular site of social practice" and tweets as an example of talk that takes place in under-regulated space of orthographic linguistic habits (Squires and Iorio 2014). Processes of recontextualisation are here implicated in a number of ways. With reference to the participatory spaces of social media, for instance, Androutsopoulos (2011) has argued that "'old' vernaculars are recontextualised to index lifestyles and associated social types," whilst "'new' digital

vernaculars may index a range of political, cultural or aesthetic orientations." In this view, digital vernaculars are contrasted with standard orthographic forms. In below-the-line comment fields, the recontextualisation and expression of outrage by commenting users is open to creative use of orthography in ways that institutional media outputs frequently are not.

What kinds of novel practices of linguistic creativity characterise these spaces? The use of the portmanteau is a central feature of an emerging digital vernacular in computer-mediated communication. One of the most important ways in which speakers display an outrageous rhetorical style is through the use of name-calling, targeted at political parties, politicians, and partisans alike. My data are marked by partisan name-calling through the creative use of portmanteau terms and other forms of jargon. Hossain et al. (2018) refer to this phenomenon as "creative political slang," defined as "a recently-coined, non-standard word that conveys a positive or negative attitude towards a person, a group of people, an institution, or an issue that is the subject of discussion in political discourse."

Throughout my sample appear a variety of references to Obummer, Dimocrats, Hitlery amongst others. These terms have a narrative complexity of their own, condensing forms of commentary that simultaneously reference identities and modes of character. They also appear alongside an array of conspiratorial and polarising claims, including the assertion that the purported Russian hacking of the 2016 US presidential election was merely continuing work already being carried out by the Clintons and the Democratic Party. However, the following excerpt features one of the more prominent portmanteau insults directed at the liberal left:

People are energized to reclaim their country from the barbarians that have controlled it. The carrier politicians who think they, and they alone run the country, along with then libtards who assumed they could simply change this country into just another third world socialist crap heap, without the people having anything to say about it.

The term "libtards" has a vibrant social life beyond the context of this particular data sample. Ebner (2019) highlights how, in the US context, libtard is a "derogatory term used by the Alt-Right—combining the words liberal and retard—to describe left leaning liberals" (2019, p. 169). Whilst Hossain et al. (2018) refer to the term as a form of creative political slang, Gao et al. (2017) classify it as a hate slur term in their analysis of hate speech on Twitter following the 2016 US presidential election. Shin and Doyle (2018) have related the use of the term to judgments regarding group identities in online political discourse.

In the context of online user-generated discourse, it is clear that orthography has become an important mechanism

of not only expression but also of resistance. Modifications to the shape of text also perform important recontextualising functions. As Sobieraj and Berry (2011) noted of text-based communication, for example, “the deliberate use of uppercase letters, multiple exclamation points, enlarged text, and so on” constitutes “shouting”—a form of meaning-making that has been sedimented through repetition. The following comment demonstrates the deployment of these expressive modes of formatting:

When you mimic like parrots and spout the Leftist terminology (such as “fascist”) when such terms do not apply in the least, and intensely protest THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE of this country as far as the results of the election, you expose to all just how out of touch you really are. Donald Trump is not even in office, and yet these lunatics are accusing the man of complete nonsense. Where were you when Obama and the DemORATS were passing unConstitutional legislation and executive orders to bypass Congress?

As argued above, “below-the-line” comment fields are one point of integration of elite and public discourse. Whilst the structure of below-the-line comment fields plots out the key distinction between media and public, participants can draw on digital vernacular practices in expressing their agency as producers. These practices distinguish the discourse of users from the standardised and regimented discourse of journalists and institutional media, even whilst users cite media content as resources in their responses.

At the same time, these digital vernacular forms are deployed in the performance of a specifically conservative vision of what constitutes legitimate political action and identification, as seen in this comment regarding the planned Women’s March on Washington, which eventually took place the day after President Trump’s inauguration:

So let them protest peacefully. Cover it once and NO more. Quit covering the tantrums, protests, and bullying agenda we voted out over and over. Start covering what the American people voted were important to us Now.

