
The Media “Event” and Erasure of Dialogue: On Image- and Decision-Making in U.S. Elections

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Abstract | As new media emerge, especially social networking, the individual’s process of making political decisions will change. Despite early claims that social networking might usher in more participatory forms of democracy, the opposite may be true. This article analyzes the decision-making process of thirteen young, undecided voters in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Election to understand how they are using social media to reach decisions. These young voters value an appearance of authenticity in political candidates, but they seem to resolve the “information overload” of news coverage and campaign advertising by focusing on a single random event rather than engaging in dialogue with others or by looking for consistency across events. An analysis of these young voters’ processes will demonstrate what is absent from their decisions, which they seem to have made in isolation—made, that is, without showing awareness or consideration of broader political/historical/rhetorical contexts. This leads us to ask, what kind of thinking—and, hence, what kind of decision-making—might have emerged had they engaged more actively in living, face-to-face democratic dialogue? As a corollary, the article raises a key question concerning the nation’s political process: In a media-saturated culture, how can we sustain a healthy dialogue about social justice?

Keywords | Social Networking, Aristotle, Jean Baudrillard, *Paradeigma*, Rhetorical Example, Event, U.S. Presidential Elections, Hannah Arendt, Democratic Dialogue, Social Justice

The most famous political advertisement—perhaps, the most effective as well—ran only once. It was 1964. Then-President and Democratic candidate, Lyndon B. Johnson, was running against his Republican opponent, Barry Goldwater, who opposed the recently-signed Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.¹ Even though U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War had not yet escalated, Goldwater said that he might end it with nuclear weapons. This is the backstory. The advertisement itself, which ran for thirty seconds, showed a young girl standing in a field and counting to ten (incorrectly) as she pulled petals from a daisy. The girl’s counting fades to a male voice counting backwards. As the camera zooms in on her eyes, a nuclear explosion—a flash and then a mushroom cloud. Then we hear Johnson’s voiceover: “These are the stakes! To make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the dark, we must either love each other, or we must die” (“Daisy Ad”). When he recorded these words, Johnson was the Commander in Chief of the U.S. armed forces. Napalm and Agent Orange were already being used in Vietnam. Yet, the complicated ethics of the war were erased with a single girl. A single place. A single viewing. A single image. A single event. And just a few words.²

During the 1988 presidential campaign, a political group supporting George H.W. Bush ran the Willie Horton ad repeatedly. Horton, a Black man, serving a life sentence for murder in Massachusetts, was furloughed for the weekend. Instead of returning to prison, he fled to Maryland, where he committed assault, armed robbery, and rape. Michael Dukakis, Bush’s Democratic opponent, was then Governor of Massachusetts and had supported the furlough program. An anti-Dukakis ad about Horton’s furlough ran multiple times in multiple markets. It told the entire story of Horton breaking into a young couple’s house, stabbing the husband, and raping the wife, but what most viewers remembered was Horton’s mug shot—a Black man with an Afro. The news media was slow to denounce the ad as racist.³ Perhaps, the furlough program reformed a number of

¹On August 5, 1963, the Partial Test Ban Treaty was signed by the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. After U.S. Senate approval, the treaty that went into effect on October 10, 1963, banned nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water. See, “Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.” *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Partial_Nuclear_Test_Ban_Treaty.

²In *Daisy Petals and Mushroom Clouds*, Robert Mann argues that the ad became “the most powerful symbol of a new era of politics” (xi). For political ads, it marked a shift from radio to television. The shift in media entailed a shift from ads that included more information about issues to ads that focused on images. For Kathleen M. German’s review in *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, see, German, Kathleen M. “Review of Robert Mann’s *Daisy Petals and Mushroom Clouds*.” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3, September 2012, pp. 669–71. To view the ad, see “Daisy Ad (1964).”

³The commercial is in color—except for the mug shot, which is shown in black-and-white and just slightly off-focus. The camera angle makes Horton seem as if he’s looking down upon the spectator (the effect of which is the heightening of his implicit power and potential for violence). This will not be the first or last time that U.S. media would manipulate the image of African-American males, making them darker in color and seemingly more menacing. In *The Race Card*, Tali Mendelberg argues that the Horton ad was effective because it only implicitly referenced race. When race is evoked overtly, the audience is reminded of

inmates. Perhaps, Dukakis could have explained it better, but the ad was effective, maybe even decisive in Bush's win. A single mug shot. A single image.

We could say that these two ads use example as a form of induction, as Aristotle describes *paradeigma* in his *Rhetoric*.⁴ It seems, however, that they are on the verge of something new, not a new form of argument, yet something that persuades, or temporarily resolves a tension between two unsatisfactory choices—they are almost “events.” The event, as I use the term in this article, will not fully emerge until the early twenty-first century; it would not be effective until social media appeared. This will not be an analysis of political ads. It will be a discussion, written in the weeks after the 2024 presidential election in the U.S., of how a dialogue about social justice issues can be easily lost in a rhetorical failure, an inability to escape a single—often random—event.

