

PULLING BACK THE LENS

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On the night of August 6, 2019, a motorcycle engine backfired in Times Square. Though the backfire was harmless enough, the crowds flooding the square heard it as a series of gunshots. Whipped up into a frenzy, people screamed, clutched their loved ones, and frantically tapped on their phones for answers. The confusion and panic were palpable. I had just attended a Broadway production of the musical *Waitress*, and as I left the theater I witnessed a monsoon of people running towards 8th Avenue, towards “safety.” Confused, I flagged down a group and asked if they knew what was happening. “There’s been an accident!” “I heard gunshots!” “There’s an active shooter in Times Square!” An older gentleman yelled to me that “Trump got another one riled up,” in reference to the recent white supremacist-inspired shootings in Dayton, Ohio and El Paso, Texas. The immediate reaction of that man was to assume that an active shooter was inspired by the rhetoric of our president. In a way, that man is a symbol of the age in which we are currently living—a reminder of the unbridled disdain between people of differing political parties. We are entering an age where it is common for people to resort to horrendous violence in service of their racist beliefs, and where political violence dominates the national imagination. In these and many other ways, we are more politically divided than ever before. Instead of working together to find solutions to problems, many prefer to spend time bashing those on the other side of the aisle. We have even allowed politics to seep into our interpersonal lives. It is not uncommon for someone to learn that a friend or loved one holds conflicting political views and to permit that to interfere with their relationship. New judgements form in our minds about others, based primarily on their beliefs. We have allowed these judgments to polarize us and damage our national fiber to an astonishing degree.

This damage is perpetuated and exacerbated by the radicalization of the national media. Long gone are the days of Walter Cronkite and the Fairness Doctrine, which required the media to accurately represent both perspectives on controversial opinions. This law legally enforced the principles of objective, quality journalism—that is, until its repeal in 1987. Though not extinct, the journal-

istic integrity and objectivity promoted by the Fairness Doctrine is being discarded by most major United States news outlets in favor of sensationalist news marketed to specific audiences. The news networks have learned that it is easier to maintain a dedicated following among those to whom you can cater your content and advertising than it is to compete for the attention of people of all political inclinations. This loss of objectivity has fueled the political division of our country. Fox News and CNN would not exist as they do today in an America that still had the Fairness Doctrine.

In trying to understand this increasing polarization and why we, as consumers of media, seem to be complicit in its continuation, writer Elizabeth Kolbert dissects the different evolutionary roots of psychological nuances in the human brain, applying that understanding to how we think politically today. In her *New Yorker* article, “Why Facts Don’t Change Our Minds,” Kolbert seeks to understand how our fallible human minds can contribute to the construction of echo chambers and a hampered political discourse. She cites a psychological phenomenon which contributes to the echo chamber, the “community of knowledge” (5). Being social animals, she says that humans have developed a groupthink mentality. While hunting on the savannah, for instance, having different individuals with different skills as members of a team could drastically increase the chances of a successful kill. Thus, Kolbert explains, we began accepting the knowledge of others as an extension of our own knowledge.

Kolbert references a study conducted by Steven Sloman and Phillip Fernbach, where volunteers were asked to rate their understanding of seemingly simple devices like toilets. Most of the participants scored themselves very highly. Then, participants were asked to write out, in as much detail as they could, how these devices worked, then score their understanding again. Their scores dropped considerably, as the exercise showed them exactly how little they knew about everyday devices. The study demonstrates how we are inclined to conflate our own knowledge with the knowledge of others. Due to the accessibility of information today—from the encyclopedic nature of Wikipedia to the endless how-to videos on YouTube—we have become so accustomed to this kind of conflation, that Sloman and Fernbach claim “we can hardly tell where our own understanding ends and others’ begins” (Kolbert 8).

However, Kolbert isn’t suggesting that this is necessarily a bad thing. The ability to “share” knowledge with other people can also be extremely powerful. It

is, for example, a critical component of how we progress technologically. It allows all of us to share in the technological innovations brought about by a few individuals. Imagine a world where everyone needed to have a functional understanding of how each and every piece of technology they use in their daily lives works. Technology simply could not change our lives the way it does if everyone had to be a programmer, computer scientist, and electrical engineer in order to use their smartphones. “When it comes to new technologies,” Kolbert writes, “incomplete understanding is empowering” (9). The illusion of knowledge, however, is dangerous in the realm of politics and policy.

Kolbert cites another study that further clarifies the political ramifications of this illusion we have about knowledge. Conducted in 2014, the survey asked respondents to explain what they believed to be the correct response to the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. After their responses were recorded, they were then asked to locate Crimea on a map. Not only was “the median guess wrong by eighteen hundred miles, roughly the distance from Kiev to Madrid,” but, the farther off respondents were, the more likely they were to favor military intervention (9). Even though their knowledge about Crimea was so incomplete that they utterly failed to find it on a world map, they still held strong feelings about military intervention— an extraordinarily dangerous course of action, as it could easily provoke war with Russia. When you couple this lack of knowledge with our dependence on other people’s minds, what you get is a group of people who all strongly believe something categorically misguided or wrong. The creation of these self-sustaining communities of ignorance helps drive our inability to agree on basic facts.