In this comment, the legitimacy of peaceful protest appears to be accepted at least to some extent. However, the comment goes on to exhort the media to “Cover it once and NO more.” Whilst the protestors may be entitled to their right to free assembly, the comment asserts the media should not be covering it. Rather, they should be giving a platform instead to the positions expressed in the election. Whilst accepting that protest is a legitimate mode of engagement, this comment nevertheless situates the source of democratic legitimacy in electoral outcomes. However, through the use of uppercase orthography, the user asserts their positioning as a critic of mainstream media through the

recontextualisation of digital vernacular practice and styles of speaking through digital text.

Androutsopoulos (2016) has argued that the “use of mediational tools and uptake of mediated messages are common language practices in a mediatized society and fundamental to the circulation and diffusion of semiotic innovations in the digital age.” To the extent that the online political talk of users exists in a series of complex relations with the talk of others, user-generated below-the-line comments in the dataset frequently demonstrate explicitly heteroglot characteristics (Bakhtin 1981). However, as these brief examples demonstrate, the affordances of digital text permit complex forms of multivocality that extend beyond simple citation or re-voicing of the speech of others. There are thus important formal ways in which audience outrage differs from institutional forms of outrage discourse.

And yet, commenters must contend with the inherent power imbalances of these putatively participatory spaces. Indeed, soon after I compiled my dataset, the below-the-line comment feature at TheBlaze.com was entirely disabled in favour of comment facilities provided via TheBlaze’s Facebook page. Whilst the site’s terms of use have yet to be modified to account for this major structural transition, the action itself highlights the enduring power of media institutions in a hybrid media system, as well as the potential ephemerality of user contributions in a system characterised by the struggle over discursive resources. In sum, whilst the deployment of new digital vernaculars establishes the identity of the audience through the recontextualisation of novel discourse practices rooted in the specific affordances of digital media, audience agency is nevertheless curtailed by structural limitations on participation.

## 5.2 Challenges to Glenn Beck’s positioning as a conservative

Here, I explore a set of examples of how Glenn Beck and TheBlaze became the focus of the negotiation of Trump support in 2016. Research on the relationship between affect and partisan affiliation in the United States has demonstrated that polarisation has both instrumental and expressive foundations (Huddy et al. 2015). This research indicates a role for orientations towards protecting party status and advancing ideology, for example. In keeping with the findings of such research, my data feature a significant focus not only on the policy positions and ideologies of actors from across the political spectrum. Rather, commentary also frequently centres on their personal moral character. Such constructions of identity/alterity are, I argue, important stylistic elements of the contemporary performance of partisanship. However, my data indicate that the meaning of conservatism is not something that is merely iterated without critique but is rather

actively contested through the discursive acts of media and their users.

With reference to my data, frequent positive characterisations of conservatives are contrasted with an abundance of antagonistic representations of Democrats, liberals, and progressives. However, the data are also characterised by a prominent metadiscourse of authenticity in which a set of intra-group oppositions is actively constructed. Here, I present an illustrative excerpt:

I am a Constitutional Conservative and people like me (and Ted) have been defeated by populists, many of whom claimed to be Constitutional Conservatives. Ted has chosen to pick up and fight as much of the fight as he can with the half way crowd until the Constitutional Conservatives have greater success. I support Ted. He is still exactly who he said he was. Trump has been all things to many people and we don't know who he would be as president because he is a liar. All that we know is that he will not be Hillary.

The focus on constitutional conservatism renders explicit a series of tensions that highlight an array of dissenting voices. This plurality of voices demonstrates ongoing, vibrant contestation in defining the meaning and nature of American conservatism. Within this field of distinction, antagonistic relations are highlighted not merely between “conservative” Republican voters and “liberal” Democrats. Rather, other Republicans are likewise deemed to have failed to live up to the publicly co-constructed standards of conservatism—e.g., Republicans In Name Only (RINOs), alongside other establishment Republicans.