The Example

In our historical moment, my concern for the discussion of social justice issues is that we are unable to move beyond the “one”—that is, beyond an audience's singular focus upon a single, seemingly isolated “event.” Let me begin with a short detour to what we call the birth of rationality in Western civilization, the fifth-century BCE, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, particularly to Aristotle's discussion of the example. The example—as Aristotle explains it, rather cryptically, in what were his lecture notes—is a form of induction, a movement from the specific to the general. The example, Aristotle says, is a “part to part” comparison (1.2.19),⁵ a form of argument that is essentially a metaphor. Although Aristotle doesn't mention metaphor, he seems to be thinking of rhetorical tropes. He writes that the example is not a comparison of “part to whole” (a synecdoche) or whole to part (a metonymy). This would seem to indicate that the example, as a rhetorical argument, begins with the specific/concrete instance *and stays there*. Yet it is, according to Aristotle, a form of induction. *Paradeigma*, the Greek word for example, more clearly implies that an example is meant to illustrate more than a single event. (We see this in English usage, where paradigm denotes an overarching pattern or model, as well as a singular instance.) As Benoit argues, the “part to part” comparison includes a general term, implied but not stated.⁶ The implied general term is similar to the missing term of

egalitarian values and then rejects the ad. This is a key point I will make in this article, that an “event” (such as the Horton ad) is more persuasive when it is experienced but not processed through reflection or dialogue. For the reviews of Mendelberg's book, see, Frymer, Paul. “Review of Tali Mendelberg's *The Race Card*.” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2003, pp. 667–68; Hutchings, Vincent L. “Review of Tali Mendelberg's *The Race Card*.” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 96, no. 3, 2002, pp. 647–48. To view the Horton ad, see “Willie Horton: Political Ads.”

⁴As Aristotle notes, “to derive a general law from a number of like instances is in Dialectic induction, in Rhetoric example [*paradeigma*]” (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1356b). Donald E. Bushman explains: “When one uses examples in argumentative discourse, one is arguing from particular instances to a general conclusion, or from known particulars to an unknown one. It is important to remember that rhetorical induction does not *prove* anything; it is arguing from probability that known instances are parallel to and illuminating to those less well known” (247; emphasis in original).

⁵I am using George A. Kennedy's translation of the *Rhetoric*.

⁶Benoit is responding to Hauser's “Aristotle's Example Revised.” Hauser does acknowledge that the example, in Aristotle, is a form of induction, but Benoit felt he did not adequately explain how the example moved from the particular to the general. See, Hauser, Gerard A. “Aristotle's Example Revisited.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1985, pp. 171–80.

an enthymeme⁷ or the warrant in Toulman’s model.⁸ Even though not necessarily stated, it makes the comparison of “part to part” work. Furthermore, the two types of examples that Aristotle mentions in the *Rhetoric* are history (we might consider this a nonfiction argument) and fable (a fiction argument). These are both narrative structures. Therefore, the “part to part” comparison is essentially narrative to narrative.

Since the 1970s, whenever the United States is considering war, some American politician will say, “This is going to be another Vietnam.” This is argument from example (history); it is an argument that metaphorically compares a narrative of the Vietnam war to a not-yet-realized narrative of a future war. The “part to part” comparison evokes a number of general statements that can then be used to explore the implications of the new war: “war is unpredictable,” “don’t get involved in a foreign civil war,” or “even superpowers have trouble handling resistance from insurrectionists.” I want to make two points from this detour. First, the example is a form of induction. It might begin with the singular/concrete (a historical event, like Vietnam), but it moves to or evokes an abstract truth. It doesn’t remain within a single event. Second, it invites dialogue and critique. Will Vietnam (a jungle war) be the same as a potential war against Iraq (a desert war)? Should we explore other historical parallels? Etc.

If we substitute the Vietnam War for the Peloponnesian War, this kind of argument could have been delivered in the *agora* or forum of fifth-century BCE Athens. Now, we have other forms of induction: the scientific method and statistics. We have bureaucracies and algorithms to manage Big Data, to attempt to make sense of it, and to develop policies from it. We are at the beginnings of Artificial Intelligence, but it is hard to say where that will lead. We also have other forms of communication: Beyond radio, film, and television (which were revolutionary in the previous century), political pundits and influencers today inhabit such media spaces as Facebook, X, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube (to name several). These expand, amplify, and digitally record discourse in ways unanticipated by classical rhetorical theory.

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle offered advice to a speaker who, without even a microphone, addressed an audience physically present. Now, our political discussions (I am using “discussion” to indicate something less than “dialogue”) rarely happen face-to-face or even in traditional print media. Discussions—*exchanges* is maybe more accurate—typically unfold on social media: Facebook, X, Instagram, etc. As Hannah Arendt argued (*Origins* 409), totalitarianism and propaganda emerged with new media: the daily newspaper, radio, and film. In the early twenty-first century, social media is transforming politics. We have not even begun to understand its implications for democracy and dialogue about social justice.