This tendency of people to congregate into homogeneously opinionated communities reflects how we have a habit of looking at our politics through a hyper-focused lens. One possible solution for our current political plight would be to see it through a larger lens. American photographer Josh Kline, through his display at the 2019 Whitney Biennial, encourages us to do just that. In his series of eight photographs, there is a theme of places and things that evoke political and economic power in the United States. The images are all placed in their own individual frames, all of which are orange or black, but LED lights inside the frame cast purple, orange, and green colors onto the pictures. The frames are watertight and filled up about halfway with water, which is cycled over the pictures constantly. The water somewhat obscures the pictures, but over time it has

the effect of wearing down the pictures until they are no longer recognizable as images of what they once portrayed.

One of the photos in the series is of Ronald Reagan's statue in the Capitol Rotunda. One would be hard pressed to find a picture that better represents governmental, and more specifically Republican, power. Revered by many as the champion of the Cold War, Reagan is symbolic of the radical shift to social conservatism in the 1980s. The piece, however, seeks to disarm his impressive legacy through visual means. The physical size of the photograph (about 8.5" by 11") does not suggest the grandeur and strength which we typically associate with the subject. This is not a grand representation of important historical figures in American history that we have come to expect. By contrast, the iconic painting *Washington Crossing the Delaware* has the huge dimensions of 12' 5" x 21' 3". By denying Reagan the physical space which the traditional canon of American art would suggest, the piece literally diminishes him. Kline also chooses to put orange LED lights inside the frame, making the light through which we view the photo orange rather than white. This use of color on an otherwise muted photo introduces a sensation of playfulness or triviality, which intentionally conflicts with our ideas of what a representation of Reagan should look like. The use of water is another method of subduing the political power which the subject possesses. The piece makes Reagan subordinate to the water, which will wear down the photo until it is no longer recognizable. Importantly, though, the photo of Reagan himself is not changed at all. It is simply the context in which he is viewed that submits to being altered. This suggests that it is not Reagan who is being belittled by the context of the piece, but our perception of him. The piece is calling for us to reframe the way we see Reagan and contemporary politics in general. It is condemning us for being so hyper-focused on political power, asking us to pull back the lens and look at everything in context.

Another piece which explores this approach of panning the camera back and seeing the bigger picture is the *South Park* episode "Doubling Down." Specifically, this episode is a nuanced critique not only of the Trump administration, but also of the liberal reaction to Trump supporters. The episode begins with Eric Cartman, one of the show's protagonists, being dumped by his girlfriend because of his repeated verbal abuse and reputation for bigotry. Cartman emotionally blackmails her into staying with him by crying, begging, and promising to change. Even though he is desperate for Heidi not to leave him, Cartman

continues to manipulate and make fun of her and, ultimately doesn't change. Worried about Heidi, her friend Kyle tries to ask her about why she still stays with Cartman. She assumes that Kyle has come to make fun of her, and she immediately grows defensive and protective of Cartman. Kyle explains to her that Cartman constantly sees himself as the victim and therefore is incapable of real change. This gives Heidi the courage to finally break up with Cartman, and start going out with kind and sympathetic Kyle, instead. In celebration of Heidi's revelation, her girlfriends take her out to dinner—where she is ruthlessly lampooned for having ever gone out with someone so terrible. This humiliation pushes her right back into Cartman's arms, ready to accept whatever he says. Cartman tells her off-screen about the “merits” of antisemitism, which causes her to break up with Kyle—who happens to be Jewish—and “double down” on her relationship with Cartman.

While silly on its surface, the episode serves as an allegory for the plight of the disillusioned Trump voter, and it strives to make sense of how we can be still so politically polarized while a president who is so objectively awful, crass, and offensive is in power. Cartman represents Trump, while Heidi represents his political base. While talking to Kyle, Heidi explains that “before [they] started going out, [she] was in a really bad place. [She] felt pushed away by society. Then this guy came along and told [her] all the things that she wanted to hear. And [she] just went with it.” This explanation is similar to the most common narrative we hear for how the white, middle class voter “fell” for Trump. And by making fun of Heidi for her decision, the other girls push her back to Cartman; their mockery serves as fuel for the very thing they seek to belittle through humor. Thus, the cycle continues.

Through “Doubling Down,” writer and director Trey Parker asks us to pull back our collective lens. The episode seeks to humanize our political opponents and challenges us to see those with whom we disagree as more than just as a manifestation of their beliefs. It asks us to empathize with them, respect them, and honestly try to see things their way. It encourages us to suspend our judgement, no matter how awful our preconceived notions of their ideas may be, because that is the only true way to progress towards reunion. We can continue to refuse to listen to each other, habitually tuning into our favorite, biased news networks and not compromising; alternatively, we can have those constructive and difficult

conversations, which will build understanding and hopefully bring us back together as a country.

WORKS CITED

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