

Rhetoric and Evidence in a Polarized Society
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THE ISSUE

When given the opportunity to discuss polarization, social science, and public discourse today, one is tempted to talk about the very dramatic changes the country has experienced since the most recent presidential election. One is tempted to discuss the reduction in environmental protections, the aggressive denigration of immigrants, or the wholesale dismantling of our foreign-service expertise. And given the regular scandals wrought by Presidential statements uttered for their shock value, one is tempted to discuss whichever the most recent blow-up happens to be. One is especially tempted because many such statements are frequently invectives against political opponents, media institutions, and individual journalists, and thus must be read as efforts to silence and intimidate, to undercut the rigorous questioning of authority that is essential to a democratic society.

But precisely because we are witness to an unusually chaotic moment, we must consider the matter of public discourse in the context of a longer past, wherein the ebbs and flows in the quality of our conversation do not change the fundamental importance of a rational debate to the long-run health of our democracy. For this reason, I will focus not on the daily scandals but on the ongoing and sober debates over the nature of our culture, society, economy, and politics that take place in our repositories for serious discourse—the major newspapers of record and the cultural and political weeklies.

I am a social scientist. As a social scientist I am also an epistemologist, a researcher who spends hours thinking about how we know what we come to know, and who uses his empirical projects to probe the limits of how we extract knowledge from different kinds of data; I study how sociologists, economists, psychologists, demographers, and anthropologists use data to make inferences about what is happening in the social world. As a result, when I read the reporting and commentary in the national media, I naturally pay attention to how journalists, pundits, commentators, and bloggers use social science evidence. That use of evidence is my focus today.

THE ARGUMENT

I will argue that one form of reasoning has often been missing from our political discourse, the form common to social scientists experienced in the collection of use of qualitative evidence, those who spend most of their time observing people in their natural environments or interviewing people, one-on-one and in depth, about how they understand their circumstances. This form of reasoning I am going to call *qualitative literacy*, as a contrast to quantitative literacy.

I believe that qualitative literacy has been scarce in our public discourse; that social scientists have failed to articulate and teach it; and that the paucity of qualitative literacy in the discourse has been detrimental to our society. This paucity is part of the reason that the election of Trump caught many unaware, that the rise of white supremacist movements seemed to many to come out of

nowhere, and that our debates about everything from conditions in poor neighborhoods to the motivations of working class people have been stagnant.

To understand what I mean, consider the commonly-discussed idea of *quantitative* literacy, the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret quantitative evidence. For decades, scientists and policy makers have been arguing that quantitative literacy is essential to critical thinking. Colleges and universities have instituted quantitative literacy requirements. And over the last few decades, serious media outlets have notably improved in quantitative literacy.

Certainly, there remains room for progress, as basic errors and misinterpretations still see their way to print. But the remarkable improvement is hard to miss. One piece of evidence is the rise in data-driven journalism, as evident in sites such as Nate Silver's 538 and the *NY Times* The Upshot, launched in 2014 [with a staff of 15](#). Platforms of this kind now offer readers the chance to interact with and interpret data well beyond the outlines of the story. A different piece of evidence is the improvement in the language of the published stories. For example, in the 1990s, as housing prices started soaring, the NY metro section of the *Times* every few months reported the increase in the *mean* price of a 2-bedroom apartment, and then characterized this trend as indicative of the quickly deteriorating experience of the [average New Yorker](#). This was misleading, because *median* prices were much more stable, and the mean increases were driven by a handful of extravagant purchases each year that drove the mean but did not affect the lives of those near the 50th percentile of distribution. But things have changed. Now, the paper often [reports both](#) figures. A final piece of evidence lies in the opinion-based commentary. Today, it is much harder than a few decades ago to publish op-eds in the *Washington Post* or the *Times* that make assertions either contrary to easily available quantitative evidence or else implausible by basic quantitative standards of evidence.