The RINO—Republican In Name Only—is a key figure in the contestation of the boundaries of conservatism, one which draws on an institutional critique of the Republican Party establishment and their congressional agenda. It has been argued that engaging in primary challenges of RINOs was a key strategy of Tea Party movement candidates, with the aim of “overthrowing” establishment elites in the Republican Party (Libby 2015). Pejorative references to RINOs can be seen as attempts to circumscribe the kinds of identities that authentically can be articulated as conservative. Some combinations are highly valued, whilst others are rejected. The following excerpt, for example, features a positive claim to Christian identity whilst remarking the important role that is being foretold for Christians in their future work alongside constitutional conservatives to “save America”:

...although widely trashed on theBlaze site for switching from my primary candidate to a Trump supporter and attempting to show the hypocrisy of Glenn (Alinsky on parade), I have never wavered in my foundational love and concern for Glenn ... I AM a "2" Corinthians Christian and "Constitutional" Conservatives

will need ALL the Christians that they can muster in the future to save America, her sovereignty and preserve her founding documents to save Humanity during the perilous near future that we face...

One of the more notable features of this comment is the manner in which it explicitly identifies the author as a “‘2’ Corinthians Christian,” thus invoking the Second Letter of St Paul to the Corinthians and specific associations with evangelical Christianity. By distinguishing between constitutional conservatism and other forms of conservatism, as well as between “‘2’ Corinthians” Christianity and other forms of Christianity, this comment thus highlights the multiple levels on which distinctions between self and other get produced. The comment also features a set of assertions of identity that establish notable relations between Christian subject positions and support for Donald Trump. The stakes are referred to explicitly: it is claimed that Christians and conservatives must work together to deal with a perceived threat to America’s “sovereignty” and “her founding documents,” as well as to the very survival of America as a nation.

In these intra-group tensions, the spectre of the Tea Party movement looms large. The movement was a mobilisation of conservatives which had emerged soon after Barack Obama’s inauguration in early 2009. As noted by Chadwick (2017), Beck was able to leverage the horizontal online networks that had been established by the Tea Party movement when he organised the Restoring Honor rally on the National Mall in Washington DC in August 2010. In so doing, Beck was able to “reanimate” left-wing modes of protest and organisation from the post-war era (Our Literal Speed 2010) at the same time as he recontextualised rhetorical forms associated with the civil rights movement (Young 2019). According to Jutel (2018), these rallies form part of a broader apparatus of affective labour through which Beck’s media operations were able to capitalise on the “free labour” (Terranova 2000) of both his audience and Tea Party movement activists. Identity here plays a fundamental role.

In the field of critical discourse analysis (CDA), Fairclough (1995) argued that traditional media discourse is produced through chains of recontextualisation that are managed through institutional routines. This production format has helped to legitimate claims that news constitutes authoritative discourse – claims which are further supported by various professional standards, e.g., objectivity, that became synonymous with journalistic roles and practices during the twentieth century (Hanitzsch and Vos 2017). Although its partisan leanings are frequently rendered explicit, TheBlaze seeks to don the mantle of authority associated with journalism at the same time as TheBlaze and Glenn Beck decry the duplicity of mainstream outlets. This resonates with the tendency among populist figures, noted above, to characterise mainstream media in antagonistic terms, for example,

through the use of the term “Lügenpresse”—i.e., “lying press”—which recontextualises a term notably associated with Nazi rhetoric regarding press criticism (Prince 2018).

However, the embeddedness of media discourse does not cease with its transmission. Media discourse may undergo further processes of textual reanimation when recontextualised by the audience. In spite of fears expressed regarding the capacity for partisan selective exposure to produce echo chambers or deliberative enclaves (see Sunstein 2018), Perrino’s (2018) analysis of how politicised collective identities are performed and asserted on blogs highlights how active audiences can also contest the meaning(s) and significance of both institutional and user-generated content. Such research is in keeping with the argument that the social life of media discourse is an important scholarly concern as a focal site of speaker creativity, in the case of both traditional media (Vidali 1996) and digital media (Danet and Herring 2007).