⁷An enthymeme is a less formal and concise form of logic, wherein the syllogistic “middle term” is generally accepted as true and can be implied (*Rhetoric* 1.2.13). “Being a man, Socrates will die” is an example whose middle term (“all men die”) need not be stated.

⁸In *The Uses of Argument*, Stephen Toulman presented a model for analyzing and constructing arguments. A claim (“there are dogs nearby”) is supported by the ground (“I hear barking and howling”). The warrant, which is often not stated, is the logical tie between claim and evidence (“dogs bark and howl”).

The Event

As social networking emerged, a number of theorists have written about the “event,” which seems more suited to our current communication landscape than Aristotle’s example. If we consider Sigmund Freud as an origin, the event carries trauma. If we move on to Jacques Lacan, the event spurs development as a young child gazes into a mirror. Gilles Deleuze considered his entire corpus an explication of the event, an explication that challenges traditional views of what is real (Bartlett et al. 117–63; Ford 41–71). In this article, I will focus on Jean Baudrillard, who understands the “ecstasy of communication” better than anyone. These theorists do not compare *event* to Aristotle’s *example*, but Baudrillard’s theory will help us to understand how our current media (touted, in its early days, as promoting personal expression and participatory democracy) has reduced the scope of political dialogue, flattened it, and randomized it.

Let’s begin with a thought experiment. Imagine the difference between reading a daily newspaper at the beginning of the twentieth century and scrolling through the feed of Facebook, Instagram, or X in late 2024, around the time of the U.S. Presidential Election. Social networking platforms include information in print, but they also include sound, video, animation, and memes. If we consider these posts as arguments, they are certainly a different kind of argument than Aristotle’s example. They are more like what we might experience in a Broadway theater—more like watching a spectacle. If posts on social media are a form of argument, the speaker seems anonymous or absent, the message seems lost in a series of random effects, and we, as the audience, expectantly wait for a moment that will startle us.

To understand some of the implications of this shift, we can turn to Baudrillard—almost to anything he has written. I will begin with “The Implosion of Meaning in Media,” a short essay in *Simulacra and Simulation*, published in 1981, long before the advent of social networking platforms. In the following quote, Baudrillard is exploring what happens when we are overwhelmed with information. We might think that “information produces meaning,” but he says the opposite happens:

Rather than producing meaning, it [information] exhausts itself in the staging of meaning. A gigantic process of simulation that is very familiar. The nondirective interview, speech, listeners who call in, participation at every level, blackmail through speech: “You are concerned, you are the event, etc.” More and more information is invaded by this kind of phantom content, the homeopathic grafting, this awakening dream of communication. A circular arrangement through which one stages the desire of the audience, the antitheater of communication, which, one knows, is never anything but recycling in the negative of traditional institution, the integrated circuit of the negative. (80)

I am sure that some who read this passage in 1981 must have thought that Baudrillard was a lunatic, like the madman in Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* who walks through the middle of town, in broad daylight, lantern in hand, screaming, “God is dead.” Reading him in December 2024, Baudrillard seems more like a prophet.

While I could spend a page or two on each phrase in the quote above, I want to emphasize Baudrillard’s use of phrases that point to a lost connection with reality (theater, staging, phantom, simulation, grafting, dream), the effect of an assault of information

(exhaustion, recycling, circularity, blackmail) and the word that holds all of this together—event. Baudrillard says, “You are the event.” The spectacle might be public. How it affects the audience is idiosyncratic and... I want to say individualistic or personal or interior. None of the words quite works. Perhaps, monologic, as used by Bakhtin.⁹ The event is the opposite of dialogue.

Later in the essay, Baudrillard writes, “Behind the exacerbated *mise-en-scène* of communication, the mass media, the pressure of information pursues an irresistible destruction of the social” (81). To bring Baudrillard up to date, which doesn’t take much effort, we could say that media, as it exists in our current historical moment, is transforming itself at an ever-accelerating pace, that we are living in a simulation of the social, that we are exhausted with information, and that we are losing connection with the real—if by “the real” we refer to living human bodies moving in time and space through a material world. We are often swept away in an “ecstasy of communication.” The only way to protect ourselves is to shut off devices, which most of us are unwilling to do, or to wait for an event to emerge from noise and provide a fleeting sense of meaning. As with eating junk food, this meaning (or, rather, this consumption of information, since “meaning” brings a promise of communication value) is not satisfying or nourishing. We are left with nothing but orange fingertips from eating a bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos. Baudrillard writes: “We live by a passionate idealism of meaning and of communication, by an idealization of communication through meaning, and from this perspective, it is truly *the catastrophe of meaning* that lies in wait for us” (83). Baudrillard’s reference to “idealization” is on point. Submerged in our failures in communication is a poorly constructed Utopia where absolute good and absolute evil are easily sorted and where actions have no consequences. In social media, we can substitute an avatar for our photograph and then slowly construct a perfect life, post after post. Remaining anonymous, we can hurl insults against anyone who challenges our beliefs.