Nevertheless, the last few decades have not seen a parallel rise in the *qualitative* literacy, the ability to understand, handle, and properly interpret qualitative evidence. Qualitative evidence is the kind typically marshalled in ethnographic or interview-based projects. Ethnographic data are the kind collected by ethnographers, people who go out into a community in the field for months or years at a time while writing down what they see or hear. If Nate Silver's data are the results of polls and surveys, an ethnographer's data are the field notes. Ethnographic data are the kind that Matthew Desmond reported in his book *Evicted*. Interview data are the kind that people collect when they go out and ask people over the course of long and open-ended interviews what they believe or feel about some issue. If an ethnographer's data are the fieldnotes, and interviewer's data are the recorded transcripts. Interview data are the kind that Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas provided in *Promises I Can Keep*.

A researcher's level of qualitative literacy can be evaluated by the extent to which she or he can assess whether the ethnographer has collected and evaluated fieldnote data properly, or the interviewer has conducted interviews effectively and analyzed the transcripts properly. As in any kind of literacy, it can only be acquired through practice; it results ultimately from the *habits of thoughts* people accumulate over years of experiencing handling these kinds of data. Still, while people typically understand the limits to their *quantitative* literacy, they do not necessarily know they lack qualitative literacy, because they are not necessarily exposed to the language with which to arrive at that recognition.

To see what I mean, I will ask the social scientists in the room, and anyone else who wishes, to answer a question for themselves: What is the difference between an empirically convincing

ethnography and an ethnography that is empirically weak but well-written? What criteria would you use to determine the difference?

I will not ask anyone to report their answer.

But I am certain of three things: One, there will be at least as many answers as there are methodologists in the room. Two, some people will decide which book is convincing by turning to quantitative, rather than qualitative, indicators of good handling of empirical data. For example, they may decide that the book with the larger number of interviewees is more convincing. While that may or may not be an appropriate criterion, it is certainly *not* what I am referring to, since it is merely evidence of quantitative reasoning, not of sophisticated qualitative reasoning. If there is such a thing as qualitative data, and there must be better and worse ways of handling such data, regardless of how much such data there are. Three, in answer to the original question, many social scientists will frankly say to themselves, “I don’t know.”

Now, journalists and commentators are not social scientists, and no one would expect them to be able to produce sophisticated qualitative social science. But one need not be an expert to possess the *basic literacy* required for a rational assessment of evidence. Consider a parallel: An ordinary writer need not be able to run a statistical regression to have a basic understanding of means, medians, and distributions, to know that certain kinds of claims require quantitative data, and to know when to steer clear of claims for which those data are not available. Similarly, an ordinary writer need not be able to conduct an effective field study to have a basic understanding of how researchers use such data, to know what kinds of claims require it, and to know how to steer clear of claims for which such data are unavailable. A minimal level of qualitative literacy, I argue, is as indispensable as minimal skills in quantitative reasoning.

THREE INDICATORS

In my remaining time I will explain how I would distinguish an empirically strong piece of qualitative social science from a well-written but empirically weak one. While my natural list of indicators would be long, today I will focus only on three—three habits of thought that researchers who have spent years collecting, analyzing, and thinking about qualitative data tend to hold naturally, and that are components, I argue, of the basic qualitative literacy our discourse could use.

Evidence of cognitive empathy

The first indicator is what I recently described in a book, *Someone To Talk To*, as cognitive empathy: The ability to understand another person’s predicament as they understand it. A good qualitative study convinces the reader that the author has captured the world as those studied see it, not as the author had seen it ahead of time and not as the author wishes he or she had seen it.

Because today the term “empathy” is popular, and even a little over used, two clarifications are warranted. One, empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is the feeling of pity or sorrow one has for the suffering of another. When you see a starving child in a developing country portrayed on television and feel moved to write a check, you are moved by sympathy. But you are likely experiencing no cognitive empathy unless you understand the experience of prolonged hunger. Two, cognitive empathy is not *emotional empathy*. I am not referring to feeling what others feel, but to understanding their perspective as they understand and represent it to themselves.

A good qualitative researcher, after having spent enough time observing or interviewing others, eventually comes to understand the experience of others in ways close to what they experience. How can one tell that a book or article or report has attained it? One sign is that the perspective of another seems perfectly rational, the perspective oneself might take given the circumstances, despite the fact that it might have seemed wrong or politically unpalatable. For example, a good qualitative researcher can make clear to an uncompromising pro-choice voter why it might be rational to believe, as some do, that an early-term abortion even in the case of rape constitutes murder. It is not necessary to agree with a perspective to come to see it precisely as another sees it.

