THE ART OF POLITICAL STORYTELLING

PHILIP SEARGEANT

WHY STORIES WIN VOTES IN POST-TRUTH POLITICS

Endorsements for
The Art of Political Storytelling

'Political storytelling is one of the most persuasive forms of communication with voters. What is most chilling, however, is that it works even if the story isn't true. In this updated edition of his brilliant work, *The Art of Political Storytelling*, Philip Seargeant's insights help us come to terms with the perplexing, frightening, damnable, heartbreaking juggernaut of events that was 2020 … and likely beyond.'

LEE MCINTYRE, Author of *Post-Truth* and Research Fellow, Center for Philosophy and History of Science, Boston University, USA

'A brilliant deconstruction of propaganda and how it co-opts dramatic and narrative technique, throwing into doubt truth, fact and identity.'

IRISH TIMES

'Interesting and readable, this survey of the political storyteller's toolbox goes a long way to account for the recent successes of provocative populist leaders around the world and makes an enlightening guide to our current political moment … 4 stars.'

THE HERALD

'Everybody with at least a fleeting interest in politics *must* read this book.'

LSE REVIEW OF BOOKS

'Enlightening and entertaining, this book reveals how we have become actors in politicians' stories and how we can take back control of our own destinies.'

PETER POMERANTSEV, Senior Fellow, Institute of Global Affairs, London School of Economics, UK and Research Fellow, Johns Hopkins University, USA

'In the current interregnum, this is an important and timely book significantly contributing to our understanding of how storytelling that has long been mastered by political leaders has led to the social orders we experience, embrace and reject. It offers valuable pathways for us to tell our own counter-stories.'

CHRISTIAN W. CHUN, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, University of Massachusetts Boston, USA

'In this timely and cogent work, Philip Seargeant analyses how politicians construct their narratives and why voters prefer a good tale to verifiable facts. As conspiracy theories thrive and the very meaning of the word truth is called into question, this is an important book for our times.'

STEVE BUCKLEDEE, Lecturer in English Language and Linguistics, University of Cagliari, Italy

'An engaging and timely account of the fundamental role of storytelling in all aspects of political life. Rich with examples, it gives us tools for understanding how stories are crafted and how they shape our world. Highly recommended for anyone wanting to understand the current political environment.'

PIIA VARIS, Associate Professor, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

'Seargeant argues that one really cannot fully understand the recent political successes of the Brexit campaign and politicians such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro and Viktor Orbán, without taking into account how much their ongoing communication resembles the storytelling found in popular culture and in Hollywood films. In some ways, this is a frightening book, but it is one that should be read by anyone interested in how political communication is crafted today.'

DAVID BLOCK, ICREA Professor in Sociolinguistics, Pompeu Fabra University, Spain

The Art of
Political
Storytelling

The Art of Political Storytelling

Why Stories Win Votes in Post-truth Politics

Philip Seargeant

For Denisa,
who loves a long story

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Setting the scene

A hero of our time

This is the story of one man's mission to save the world from the forces of evil. To do battle against a corrupt and self-serving enemy bent on enslaving an innocent population. In order to achieve this, he has to venture deep into hostile territory, abandoning the comfortable existence he once had, and embark on a perilous, unforgiving journey. At each stage of this journey he's assailed by fierce and unscrupulous opponents. As he battles ever further into the heart of darkness, his allies, colleagues and even his friends begin to doubt his resolve. Some of them counsel him to abandon the mission. Others lose faith completely and end up siding with the enemy.

At his lowest ebb he faces a crisis which not only threatens the outcome of the quest but also puts his very existence in danger. Life itself is in the balance. But it's at this moment of utmost crisis that he's able to realize his true potential. This is when he looks deep within himself and discovers his true identity. Through self-belief, force of character and complete conviction in his cause he faces down the enemy in one final conflict. In doing so, he achieves the unachievable and wins a famous victory. In the closing scene he returns triumphant, not only in what he's accomplished personally but also in having saved the world from a cataclysmic future.

This is a classic story archetype. You could slot an almost endless array of scenarios into its structure and come up with the plots to umpteen Hollywood movies. The hero at its centre – usually male, but by no means exclusively – could be pulled unwittingly into an intergalactic conflict and have to do battle with a despotic imperial army. They could be fighting corruption at city hall, or battling a faceless, heartless insurance company. They could be called upon to protect the inhabitants of a small Western town against a marauding posse or to apply their forensic psychology skills in the hunt for a serial killer. The same structure could provide the blueprint for political drama, telling the tale of an innocent outsider sent to Washington to confront the vested interests and rampant dishonesty of an immoral ruling elite.