Undecided Young’uns

Let us see if we can make meaning from Baudrillard by applying his theory to current politics. The 2024 U.S. Presidential Election—as we were told, ad nauseum, by both sides—was about the future of democracy. It is hard to imagine an advancement of social justice without a healthy democracy. If democracy in the United States is not already in its death throes, its future will depend on the young’uns: the Millennials (born 1981–1996), the Gen Zs (born 1997–2012), and whatever else is coming down the pike. Baby Boomers, like me, may stick around a while longer so we can keep mucking things up, but the future is with the young’uns. They are already having an impact, and they may have been the demographic that determined the 2024 election. That remains to be determined, but what do we know, in these early days after the election, about young voters?

From August through the November election, *The New York Times* followed thirteen young voters. In August, they were all undecided. *The NY Times* checked in with them often, but I am going to focus on the post-election article (see, Healy et al.). The

⁹The monologic is best described as what it is not—the dialogic. Emerson and Morson write: “The dialogic sense of truth manifests unfinalizability by existing on the ‘threshold’ of several interacting consciousnesses, a ‘plurality’ of ‘unmerged voices.’ [...] The voices cannot be contained in a single consciousness, as in monologism; rather, their separateness is essential to the dialogue” (236–37).

article is rich with quotes and worthy of study. For the sake of brevity, I will refer to the group as the Thirteen.¹⁰ Let me make it clear that I am not critiquing the moral or intellectual character of these young voters. I am focused, rather, on their “rhetorical situation” and its texts: specifically, on the characterizations these thirteen have given of their own decision-making processes, each of which, for all appearances, proved singularly reliant upon a single example or event. For it’s a *rhetorical* analysis that I’m engaged in, one that aims to demonstrate the inordinate power of the paradigmatic “one.” Concomitantly (and perhaps ineluctably), it’s a power of persuasion that is purchased at the price of (over)simplification. Where examples reign, the more rigorous modes of logical demonstration fall asleep (as, indeed, do an individual’s capacities for critique and self-reflection: these, too, tend to fall asleep). Let me again quote Bushman on the Aristotelian model:

Whereas full logical induction enumerates all possible instances, the rhetorical argument by example almost always enumerates less than the total. [...] If one provides examples, for instance, of the voting records of all one hundred U.S. senators to make a general statement [...] one is making use of full induction. In a typical rhetorical situation, however, a writer or speaker hasn’t the time and the reader or listener hasn’t the patience to deal with every possible example. Instead, one chooses representative examples, the persuasive value of which is strengthened by their relevance and by means of their connection to other rhetorical devices. (247)

In the “rhetorical situation” of the Thirteen, we see this lack of “time” and “patience” taking its toll. In making this last observation, I’m not quarreling with their votes; rather, I’m pointing to an effect of rhetoric that popular media has amplified—to the detriment, I would argue, of reasoned, informed, reflective choice within democratic governance.

What follows, I freely admit, is itself a rhetorical strategy, one that treats the Thirteen as *paradeigmata*, themselves. I am reading and responding to these, not as human histories but as rhetorical *exempla*, each embedded within a larger political narrative. In effect, their texts become themselves “events” that I’ve chosen to dialogue with, rhetorically. More than analysis, you can call the following an argument—an argument by example.

As a group, the Thirteen seem bright and well informed, but not particularly ideological. Most of them do not speak of themselves as Democrats or Republicans, and they often switch their votes from one party to the other, election to election. They are deeply distrustful of mainstream media, less so of social media. A few of the Thirteen were concerned about inflation and the economy, but this did not seem to drive how they voted. *The Thirteen were most concerned about authenticity*. They found, in my opinion, good reason to question the authenticity—and, hence, the projected image or ethos—of both candidates, Donald J. Trump and Kamala Harris.

Jack (22, New York, white, underwriter, voted Biden in 2020, Trump in 2024) said: “The Joe Rogan interview was huge for me. Trump enthusiastically said yes to a

¹⁰The *NY Times* undecided voters might not be typical of their generation. Indeed, it is hard to find a common thread even among the Thirteen. This will not be an exhaustive analysis. I want to focus on a few insights and use them to say something about what democracy demands of us all, not just the young’uns.

three-hour, open, honest conversation with Joe Rogan, who was a former Bernie bro.¹¹ I think it’s very telling about which candidate is authentic and which candidate is not.”¹² I am sure this quote makes many liberals cringe, but Jack is operating from a good value (authenticity) and he is reasonable, at least, in how he explains his decision. Trump sat with Rogan for three hours; Harris did not. Several of the Thirteen mentioned that Harris, in their view, only did interviews on “entertainment” platforms. It is interesting that *The Joe Rogan Experience* was not classified as “entertainment.”