In this sense, media are not simply vectors of influence; they are also sites of engagement (Androustopoulos 2016) and, by extension, contestation and transformation. Although audiences may establish various forms of “footing” or alignment with characterological figures performed through speech, as argued by Agha (2005), recontextualisation allows them to do so in ways that fundamentally challenge dominant meanings (Wu et al. 2016). In this sense, the authority assumed by media elites can be challenged in user-generated below-the-line comments. This form of resistance is notable in the following excerpt:

America is an idea, not a country.—This shows the fundamental flaw in Beck (and many others) thinking. It is one thing to support an idea, it is another to protect a nation built on that idea. Beck would cede the nation to those bent on its destruction in order to protect the ‘idea’. The problem is that failing to protect the nation will see the ‘idea’ destroyed along with it. As those like Clinton and her Globalist ilk gain greater power, you will see the ‘idea’ destroyed or relegated to the dustbin of History ...

Whilst directly citing Glenn Beck’s (2016) claim that “America is an idea, not a country,” this comment draws on historical imagery and prophecy in establishing an antagonistic relation between those who would threaten America and those who would seek to preserve it. At risk in this apocalyptic battle is not just the survival of America and the American way of life. Rather, the very future of humanity is seen to be at stake. Importantly, by relating past, present, and future, the comment recontextualises a historically powerful mode of rhetoric (i.e., jeremiad) that has been dominant in the discursive articulation of American nationhood since the era of New England Puritanism (Bercovitch 2012). In this sense, this excerpt offers an example of the ways in which

users can actively (i.e., creatively) integrate a variety of discursive forms when framing their own responses to media representations of partisanship and political agency.

The preceding excerpts encode a specifically partisan vision of America and American nationhood. This is achieved largely by connotation, through a focus on a perceived moment of national crisis, with its attendant (albeit imagined) implications for the future of American culture, society, and identity. Beck figures centrally in this imagined conflict and is likewise portrayed as having a significant role to play in the coming collapse. Thus, whilst the final example, above, provides uptake to Beck’s outputs, it nevertheless does so in a way that fundamentally resists his message. This form of pushback against partisan messaging highlights a key issue with analyses of contemporary partisanship (e.g., Mason 2018), insofar as a focus on the salience of in-groups and out-groups has privileged distinctions between Republicans and Democrats. These data point to the importance of the kind of intra-party tensions that manifest in increasingly stringent purity tests within the Republican Party—tests that are frequently administered by outrage media figures (Rosenwald 2019). There is clearly debate in this case over the parameters of the test and whether or not Beck has failed. These comments thus demonstrate how fraught this process of partisan identification can be, even in the context of a hybridised outrage media audience that some scholarship might presume to be likeminded.

### 5.3 Media choice as political action

If media figures are a focus of the performance of self/other distinctions, so too is the media choice of users. My argument in this article is that commenters can use below-the-line comment fields to actively contest the representations of personhood in the media they consume. This can also take the form of an explicit metacommentary on media selectivity in which media choice is recontextualised as a mode of political action. This focus is demonstrated explicitly in the following excerpt, which also highlights the “transmediality” (Bateman 2017) of Beck’s operations as well as the engagement of his audience:

If you hate Glenn Beck so much, why do you spend the time on his site, listening to his show, reading his posts, etc.? Why? Go post happy thoughts on Breitbart or Hannity’s site. Be happy there instead of angry here. But I have a feeling you’ll continue to troll away, cause that’s what you do. Weak.