Another tell-tale sign of cognitive empathy, or more precisely of its absence, is the tendency among inexperienced authors to confuse sympathy with empathy: to portray others in a sympathetic fashion—meaning, in a way meant to evoke sorrow or pity for them or a sense of guilt or responsibility on the part of the reader. As a result, the works often read [as collections of stereotypes](#) wherein the behavior of people represented one-dimensionally is excused through a moral appeal. Such moral appeals are perfectly fine, but in the absence of true cognitive empathy the works are rarely empirically convincing.

The distinction between cognitive empathy and sympathy would seem obvious, but it actually is blurred often in the public debate. Consider a recent example—a case from a serious journalist in a major publication to help demonstrate that the distinction I am pointing to can be missed by our best commentators. The *NY Times* recently produced an in-depth story depicting a neo-Nazi named Tony Hovater, a story whose stated purpose was precisely to understand the man’s perspective on the politics as he did. As the author later [reported](#) in a personal reflection: “Why did this man—intelligent, socially adroit and raised middle class amid the relatively well-integrated environments of United States military bases—gravitate toward the furthest extremes of American political discourse?”

The author tried to dig deep and wrote well. He rightly eschewed easy stereotypes. For example, he avoided trying to attribute his a bad childhood experience or to a particular economic background: “Mr. Hovater [grew up](#) on integrated Army bases and attended a mostly white Ohio high school. He did not want for anything. He experienced no scarring racial episodes.” This is what we would want.

But the author never attained cognitive empathy, never came to understand the predicament of the neo-Nazi as the latter understood it. The piece offered glimmers, as when it explained that the neo-Nazi became partly awakened when, as band member, he travelled the country and saw that white people were “hurting” throughout the country, particularly in Appalachia. But such cases were too few for the reader, and even underdeveloped. For example, we never learn what the person saw in Appalachia.

Instead, we read details of the man’s life that reflect what appear as attempts at eliciting sympathy, not for the ideas, of course, but [for the person](#). “Tony and Maria Hovater were married this fall. They registered at Target. On their list was a muffin pan, a four-drawer dresser and a pineapple slicer.... [H]is tattoos are innocuous pop-culture references: a slice of cherry pie adorns one arm, a homage to the TV show ‘Twin Peaks’. ...He is a big ‘Seinfeld’ fan.”

Perhaps nowhere is this fact clearer than in [the kicker](#), the conclusion of the story: “The pasta was ready. Ms. Hovater talked about how frightening it was this summer to watch from home as the Charlottesville rally spun out of control. Mr. Hovater said he was glad the movement had grown.

They spoke about their future—about moving to a bigger place, about their honeymoon, about having kids.”

Note that the kicker to the story was not, “this is why he believes what he believes” (empathy); it was, “he’s just like us” (sympathy).

This replacement of empathy with sympathy, not surprisingly, created an uproar. Many [responses](#) were plain angry: “‘How to normalize Nazis 101!’ one reader wrote on Twitter. ‘I’m both shocked and disgusted by this article.’” Another: “‘You know who had nice manners?’ Bess Kalb, a writer for Jimmy Kimmel Live, [said on Twitter](#). ‘The Nazi who shaved my uncle Willie’s head before escorting him into a cement chamber...?’” Et cetera.

The author later admitted that he found it hard to attain the empathy he sought. But the confusion of empathy with sympathy deprived the discourse of a unique an opportunity to think more deeply about an important issue, with commentators instead feeling compelled to argue that Nazis are bad guys and should be portrayed as such.

To be clear, attaining cognitive empathy is hard. This is part of why qualitative social scientists often take so long to complete their works. Journalists, of course, face deadlines. What could he have done? The narrative itself is full of ideas that could have been pursued further. [For example](#):

It was midday at a Panera Bread, and Mr. Hovater was describing his political awakening over a turkey sandwich. He mentioned books by Charles Murray and Pat Buchanan. He talked about his presence on 4chan, the online message board and alright breeding ground (“That’s where the scary memes come from,” he deadpanned). He spoke dispassionately about the injustice of affirmative action, about the “malice directed toward white people” in popular media, about how the cartoon comedy “King of the Hill” was the last TV show to portray “a straight white male patriarch” in a positive light.