In our current media landscape, the distinction between traditional news, entertainment, and social media is blurry. What is unclear is how Jack experienced the Rogan interview. Did he watch the entire interview as an audio podcast? Or, as a podcast with video? Or, as a snippet or two on YouTube? Maybe Jack even saw the same snippets repeatedly. Maybe he viewed most of the interview in fragments, out of sequence. A fragment, a snippet, a soundbite: These are easier to react to as an event. Some voters, for example, watched the entire presidential debate between Trump and Harris. This experience is more complex and nuanced. If viewed as segments on YouTube, Harris might have seemed weaker or stronger, considering which fragment was viewed. Harris started out shaky and gained strength as the debate proceeded. In the vice-presidential debate, Democratic candidate Tim Walz’s performance was generally weak, except for one moment, when he asked Republican candidate, J. D. Vance, if the 2020 election had been stolen.¹³ Watching only a YouTube clip of Walz asking this question and Vance struggling to answer would make Walz seem stronger than if the entire debate were watched. The snippets, fragments, and soundbites are media-structured events. They are well suited to digital media, which we tend to sample in small bits. To be understood, the complete debates have to be analyzed—reflected on over time or discussed with friends. The event is immediately experienced as complete, self-sufficient, and unambiguous.

With the event, even authenticity, typically difficult to assess in any form of media, seems apparent in the moment. For example, Laura (22, Maryland, white, legal intern, too young to vote in 2020, voted Trump in 2024) said: “I was looking for a candidate I felt I could trust. A key moment that stuck out to me was the ‘S.N.L.’ skit that Harris did, where she essentially made fun of herself. All of her focus was going to entertainment industries and avoiding interviews. That came off to me as very phony.”¹⁴ Again, the importance of authenticity. This is a good value, but we might question her process. Could Harris’s willingness to laugh at herself be viewed as authentic? Could Trump’s unwillingness to laugh at himself be viewed as inauthentic?¹⁵

¹¹Jack is referring to Bernie Sanders, the prominent U.S. senator from Vermont whose democratic-socialist views stand radically opposed to Trumpian populism. Sanders was a regular guest on Rogan’s podcast, though that in itself hardly makes Rogan a “Bernie bro” or fan. They do, however, share something in common: both Rogan and Sanders are political independents, affiliated with neither major U.S. party.

¹²For the interview, see, “Joe Rogan Experience #2219 – Donald Trump.” *The Joe Rogan Experience*, 25 Oct. 2024, <https://youtu.be/hBMoPUAeLnY?si=d2trJP2jsKOeCEDG>.

¹³For the complete text, see, Becket, Stefan. “Read the Full VP Debate Transcript from the Walz–Vance Showdown.” *CBS News*, 2 Oct. 2024. www.cbsnews.com/news/full-vp-debate-transcript-walz-vance-2024/.

¹⁴In the last days of the 2024 election, Harris appeared on SNL on November 2. See the SNL Wiki page on Harris at https://snl.fandom.com/wiki/Kamala_Harris.

¹⁵Let me add a further observation here pertinent to the “rhetoricity” of rhetoric, itself. As Aristotle notes, rhetoric differs from dialectic in that its arguments aim at probability—not logical/epistemological

Less apparent in Laura's comment is the way that the event, which seems to have triggered an intuitive decision to vote against Harris, comes prepackaged with its own interpretation, which she uses to justify her decision. She said that Harris avoided interviews (she means on traditional news platforms) and only did "entertainment" interviews. In the early days of Harris's campaign, this was a frequently repeated criticism. Laura may have even heard a comment like this before she watched Harris on SNL, which would have shaped her experience with that event. She doesn't have to analyze the event; social media does that for her so seamlessly that event and interpretation are difficult to see as separate.

In point of fact, Harris had 107 days to run her campaign. Most candidates begin preparing a few years out. Harris also needed to formulate policies and strategies before beginning interviews. She did several interviews with mainstream media, including Fox News. Trump cancelled interviews, especially in the final weeks. Presidential candidates often appear on SNL and poke fun at themselves. In 2008, both McCain and his VP candidate, Sarah Palin, went on SNL.¹⁶ In 1968, Richard Nixon tried to make himself seem less stiffly formal by going on *Laugh In* to say, "Sock it to me."¹⁷ In contrast, Trump rarely pokes fun at himself. I have never seen him laugh. Here, in response to Laura, I'm trying to put the event into context and evaluate it. I am trying to construct my own meaning, looking for patterns and consistency across events. This is what seems to be missing from the Thirteen's consumption of media during the election.