This excerpt highlights, in the first instance, the kinds of media and information repertoires (Yuan 2011) that obtain in the cross-platform behaviours that characterise contemporary media. An alternative media choice is offered, one which elaborates a partial classification of the right-wing



media ecology within which TheBlaze is seen to operate. By admonishing another user to “post happy thoughts on Breitbart,” the comment author seeks to patrol the affective character of user-generated discourse on the site. Importantly, whilst there is little mention in the data of positive, congruent media, this comment explicitly focuses on other right-wing media in explicitly negative terms.

Nevertheless, the user doubts this admonishment will have any impact, suggesting the user being addressed will “continue to troll away,” a statement that delegitimises the target’s contributions to the comment thread. Furthermore, by referring to speech as “trolling” (Hardaker 2010), the comment author highlights the problematic nature of negative or uncivil contributions. This comment thus articulates a set of judgments not only around forms of participation, but also their proper place on the site as well as within the broader landscape of American conservative media. In so doing, it publicly sets out explicit claims about the partisan character of media choice. At the same time, it also recontextualises modes of commentary associated with other right-wing partisan media spaces that are seen as oppositional in the context of negotiations around support for Donald Trump.

Beck was one of the most prominent conservative media figures to publicly stand against Trump’s candidacy and nomination in 2016. The near unanimous support for Trump once he had secured the Republican Party nomination left Beck isolated:

Glenn From the day you left fox I subscribed to the Blaze and when the channel came on Dish I also supported you through that also But you have lost me now I turn it on and all I hear is Trump bashing from you Stu and Pat I donnot like Trump or love Trump but it is all I have It is a binary election only 2 choices now and I am definitely not voting for Hillary.

The audience’s varied responses to Beck’s position help to illuminate debate over the proper role of media in the political process, as well as the audience’s publicly negotiated understandings of their own role as both consumers and producers of media discourse in the context of a hybrid media system. One of the more significant factors to consider here is the claim that Beck’s “Trump bashing” is having an impact on the user’s engagement, such that Beck’s anti-Trump stance, as a media figure speaking through the cross-platform constellation of media that is TheBlaze, is foregrounded not only as a key factor in a transformation of the user’s perception of Beck, as well as his colleagues and co-hosts, but also in a stipulated shift in their stated rituals of media use.

The tendency towards selective exposure to partisan media has been characterised as intimately bound up in economic factors that shape the business models of media firms

(Bernhardt et al. 2008). In that regard, Bird (1998) more than two decades ago warned against seeing audiences as overly passive recipients of whatever journalists put in front of them, arguing instead that we should see audiences as actively engaged in shaping the media environment through their engagement with an array of content. In the context of explicitly articulated loyalty as a supporter and a subscriber (i.e., consumer/produser but also, crucially, customer who has paid for these services), statements regarding a change in media choice acquire greater significance.

One of the benefits of a qualitative analysis focusing on claims of media bias is the way in which the dynamism of such claims can be revealed. In the case of my sample, audience commentary focusing on a perceived anti-Trump bias highlights a supposed shift in Beck’s partisan stance and thus the reclassification of TheBlaze and Beck as counter-attitudinal media. This final example speaks in frank terms about the sizeable shift that has taken place in the author’s alignment with Beck and his message as a reaction to Beck’s perceived anti-Trump stance:

Of course Beck is disappointed. He dedicated his whole show to defeating Trump, and said some downright horrible things about Trump ... Hillary as POTUS would be the end I’m afraid. At least with Trump we have a chance. I quit listening to Beck because his Gandhi phase quickly turned into out-right HATE of Trump. It got old and so negative I couldn’t listen anymore ... I think Beck trusts in gold and his political candidates more than he trusts in God. It’s really sad, because I used to be a HUGE Beck supporter. I still visit this site often and comment sometimes, but I will probably never listen to Beck again, let alone watch the Blaze channel that I have access to.

Insofar as the comment makes explicit reference to the impact that Beck’s position has had on the commenter’s viewing habits, media use here is attributed political dimensions, thereby foregrounding media choice as a mode of political action.