Each of these statements represents a missed opportunity to probe further in pursuit of true understanding: What was appealing about Charles Murray? About Pat Buchanan? Why 4chan as opposed to other sites? What would he say to those who believe affirmative action redresses past injustices? What are examples of “malice towards whites”?

I am sure we could all imagine answers to those questions. But what we want to understand is why *this* person believes what he believes. That remains the only path toward cognitive empathy, which I contend is a foundation of constructive civil discourse. Had the author pursued that path, perhaps our understanding of at least some of the appeal of the neo-Nazi movement among people not facing dire straits would have been deeper.

Instead, we fill in the blanks with our own perceptions, congratulate ourselves for denouncing Nazis, and—even worse—discourage future writers from taking on an important challenge. In such an environment, it is no surprise that people at one end of the political spectrum often cannot comprehend, in a literal sense, why people at the opposite end think, vote, or otherwise act the way they do.

Attentiveness to outgroup heterogeneity

A second indicator is an awareness of an important bias, one that psychologists have termed outgroup homogeneity bias. This is not a term qualitative researchers typically use; however, it is an idea they are often, as is evident in their work, attuned to. This bias refers to the tendency people

have to think of their own group as highly diverse or heterogeneous, while thinking of other groups as homogeneous. Think of the fact that people often have an easier time distinguishing the facial features of those in their own group over those in another group, as when professors in majority-white universities have a difficult time telling black students apart. The bias is not merely about race; it is about any outgroup trait, and it one of the first biases that begins to dismantle after a qualitative researcher has spent time in the field.

Consider an example from my own [research on neighborhoods](#). Poor neighborhoods, or so-called ghettos, are often represented in both scholarship, journalism, and even television, in a particular set of ways: as places with high violence, social isolation, open-air drug trade, a prevalence of young men on the street, a scarcity of everyday business and organizations, etc. Think of the streets depicted in Sudhir Venkatesh's *Gang Leader for a Day*, based in Chicago, or the show *The Wire*, based in Baltimore: desolate, depopulated places with boarded-up houses and a scarcity of basic institutions. But when I first started doing fieldwork in poor neighborhoods, beginning in Boston and continuing through New York, Chicago, Houston, and other cities, the first thing I noticed was not how much they confirmed these impressions but how *different* they were from one another. The pictures of Baltimore and Chicago were not wrong—on the contrary, they were remarkably accurate. They were just not representative of many other cities. Poor neighborhoods, I noticed, were *heterogeneous*, and the middle-class bias toward perceiving homogeneity in such places began to be clear.

Consider an [example](#). In Chicago, poor neighborhoods, like those in Baltimore, are among the least populated neighborhoods in the city. But in New York City, neighborhoods with precisely the same level of poverty, unemployment, public assistance level, and segregation are among the most *densely* populated in the city. Equally poor neighborhoods in Chicago and NY may differ by as many as 70k people per square mile. Neighborhood poverty is an entirely different experience, with a dramatically different set of dynamics. For example, if isolation in Chicago brings a difficulty in accessing important resources then overcrowding in New York can bring high levels of congestion, lower air quality, and high rates of asthma among children.

Anyone who spends enough time in the field becomes increasingly aware and sensitive to the heterogeneity in those being studied. This sensitivity is inevitably reflected in the work, which will inevitably belie the idea that a particular group is as homogeneous as one not exposed to it is inclined to think. In time, one becomes suspicious of narratives depicting outgroups as motivated by one sole factor or perspective.

Serious journalists tend to be college-educated, majority white, heavily concentrated in large metropolitan areas, particularly in the East Coast. They tend to vote Democrat and to hold liberal attitudes about social issues. As a result, their representations of those who are not part of this group—those who are not highly educated or who are poor or who are not white or who do not live in major metro areas or who vote Republican or who are socially conservative—tend to reflect a high degree of outgroup homogeneity bias.