While almost all of the Thirteen mentioned authenticity, they were not consistent about what event pushed them to a decision. It is striking how randomly they settled on *their* event. Their processes, however, were remarkably similar. As with Jake and Laura, they tended to focus on one event and emphasize it without qualifications or context. They focused on *the* single event—not so much an issue—as if that alone provided all the information they needed to cast a responsible, informed vote. When prompted toward the end of the focus group, they were able to discuss issues, even in depth. But their take on issues didn't seem decisive. Once they experienced the event, their thought process seemed to end. If one focuses on a single event, then patterns, consistency, and contradiction are never considered.¹⁸ It seems like their view of authenticity is rather flat.

certainly—and deal with appearances (*Rhetoric* 1.1.354a). Within the classical rhetorical model, *every argument is reversible*. One could in fact argue that "authenticity" is never anything more than an appearance, curated and manipulated by media.

I, personally, embrace an ethic grounded existentially in authenticity, which is itself grounded in the exercise of self-reflection leading in turn to self-knowledge and ethical care/responsibility. Like Jack and others among the Thirteen, *I want to believe in the possibility* of personal authenticity. This is an aspect of ethos that enables us to trust others, even if it requires "a leap of faith." If we cannot place our trust in the politicians whom we vote for, then whom can we trust? Who can deserve our vote?

¹⁶McCain hosted SNL on October 19, 2002. During the 2008 campaign against Obama, he appeared on Weekend Update on November 1. See the SNL Wiki page on McCain at https://snl.fandom.com/wiki/John_McCain. Palin appeared on October 18, 2008. See the SNL Wiki page on Palin at https://snl.fandom.com/wiki/Sarah_Palin.

¹⁷Nixon appeared on *Laugh-In* on September 16, 1968. See, Edwards, Phil. "What Really Happened When Nixon Did Laugh-In." *Youtube*, 11 Dec. 2022, <https://youtu.be/RejncCk2QxE?si=OK64B5LIPHXCjBOJ>.

¹⁸It seems like, in an age when almost everything is recorded and available online, that consistency would be key to evaluating authenticity, especially when many politicians contradict themselves. *The Daily Show* is particular adept at collecting a series of contradictory statements on policy and presenting them in a

For example, Lillian (27, Virginia, white, digital advertising, voted Trump in 2020 and 2024) said: “The thing that was really the nail in the coffin for me was when Biden called half the country garbage and then the White House moved to change the record officially. That really bothered me. That made me really want to rally against them.” Again, authenticity. I agree that the statement was undemocratic, and the White House should have owned it and apologized. What interested me, however, was the focus on this single Biden comment—a single event. This is the process that candidates and many 24/7 cable news programs model. Fox News, for example, spent days commenting on Biden’s “garbage” statement.¹⁹ Trump himself dressed up like a garbage man and, as a photo op, climbed into a garbage truck.²⁰ The same news media that create the noise of too much information do their best to transform bits of information into events.

For Abigail (23, Virginia, white, graduate assistant, voted Biden in 2020, Trump in 2024), the event was a Harris advertisement “where there are two married couples and the two wives went in to vote secretly and they glanced at each other and then voted for Kamala Harris—oh, my gosh. Is that what you think of married women, that we don’t have the confidence to marry men who are our equal partners? I cannot vote for a party that thinks that poorly of me.”²¹ I see her point. What I find troubling is the focus on this one event. She doesn’t move from this statement to other events in Harris’s campaign. She doesn’t compare it to the other candidate’s statements and actions. The spectacle of this one event, to her, explains everything.

Implications

The Thirteen are digital natives. They have been trained—the word is not too strong—to skip from one bit of information to the next. They were also raised in a world with too much information. Much has been said about the way social media rewards us for living in information silos. Not enough has been said about information overload and how we need to become radically and arbitrarily selective to adapt to social media. The Thirteen might not even be representative of their demographic, but their process may very well be typical of how many current voters, regardless of their generation, participate in the democratic process.

I see the Thirteen as hitting a point of information overload, experiencing one event, making their decision, and then shutting down. I don’t see evidence of sustained reflection, analysis, or dialogue. None of the Thirteen cited a discussion with family or friends as the event that triggered their decision. Perhaps, the range of what they chose

montage. See, Spocchia, Gino. “Daily Show Supercut Ridicules Lindsey Graham’s Attacks on Trump Before He Took Power.” *Independent*, 31 Oct. 2020, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/daily-show-supercut-ridicules-lindsey-graham-s-attacks-on-president-before-he-took-power-b1479902.html. While humorous, these contradictions, even when pointed out, seem to have little effect on how the politician is viewed.

¹⁹See, Wulfsohn Joseph A., and Jacqui Heinrich. “White House Altered Biden’s ‘Garbage’ Transcript despite Concerns from Stenographers.” *Fox News*, 31 Oct. 2024, www.foxnews.com/media/white-house-altered-bidens-garbage-transcript-despite-concerns-from-stenographers.

²⁰See, WBNS 10TV. “Donald Trump Boards Garbage Truck to Draw Attention to Biden’s Remarks.” *YouTube*, 31 Oct. 2024, <https://youtu.be/-PBPSmqPUtQ?si=oj-kCa-o2stzx8b>.