Swap out the ending and you have the story of a tragic anti-hero. It's Macbeth bewitched by ambition, seeking the Scottish throne through duplicity and murder, and then desperately fighting to maintain control of his destiny. It's Michael Corleone from *The Godfather*, responding to the attempted assassination of his father, then reluctantly embracing the family legacy. Or – occupying a morally more ambiguous middle ground – it's Walter White from *Breaking Bad*, naively stumbling into the world of organized crime as he tries to secure a stable economic future for his family, then having to learn to adapt in an environment which challenges his entire moral outlook on life.

But this structure doesn't only work as the foundation for innumerable fictional stories. It's also, almost precisely, the story of Donald Trump's candidacy for president. This same blueprint maps astoundingly well onto the narrative of Trump's run for office. The actual telling of the story – whether it's tragedy, heroic drama or farce – would obviously depend on the tone you chose. Which in turn would depend on your attitude to the man and the values for

which he stands. But the basic shape of the plot – the motivation, the struggle, the climax – is practically identical.

What I aim to argue in this book is that this similarity is neither coincidental nor inconsequential. The way in which Trump's candidacy – and his subsequent presidency – has centred so completely around his character, and the way his character, when thrown into the world of politics, creates an archetypal Hollywood plot structure, is one of the driving forces behind his success. His whole saga has been compelling, if not essential, viewing. In an era of binge-watching and exemplary long-form drama, this story has dominated the ratings like no other. The narrative Donald Trump created for himself, and the way he went about telling this and manipulating the media into amplifying and broadcasting it for him, offers a paradigm example of what a persuasive tactic political storytelling can be. It was, arguably, the foundation on which his success as a political figure has been based. The structure of the Trump story was torn straight from the template of all great drama. It mixes together all the same ingredients: well-defined antagonists and protagonists; a challenging quest with an unlikely outcome; and page after page of memorable dialogue. As a result, it's had a huge influence on the shape of the political landscape. In fact, I'd argue, it's played a key role in reshaping the way we perceive not just politics but culture and society in general.

And Trump isn't alone in basing his persuasive power on strong storytelling. The Leave campaign in the Brexit vote is another forceful example of the effectiveness of a good narrative. This again fashioned an underdog story of a put-upon community fighting back against a seemingly invincible autocratic bureaucracy. And in doing so, it turned voting into an act of dramatic resistance.

It is not just politicians from the last few years who've exploited this approach. Almost all notable political figures and movements down through history are associated as much with a particular narrative as

they are with a set of ideas, policies or actions. Or to put it another way, behind every successful politician is a simple but powerful story.

As we'll see, the adherence to this strategy of communication has become, over these last few years, evermore important for the way we shape not only our politics but also our understanding of the world more generally. It's become something of a modern mantra – a cliché even – that we're living in an era in which tapping into people's emotions has proved far more effective than rational argument. That people vote primarily on their values and feelings. The idea is offered up as an explanation for Trump, Brexit and Boris Johnson, for Jair Bolsonaro's take-over in Brazil and for the success of populists in Eastern Europe such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán. In each case, it's passion rather than rationalism which beguiles the voters. And one of the most powerful tools for playing on people's emotions is storytelling.

* * *

The purpose of this book is to illuminate this pivotal role that persuasive storytelling plays in society. Storytelling is an essential element in the way we interpret the entire social world. Our knowledge of the world may be built on facts and evidence – but facts only have meaning when they're placed within a context; and that context is more often than not built around a story. Although storytelling has played an important role in politics throughout history, today's combination of digital media, populism and partisanship is making it an evermore important part of the persuasive process – so much so that even when the current cast of characters get written out of the script, the storylines they've instigated will continue to resonate throughout the culture. And as I'll show, this persuasion isn't restricted to those running for office or already in power. It's also at the root of strategies of disinformation, of 'fake news' and propaganda.

It's for this reason that an understanding of narrative can provide us with important insights into the workings of power, and perhaps help us harness these dynamics so we can communicate our own ideas, perspectives and propositions with as much power and effectiveness as our opponents. The purpose of the book, then, is to show how the tools and tricks of narrative can be mastered to shape our understanding of the world. To explore how stories are structured, shared and contested. And to explain the rhetorical strategies that are used to enact them, and the language that's used to craft and narrate them.