As TheBlaze was framed increasingly as oppositional media, this blending of consumer and political discourses in user-generated narratives around engagement with TheBlaze became a matter of growing relevance. Commentary on media choice here became a mechanism for performing alignments with perspectives on disputed forms of partisanship. In this way, the public contestation of oppositional identities became a prominent factor in shaping not only practices of media selectivity but also public understandings of the impacts of choosing to engage with particular forms of media. Media choice can in this sense be seen to be recontextualised as politically significant behaviour. However, these data also clearly demonstrate the relevance of media choice in the mediated performance of partisanship.

## 6 Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that recontextualisation provides a powerful conceptual framework for examining the role of audience agency in the (re)articulation of politicised collective identities in a hybridised outrage media ecology. Whereas in their definitional work, Berry and Sobieraj (2013) conceptualised outrage as a commercial strategy, this model is problematised in a hybrid media system within which users of newer digital media maintain interactive and frequently competitive relations with traditional media and political elites (Chadwick 2017). By permitting audiences to voice public (re)alignments with outrageous characterisations of political opposition through an array of discursive techniques of recontextualisation, hybrid news media present opportunities to challenge the partisan oppositions performed by institutional media. At the same time, online political talk in below-the-line commentary was here conceived as a heteroglot (i.e., multivocal) social practice in which sometimes antagonistic voices, characterological figures, or social personae are articulated or brought into alignment by participants through iterative and reflexive practices of recontextualisation.

Whilst media discourse may serve as a significant resource for audience conversation, my data thus reveal numerous points of engagement with partisan content that centre on an explicit and creative contestation of media representations. These data show that although the outrage discourse of commercial partisan media may seek to recruit their audiences into an array of antagonistic subject positions, this ideological work is open to sometimes forceful resistance. Recontextualisation is a key tool in this process, one which allows participants to creatively engage with institutional outrage media whilst articulating their own antagonistic visions of the social world. The manner in which users counter and contest such discursive constructs is illustrative of the struggle for discursive authority that characterises hybrid media systems. At the same time, it should duly be noted that these creative forms of resistance can represent alignments with other forms of elite cueing within the context of networked outrage.

My data demonstrate how conservative identities are contested and (re)negotiated in online user-generated media discourse. In particular, my data indicate that users have the capacity to recontextualise the rhetorical frameworks of institutional outrage discourse, (re)deploying them in the characterisation of media they view as insufficiently conservative. These are meaningful findings in terms of contemporary forms of political communication. Whilst there have been prominent arguments positing the emergence of deliberative enclaves as a response to the

fragmentation of the online public sphere (Sunstein 2018), my data indicate that this vision is insufficient to describe actually existing media practices. The case study presented here demonstrates not only the dynamic nature of audience positioning but also the possibility that alignments with partisan media can shift dramatically based on the vagaries of the political moment. In that regard, the production of self/other distinctions was here described as a process that is driven by various forms of creative iteration. In this case, acts of repetition were shown to be characterised by a fundamental tension between citation and contestation—between replication and transformation.

Although commenters can be seen to play an active role in shaping both the market for partisan content and the form of hybrid partisan media discourse online, this struggle for discursive authority should be viewed as embedded within a broader hegemonic struggle to define the boundaries of contemporary American conservatism, which is itself a struggle touching on encoded representations of religion, race, and social status amongst other factors. As fears propagate regarding the linkages between online outrage and democratic dysfunction, one of the key tasks for social scientists will be to examine where publics stand on these matters and to represent their role rigorously. My analysis reveals that this is not a simple matter of media influence. Following the work of Silverstone (2002), I conclude, if partisan media are to continue to play an outsized role in the social and political life of Americans, there must be greater recognition of the complicity and culpability of audiences—as consumers and producers—in the consequences of these practices. In this sense, a complex set of relations obtains between mediated outrage and broader spheres of political participation. Violent manifestations of partisan animosity and racial tensions in the US today clearly indicate the growing need to further examine how engagements with and through media contribute to these processes of opposition and exclusion.

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