This bias was perhaps most striking after the surprise election of Donald Trump. The outcome of the election, as we all know, [undermined the predictions](#) of the majority of pollsters, social scientists, and journalists. A period of self-reflection followed. Strikingly, much of that self-reflection centered on understanding a category called, alternatively, “the Trump voter” or “the white working class,” terms that at this point are all-but-synonymous in the mainstream discourse. What followed

was story after story debating which core narrative about this presumably homogeneous group of people was correct: they were fundamentally racist or they had felt ignored by mainstream politicians or they were reacting to a black president or they felt that immigrants and others had cut in line. Whatever the imputed motive, the overwhelming majority of the stories both agreed with the idea of the white working class monolith and failed to entertain the possibility that different individuals in this group might have gone to the booth for dramatically different sets of reasons.

For sure, there were exceptions, as when the *NY Times*, in one of several good stories, allowed female Trump supporters to [describe their own rationales](#). In fact, several outlets tried to account for the fact that Trump won the majority of votes by white female voters even though he had just been caught on tape boasting about his ability to assault women with impunity. But stories of this kind have been exceptions. The trend remains—despite of the fact that, as political scientists Nicholas Carnes and Noam Lupu recently showed, most Trump voters [were not working class](#). The white working class voter, or the Trump supporter, remains a conceptual monolith—frankly, a stereotype in the public discourse, albeit one whose motivations remain elusive.

At this point, some may well complain that, by several measures, the people who voted for Trump were more demographically homogeneous than those who voted for Clinton. That is both possibly true and beside the point. Racial homogeneity, or even racial and class homogeneity, does not equal homogeneity in all forms. To be sure, the true level of heterogeneity in any given political attitude among a subpopulation is a quantitative, not a qualitative question. There is a distribution, and this distribution will reflect a variance we can compare to that of other groups. What I am referring to is the fact that in much of the discourse the variance is essentially presumed to be *zero*, and that this presumption results not from any empirical assessment but from a natural bias toward minimizing differences among people we do not know well.

In fact, mainstream commentators often discuss working-class whites with the same simplifying lens they use to discuss low-income blacks, one in which there is little diversity of thought, experience, perspective, and motivation among the respective groups. In both cases, there is debate about how to address a problem, but little disagreement that one largely homogeneous set of issues is at play.

This bias is important. In a polarized society, the lack of contact increases the probability of outgroup homogeneity bias, which, in turn, increases polarization. The homogenizing lens through which mainstream media describe white working class individuals—as racist dupes who cling to guns and religion because they feel left behind by society—is only matched by the homogenizing lens through which conservative and right-wing commentators describe liberals—as feeble-minded hypocrites who care more about so-called criminals, foreigners, and the environment than they do about ordinary Americans. We can certainly do better.

Sensitivity to the differences between kinds of qualitative data

A third indicator is an acute sensitivity to what kinds of argument require qualitative data—more precisely, what kinds require interview data vs. observational data. A claim about what people—whether low-income mothers or undocumented immigrants—are experiencing over the course of their everyday lives requires observing such people over the course of their everyday lives. A claim about what motivates people to act a particular way requires data on what they say motivates them. The point may seem obvious but it is easy to neglect.

To understand why, consider the issue from the perspective of a scientific researcher. Research in any academic discipline constitutes a set of habits of thought, a set of practices guided toward answering social science questions. Those habits inform how researchers think of questions and of data. For example, when confronted with a puzzle about society, a good empirical economist may ponder creative ways of using naturally occurring changes in policy or practice to help estimate a causal effect. A good psychologist may think of ways of designing a laboratory experiment where a stimulus can be manipulated to determine whether it has an expected outcome. This is all as it should be.

But a good qualitative researcher will not necessarily proceed in an analogous way. Qualitative researchers in the social sciences understand that their work may have to be convincing to people who are not necessarily familiar with their methods or standards of evidence. While an economist, psychologist, or demographer does not have to worry that an ethnographer will not understand or believe her findings, an ethnographer, if he studies inequality, poverty, education, immigration, or health, understands that many of those evaluating his grant proposals, papers, and cases for promotion are people trained in methods other than his own. Many of his evaluators will be quantitative researchers. So, a qualitative researcher working in social science today—and I emphasize, I am not talking about those who work entirely in the humanities—will have to be finely attuned to what the particular form of data they are collecting can and cannot say, and, by extension, to what other forms of data can and cannot say.