As I'll argue, language is a huge part of this overall story. Language frequently gets blamed for breakdowns in public discourse and for the critical state of modern politics. For being in a state of decline, and for wilfully obscuring rather than clarifying our state of affairs. But language itself is simply an instrument for communication. It's how people *use* language, how they respond to it and how it comes to reflect the concerns of a community that together builds the background to our politics. To understand why things are the way they are, we need to look at how language is used, how it's manipulated and the force and effect this manipulation is having on the ideas that shape society.

Neither the language we use nor the stories we built from this language arise out of nowhere, of course. The tales we tell not only shape the times we live in but also reflect them. They need an environment in which to be embedded: a climate of ideas, ideals or fears to rub up against. Today's political climate can best be summed up as the collision of two trends in global culture: post-truth and populism. Both of these terms are bandied around with abandon in analyses of what we're meant to make of the modern world. And both of them are vague enough to mean a range of different things to different people. In order to better understand their significance for today's politics then, and to set the scene for this particular story, let's

rewind a few years, and transport ourselves back to the eve of the end of the world.

Living through apocalyptic times

Let's start with a fairly straightforward, if slightly philosophical, question. When the apocalypse finally arrives – that is, when we reach the climactic chapter in the human story – how are we best going to deal with it? Should we see it as a chance to rebuild society from the scorched earth upwards? Reboot civilization and discover afresh what humanity is capable of? Rethink our attitude towards sustainable power and the relationship we have with technology? Finally take decisive action against climate change?

Or should we just embrace it as a marketing opportunity? Hope that our faith in the power of consumerism can banish the doomsday gloom?

Unsurprisingly perhaps, it was this last option that was chosen by various large multinational corporations when faced with the possible ruination of human civilization in late 2012. For much of that year there'd been growing disquiet about a prophecy (or at least, an internet rumour) related to the ancient Mayan calendar system, which was predicting that the end of the world was nigh. Not only was it nigh, but it would also be arriving on precisely 21 December.

Various natural disasters were mentioned as the likely catalyst for the cataclysm, including that the planet Nibiru was spiralling through space on a direct collision course with Earth. The source of this prediction was a woman who claimed she'd been receiving messages from extraterrestrials from the Zeta Reticuli star system. They'd chosen her to be their mouthpiece, she said, so she could warn humankind of its approaching annihilation.[1] Such was the

concern about this that NASA felt it necessary to step in and debunk her predictions.[2] Yet even with calming strategies of this sort, as the date drew near there were reports of panic-buying across the globe, of desperate, reassuring statements from the Russian 'minister of emergency situations',[3] while on the day itself the *Guardian* live-blogged the whole nerve-racking drama as it unfolded.[4]

For advertisers, this was too good an opportunity to miss. Jell-O, the gelatine-based desserts people, produced a commercial in which a crate of pudding was offered up as a sacrifice to the Mayan gods in the hope that it would persuade them to cancel the cataclysm. Picking up the narrative a little further along the timeline, Chevrolet had an advert showing a Silverado cruising through the post-apocalyptic wilderness to the sound of Barry Manilow. When the driver finally met up with his fellow survivors, they all lamented the fact that their unfortunate companion Dave, who'd been driving a Ford (the damn fool) hadn't made it. This didn't go down too well with the people at Ford, who took umbrage at the idea that their product would be found wanting after the fall of civilization. They threatened Chevrolet with a cease-and-desist order,[5] proving that even come the apocalypse, corporate lawyers will still be in great demand. Then there was Durex, who encouraged us all to celebrate oblivion with the slogan, 'The end of the world shouldn't be the only thing coming.'

For most people of course, the Mayan apocalypse was a bit of a joke – what the political media consultant Tobe Berkovitz calls a 'water cooler catastrophe'. While it's fine to exploit this vision of human calamity as a way to sell puddings and prophylactics, you're much less likely to see 'commercials making fun of the fiscal cliff', he notes.[6] Real social and cultural upheaval, when it arrives, probably won't involve alien communiqués or planetary car-crashes. But its mundanity will make it all the more difficult to come to terms with.

We're now further into the twenty-first century than our ancestors were with the twentieth century when the First World War fundamentally changed the character of that century. Have we already experienced an event of equal magnitude that will set the agenda for the rest of our lifetimes? Given that it turned out not to be the Mayan cataclysm, what's likely to stand as our moment of fundamental change when the history of this century gets written?

The global financial crash of 2008 would be one candidate. Its ramifications are still reverberating through the fabric of society in disturbing and unexpected ways. Yet it doesn't perhaps have the symbolic resonance that other major historical turning points have had. It was undoubtedly dramatic, both as a process and in its implications. But it wasn't perhaps dramatic enough as a spectacle.