²¹See, Yang, Angela. “Political Ad Ignites Conservative Anger over Women Possibly Hiding Their Vote from Their Husbands.” *NBC News*, 4 Nov. 2024, www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/political-ad-ignites-conservative-anger-women-possibly-hiding-vote-hus-rcna178584.

to focus on, which seems erratic to me, is an indication of them making decisions in isolation.

If the Thirteen's decision-making process is widely spread, perhaps a growing trend in our rapidly changing media landscape, it will impact the future of democracy and dialogue about social justice issues:

1. *The Thirteen were generally dissatisfied with both candidates.* This tracks with other sources that have reported on “double haters” and erratic shifts in some voter demographics (see, Miller’s “How Some Voters Moved from Bernie Sanders to Donald Trump”; and Klein’s *Doppelganger* 94–113). This may be connected to the kind of family structure that often produces the “authoritarian personality” (see, Adorno et al.’s *The Authoritarian Personality*; Erikson’s “The Legend of Hitler’s Childhood”; and Hoffer’s *The True Believer*).²² Another cause might be, as Baudrillard contends, a vague sense of Utopia embedded in advertising campaigns.²³ How can we sustain a dialogue about Social Justice issues when voters are disillusioned with the entire political process?
2. *The Thirteen valued authenticity but the value seems poorly developed.* As they focused on one event, they did not look for patterns, consistency, or contradictions. While authenticity is certainly a problematic concept, especially within the context of postmodernism, I think most theorists would agree that consistency is important (see, Jensen’s *The Ethics of Nonfiction* 21–55; Jensen’s “The Rhetoric of Permanence and Change”). It is difficult to say much about how the Thirteen might define authenticity, but they seem to use it within the context of Political Correctness. As the norms of Political Correctness developed since the late 1950s, most politicians have become increasingly cautious about their public statements. Politicians who seem to ignore the norms of Political Correctness (for example, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders) seem authentic. Have we reached a point where discussion of social justice issues seems, by default, inauthentic?
3. *The Thirteen’s anxiety increased until it was resolved, at least temporarily, by an event.* The event allowed them to find enough meaning in the moment to move toward a candidate they already favored or away from one they found troubling. Do extended discussions of social justice issues increase the anxiety of many voters, maybe even make them feel like they are bad people?
4. *The Thirteen’s interaction with an event seemed arbitrary.* As I have suggested throughout this essay, the context of the event is less narrative than image, less speaker than authorless messages, less audience than witness, less a political campaign than spectacle. The Thirteen seemed to wait for an event to appear from the background noise of information overload. Why one event attracts attention when so many other events are ignored is hard to say. Maybe, it is highly personal,

²²On my Substack platform, I published a series of essays that analyzed these works and used them to explain both the MAGA movement and Wokers. For an introduction to the series, see, Jensen, George H. “Divided America: An Origin Story.” *Democratic Vistas*, 18 Jul. 2024, <https://georgejensen.substack.com/p/divided-america-an-origin-story>.

²³In *Fatal Strategies*, Baudrillard writes: “In ecstasy: this is the object in advertising, as is the consumer in contemplation of the advertisement—the spinning of use-value and exchange-value into annihilation in the pure and empty form of the brand-name” (28).

even idiosyncratic, almost random. The right image hitting the right person who happens to be in the right mood. In an environment of mass media overload, how can Social Justice issues demand attention?

5. *The Thirteen’s experience with the event seems, for them, self-sufficient and complete.* The event might provide fleeting meaning, but it erases much more. Consider Laura who seemed to use feminist values to critique the Harris ad about women voting secretly against their husbands but ignored Trump’s misogyny. The event is isolated from other issues and comes with its own prepackaged interpretation. Rather than initiate dialogue, it finishes it. How can we have sustained dialogue about social justice issues when networks of issues are reduced to the singular event?

I didn’t see any of the Thirteen looking for patterns, placing the event into a context, or weighing the seriousness of the event by thinking through its implications. In other words, the event struck them viscerally—as if it were a slap in the face. We could say that it was not just “an event,” it was the “final event.” The event resolved ambivalence, provided a sense of meaning, and allowed the witness—this is a good way to describe how the Thirteen processed the event—to act, to cast a vote. The event is but a moment. It soon passes. It has been felt and does not need to be discussed or processed. The randomness of this process might explain why polling has been so inaccurate in recent years.²⁴

Rationality as Mystique

It would be wrong to attribute this process to the Thirteen being young or undecided voters, since people from all demographics proceed largely in this unreflective way. In *The Enigma of Reason*, Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber wrote that people reason “not to solve the problem—that they had already done intuitively—but to justify their intuitive decision” (44). In other words, people make decisions intuitively and then develop reasons for arriving at that decision, either to justify it to others or themselves. We are less rational, Mercier and Sperber say, than we think. With the Thirteen, the event is what triggers the “intuitive decision.” This, in itself, is not necessarily bad. The problem is stopping with a flash of intuition. As Mercier and Sperber explain, “What is problematic isn’t solitary reasoning per se, but solitary reasoning that remains solitary. Reasoning, however, is bound to sometimes remain in one’s head, as people fully anticipate when they will be called to defend their opinions. [...] Modern environments distort our ability to anticipate disagreements” (249).