Thus, the hypothetical qualitative researcher facing a puzzle will not necessarily first determine out how to apply her methods to the question; by experience she will first be inclined to determine what kinds of data the question demands, to delimit as clearly as possible the space to which she can contribute. This habit of thought, then, is not actually that common, because it does not need to be that common among many social scientists.

The habit of thought is not merely important in the realm of research. In fact, the failure to recognize the kinds of data needed to answer a question may be one of the most consistently violated practices in the media outlets that aim to inform serious debate. A contrast to the higher level quantitative literacy may again prove useful: We know, for example, that an op-ed making an argument about a national trend requires national data on the evolution of the trend; an argument about rising income inequality, data on people's income. Yet though the need for data is no different when the data in question are qualitative, the expectation is routinely violated.

I can think of no better example than an extension of our earlier theme: the debate among liberal commentators over “why the white working class votes against its own interests.” This phrase is so ubiquitous that the problem it poses is taken by many to be a fundamental conundrum, like a mathematical theorem that has yet to be proved, or an unsolved philosophical paradox. Yet the commentary on the issue is often so abysmal that it is no wonder conservative politicians can get so much leverage out of the idea that the liberal media are biased and out of touch. In fact, the discourse on that particular issue ends up revealing many of the issues I have talked about today.

Much of the commentary on that topic has been crude and even patronizing. But we can take a piece that does not suffer from those ails as an example. *Politico Magazine* recently produced a thoughtful, well-written, roughly 4,000 word essay titled, [“Does the White Working Class Really Vote against Its Own Interests?”](#)

The essay is notable in several ways. First, it properly traces this question to the first researcher to posit it in systematic form, W.E.B. DuBois, who influenced by Marx argued in *Black Reconstruction* that plantation owners drove a wedge between black and white workers to help keep wages low and prevent worker-led coalitions that might undermine their economic power. Second, the *Politico* essay does what must be described as an unusually good job at tracing the history of this idea, particularly given the space constraints of magazine article.

Ultimately, the author concludes that “working-class whites historically derived both psychological and citizenship wages by privileging race over class.” That is to say, he argues that working-class whites vote Republican against their economic self-interest because they are getting psychological benefits from a party that celebrates their whiteness.

Whether or not one agrees with that argument, a qualitatively literate reader would be attuned to the kind of evidence needed in support of it. The argument that working-class whites vote against their interests because of the psychological benefits is suggesting that people in social class are motivated to act based on psychological gains. That is, as an argument about people’s motivation, it requires interviews with such people about what motivates their behavior.

Astonishingly, the 4,000-word piece does not offer a *single* quotation from a working-class white person about what motivated her or his vote. Imagine, in parallel, a 4,000 word argument about why income inequality has increased that does not present a single statistic demonstrating that income inequality has increased. Lacking data appropriate to its core claim, the proposition should be fundamentally unpublishable.

But it is not, in part because the piece makes an argument that, to its middle-class, coastal, highly educated editors, makes plausible sense. It is also not unpublishable because we have become accustomed to a discourse lacking the habits of thought essential to robust reasoning about qualitative evidence: among them, the ability to communicate a person’s perspective as they understand it, the precaution about the bias through which outgroups appear homogenous, and the sensitivity about the kinds of data that an argument about people’s motivations would require. The piece manages to demonstrate all three problems I have spoken of today.

To be clear, what is strong and effective about the piece is its historical reconstruction of what theorists have said about this issue. The more appropriate title would have been not “Does the White Working Class Really Vote against Its Own Interests?” but “What Theorists Have Proposed about How the Working Class Votes”; the more appropriate argument would have been not about what working-class people do or think but about what researchers throughout history have argued or claimed. In these particular respects, the essay is terrific. But its unsubstantiated claims pass muster only among those already inclined to believe them, and they in the end offer more evidence for the complaints among commentators on the right that journalists and pundits on the left are blind to their own biases.

TO CONCLUDE

Political polarization has resulted from many factors. But an important one has been how people in different parts of the country interpret the facts around them, interpretations strongly filtered by the media they consume. In this environment, the most important asset of a reasonable citizen is the ability to consume the news, real or fake, and the commentary, liberal or conservative, attuned to the

relation between rhetoric and evidence. We have come to understand that quantitative literacy is essential to this ability; it is time we recognize that qualitative literacy is equally indispensable.