Which brings us to the events of 2016. This was, for many, a critical year of change which seemed to throw into confusion so much of what we understood of the social world we inhabit. Even as early as July, people were asking whether it was 'really one of the worst years in history'.[7] Headlines such as this obviously have a lot to do with the narcissistic hyperbole of the present moment. Yet by the end of the year the sense was that, if the apocalypse hadn't quite arrived, at the very least a deep fracture had opened up across the crust of the globe's culture. And nowhere was this more apparent than with the sense that rationality and truth seemed somehow to have lost their authority. That they no longer had the purchase they once did on civic debate. Or held sway over the way we were choosing our future.

A dumpster fire of a year

The year 2016 began in positive enough fashion. It marked the five-hundredth anniversary of Thomas More's *Utopia*, in which he

outlines his vision of a perfected society. In January, there was the launch of twelve months of celebrations for this, under the slogan 'A Year of Imagination and Possibility'.[8] A special flag was designed to commemorate the occasion, showing a large smiley face emblazoned on a bright yellow background.[9] By the end of those twelve months however, that slogan and the optimistic flag waving was ringing rather hollow.

A simple primer for seeing how the world experiences the year is to look at the way the major dictionaries attempt to capture the spirit of the times with their 'Words of the Year'. The stories these tell provide an intriguing insight into how the drama and trauma of 2016 was experienced, and how, instead of a year of utopian dreams, it turned out to be one of 'paranoia' and 'post-truth', of ongoing 'refugee' crises, 'xenophobia' and a close shave with 'fascism' (plus the odd Australian obsession with sausages).

During the autumn of 2016, a campaign was launched to have the phrase 'Essex Girl' removed from the *Oxford English Dictionary*.[10] (For those unfamiliar with the civic geography of Great Britain, Essex is a county just outside London. Over the last couple of decades it has attracted a reputation in the media as having a rather gaudy, if not vulgar culture: something along the lines of a British Jersey Shore.) Those behind the campaign were upset that the definition in the dictionary – a young woman 'variously characterized as unintelligent, promiscuous, and materialistic' – was derogatory, that it reflected badly on the county of Essex, and so needed to be expunged from what describes itself as 'the definitive record of the English language'. In turning down the request, the spokesperson explained that because it's a historical dictionary nothing is ever removed. The whole purpose of the *Oxford English Dictionary* is to describe the language as people use it, and to thus stand as a catalogue of the notable fads and preoccupations of the changing times.[11]

The 'Words of the Year' tradition is a particularly high-profile way in which dictionaries bear witness to the times. Begun with the German *Wort des Jahres* in the 1970s, the tradition has spread over the decades to other languages. In the last few years, with the rise of social media and its obsession with listing, ranking and evaluating everything, it's become increasingly popular. In 2015 – the year before our tale begins – *Oxford Dictionaries* had chosen a pictograph as their 'word' for the first time in their history: the emoji for 'Face with Tears of Joy'. By 2016 however, the verbal was very much back in fashion.

In English, there are a range of competing 'Words of the Year', as all the major dictionaries make their own choice. Many of them had a distinctly dystopian feel in 2016. For example, *Cambridge Dictionary* chose 'paranoid' because users searching for this word in its database had increased fourfold. According to their managing director, this was clear evidence that people are 'less trusting than they used to be and that the world as a whole feels a lot more uncertain than it did compared with even a year ago'.[12] Dictionary.com meanwhile went for 'xenophobia': another word which saw a sudden spike in interest. This apparently reached its zenith on 24 June, the day after the Brexit referendum, with increased traffic to the Dictionary.com site of 938 per cent.[13]

Merriam-Webster tried to stem this tide of pessimism at the beginning of December when 'fascism' started to emerge as the likely winner in their online poll. They tweeted their readers imploring them to get behind something – anything – else.[14] The strategy seemed to work. In the end, 'surreal' was chosen as being most representative of a year in which, time and again, events almost defied belief.[15]

Collins, meanwhile, chose 'Brexit':[16] a term which their spokesperson suggested had become as flexible and influential in political discourse as 'Watergate'.[17] Just as the latter spawned hundreds of portmanteau words whenever a political scandal broke, so Brexit

begat 'Bremain', 'Bremorse' and 'Brexistential crisis', along with an endless stream of other somewhat strained puns. The form of the word also began being used by other political rifts: in fact, a word from the Brexit family nearly won out in Australia, where 'Ausexit' (severing ties with the British monarchy or the United Nations) was on the shortlist in 2016. Instead, the Australian National Dictionary went for the slightly more idiosyncratic 'democracy sausage' – the tradition in the country of eating a barbecued sausage on election day.[18]