If we are essentially irrational, what does that say about the future of democracy? Mercier and Sperber also write: “Instincts can be seen as ‘natural expertises.’ Expertises could be seen as ‘acquired instincts’” (69). In other words, not all intuitive decisions are the same, and people can learn how to make better intuitive decisions. Even though our thought process might be rather submerged, even from our own awareness, we can still learn to think better. Doctors, scientists, and engineers typically make better decisions

²⁴Political polling will, no doubt, continue, but it has been wildly inaccurate in the last few decades. After the 2024 campaign, Ann Selzer, pollster for the Des Moines *Register*, considered to be the best pollster in the country, retired after her last poll had Harris ahead of Trump in Iowa. See, Reilly, Liam. “Ann Selzer to End Election Polling After 16-Point Miss in Final Iowa Survey.” *CNN*, 17 Nov. 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/11/17/media/iowa-pollster-ann-selzer-retire-trump-harris/index.html>.

about their area of expertise. And their expertise deepens as they talk with other experts. Something similar can happen in other domains of life, including politics.

This doesn't necessarily mean going to graduate school to work on a PhD in Philosophy and writing the definitive dissertation on Kant. It can come from engaging in respectful political dialogue with people who have diverse views and experiences, which helps us develop better intuitions (to make more nuanced decisions, even when the decision is made rather automatically) and more accurately anticipate responses (to internalize a dialectic and critique the original decision). This rarely happens in our divided country, which means we will become more divided.

All of the Thirteen said that they enjoyed participating in the focus group. They enjoyed listening to how others were thinking, which suggests that the experience was rare or nonexistent for them. Mark (24, California, Black, chef, voted Bided in 2020) said:

I grew up in Alabama, and now I'm in California. Seeing a group of people who can actually debate and care about the candidates and aren't loyal to a party but loyal to a set of ideas and real things—it gives me hope for the future of our country. I don't trust the leadership at the top right now. But I think with people like us coming up, real change can come through. I think we can fix problems.

Mark and the others want debate. I don't agree, however, that a focus group is the same as a debate or a dialogue. It is more a means of studying views already formed than it is a way of processing and challenging those views, a give and take, someone saying, "Have you thought about...?" We are living in a world that is so absent of true dialogue that we mistake a series of monologues for a dialogue, an interplay of opposing voices, an open space where nothing is certain, where arguments become transparent instead of assumed or implied, and where everyone emerges changed. This is what philosophers, since Plato, have called the dialectic—arriving at truth through deep and systematic dialogue.

The Danger of Purity

One final point, perhaps the most important. The Thirteen consistently disliked both candidates. They wanted a better choice. We could talk about how mass media, the primary system, and donor money taint the system. Probably all of these factors play a role in the selection of candidates. While they didn't say it, the Thirteen seem to want purity—a candidate they can adore. Baudrillard wrote about the "idealization of communication." The Thirteen seem to look for *the* event that will allow them to overlook the faults of one candidate or *the* event that will produce such emotional outrage that another candidate becomes unacceptable. They don't seem to view the candidates as human and as necessarily flawed. They don't seem willing to evaluate flaws—to decide which flaws are acceptable or benign and which are unacceptable and dangerous, which are normal and which are pathological.

In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt wrote that absolute good is as dangerous for democracy as absolute evil (72–75, 80–88). I was stunned when I first read this, but I think she is right. Those who seek purity, who want to be absolutely good, cannot accept even normal faults in politicians. We should not worship our leaders. If we dislike both

candidates, we should view that as part of the democratic process—even as a democratic virtue.

Conclusion

I will return to where I began—political advertising. In “Absolute Advertising, Ground-Zero Advertising,” Baudrillard says that all discourse has taken the form of advertising and propaganda (*Simulacra and Simulation* 87–94). Propaganda, public relations, and advertising all develop a simple message that is repeated endlessly. As the simple message is repeated, W. J. T. Mitchell would say it is also “cloned,”²⁵ it seems true enough because it is everywhere. If we substitute event for message, we can see that its repetition and cloning move a single event from mere noise to seeming like the experience of a spectacle. It is outside us and shakes us into awareness. It is both singular and everywhere, difficult to resist, too easy to accept as complete. All that is missing is the suffering of human beings living in physical bodies as they move through a material world. All that is missing is ethics.



²⁵In *Cloning Terror*, Mitchell writes about cloning, the duplication of images (for example, the photos of prisoners being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison) as a disease, a virus, or a metastasizing cancer cell.

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