Around the world a similar pattern of apprehension emerged. In France, the *mot de l'année* was 'réfugiés' ('refugees').[19] Swiss German speakers went for 'Filterblase' (filter bubble)[20] – the idea that social media is causing increasingly polarized political communities. Also in Switzerland, the Deaf Association chose a Sign of the Year for the first time. Perhaps predictably their choice was 'Trump', which consists of a sign made by placing an open palm on the top of the head, thus mimicking the president's distinctive hair style.[21] Trump's hair also played a role in Japan's choice for the year. Rather than a word, Japan chooses a kanji (Chinese character), and for 2016 it was 'gold' (金).[22] This represented a number of different topical issues: Japan's haul of medals at that year's Rio Olympics, fluctuating interest rates, the gold shirt worn by YouTube sensation Piko Taro (singer of the popular 'Pen-Pineapple-Apple-Pen' micro-song), and, inevitably, the colour of Trump's hair.

Then there was Austria, whose word was fifty-one letters long – 'Bundespräsidentenstichwahlwiederholungsverschiebung' – and means 'the repeated postponement of the runoff vote for Federal President'.[23] Referring to the seven-month period of votes, legal challenges and delays over their presidential election, this again referenced an event that flirted with extreme nationalism and exposed the convoluted nature of democracy.

All of which brings us, finally, to *Oxford Dictionaries*. Having heralded a post-language era in 2015 with the choice of an emoji, they decided on 'post-truth' for 2016.[24] Other organizations followed suit – Germany, for example, chose 'postfaktisch', which has much the same meaning.[25] 'Post-truth' also won the American Dialect Society's 'Political Word of the Year', but lost out in the general category to 'dumpster fire', defined as 'an exceedingly disastrous or chaotic situation'.[26]

Just to round out the picture, it's worth also noting the winner of Germany's 'Non-word of the Year' (*Unwort des Jahres*). Not content with having begun the Words of the Year tradition, scholars in Germany also choose a representative *unwort*: a word or phrase that's considered to have the most offensive recent history.[27] Again, these almost always focus on the close relationship between language and politics, and often have direct equivalents in Anglophone countries. Recent winners have included 'Lügenpresse', a Nazi-era equivalent of 'fake news'; 'Alternative Fakten', and, in 2016, 'Volksverräter' or 'traitor of the people', another Nazi-era term which was revived by anti-immigration right-wing groups, and which was selected by the panel 'because it is a typical legacy of dictatorships'.[28]

Not that this pervasive sense of gloom was shared by everyone. For some, the moroseness and endless moaning was symptomatic of how out of touch those in the media and academia (the 'intellectual elite') were. Putting aside celebrity deaths and a crisis in opinion polling, 2016 saw significant progress in important areas such as medicine, life expectancy and scientific knowledge. For the commentator and arch-contrarian Brendan O'Neill, it was a year of 'disruption', both scientifically and politically – but that's all for the good.[29] 'If you must weep over 2016', he wrote, 'it should be with joy' – presumably much like 2015's signature emoji was doing.

So what it is? Are we really living in a post-truth era which is a threat to social democracy as we know it? Or is this talk of post-truth itself part of a partisan battle? Just a means of spinning political disappointment; an anxiety hyped in the mainstream media, as, in the words of media scholar Tim Crook, 'journalism's key institutions sense a crisis'?[30] Is it all just a matter of trying to rationalize a world which never had much of a relationship with rationality in the first place? And how does it all relate to the double feature of Trump and Brexit, two populist uprisings which gave the year its dramatic arc, and were symptomatic of broader shift in the political mood across the globe?

2

Let's begin with the facts

Fact-checkers and other bad people

If we want to answer any of the questions raised in Chapter 1, it might help if we knew exactly what we were dealing with. What precisely is this idea of 'post-truth' that everyone's so alarmed about, and why is it supposedly so significant for understanding the current state of society? Is it simply a euphemism for lying? In which case, why do we need a new term to describe this type of behaviour? And how is it any different from what humans have been doing ever since they first developed the ability to speak?

The subject I'll address in this chapter is why, following three centuries of scientific endeavour since the Enlightenment, we're still arguing with such rancour over the significance of factual- and evidence-based reasoning. And, equally importantly, what implications does this scepticism of evidence-based reasoning have for modern politics, as well as for the stories we tell ourselves about our culture and identity. Lying is, after all, a form of fictional storytelling, of replacing real events with imaginary ones. So perhaps the trend in political discourse for controlling the narrative has, inadvertently,