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Post-election Analysis Report

This has surely felt like an election for the ages. At least to those in my generation, this has been one of, if not the most, tumultuous election cycle we have lived through. When I first heard that Donald Trump would be seeking the nomination in 2016, I scoffed at the very idea. It seemed to me a logical next step in American politics, which has in recent years become more sensationalized and less about the issues and more about personality. However, I assumed every step of the way that it was all a huge publicity stunt by Trump to restore some of the interest that the public had in him in years prior. When Trump actually won the nomination, I scoffed again at the irresponsibility of the RNC and thought they had dashed their chances at a presidential run. When I went to bed on election night, I was completely certain I would be waking up to the news that Hilary Clinton would be our new president. I had not taken Trump seriously, as I believe many Americans (particularly Democrats), had not. Fast forward to the months preceding this 2020 election and I had reversed my position. Based on what I have seen in the last four years and the fanatical fervor with which Trump’s supporters lock-step with his every word and move, I was completely certain we were looking at another four years of Trump. I also must say that I was a bigger fan of Biden before he was put forth as the Democratic nominee. Between Biden’s frequent gaffes and losses of trains of thought, it seemed to me that it would be impossible for him to overcome a man who is rarely at a loss for words (regardless of the comprehensibility of those words). But here we are. If I have learned anything from these last two election cycles, it’s that I terrible at predicting the presidential winner and am the last person who you should ask their analysis of on this subject. Now, here is my analysis on this subject.

One of the best and most tangible ways I have been able to stay connected to election-related information has been through our Weekly Readings. While I always have tried to keep myself informed, these Weekly Readings have helped me to make it more of a habit in my schedule. One common theme stuck out to me as I reviewed my Weekly Readings for this project, and that is that every story is either about Trump or is primarily covering him and not Biden. I believe the tactic here for the RNC and Trump was the old motto, “Any press is good press”, and it may have been a major contributor to his loss. I believe Biden and his handlers did well by keeping him away from doing anything “bad” or headline-worthy, as Biden did more than once when he over-extended himself. I believe Trump was convinced he would win as well until around mid-September. I think it was when people, including some of his supporters, began to see Trump overstep his legal authority for what seemed like largely personal reasons, such as when he expressed his desire to activate the 1807 Insurrection Act in order to send military troops to stamp out the riots over George Floyd’s death, that it was finally realized the threat Trump could pose. At the beginning of September, Trump told the people of North Carolina to vote twice, once by mail and then again in person, saying that “If the system is as good as they say it is then obviously they won’t be able to vote (in person)” (BBC, 2020). This was a dual-pronged attack, because if people actually voted twice as he asked them to (which is illegal), he would either be able to prove that voting fraud was indeed possible or he would get two votes for the price of one. About a week after these statements, White House press secretary, Kayleigh McEnany, went on Fox News saying that the Trump administration was not sure the election would be carried out honestly, suggesting that Democrats did not want the people to know who had won on election night, and that if the results were not known on election night, that it points out that the system is broken (Cillizza, 2020). Trump began to say he would not commit to a peaceful transfer of power by the middle of September. By late September, there were concerns from senior Pentagon officials that Trump may attempt to call on the military in the event of unrest and/or protests caused by the election results or that the military may need to be called in in order to \*remove\* Trump from office (Steinhauer & Cooper, 2020). By mid-October, Trump’s campaign was fledging even more and he tried to make up the difference with an advertising blitz and several expensive programs all with the aim of reinvigorating confidence in him and hopefully bolster his reelection efforts. These programs include “millions of boxes of food doled out to needy families- with letters signed by the president taking credit stuffed inside”, “an $8 billion program for drug-discount cards to seniors featuring Trump branding” and a “$300 million advertising blitz to defeat despair over the coronavirus pandemic”, (Korecki & Kumar, 2020). All of these transparent efforts to appeal to the American people were paid for with taxpayer dollars and the American people noticed. By the end of October, Trump was doubling down on his claims of election fraud, particularly from mail-in ballots, and was saying that states would hopefully not be able to count their ballots after Election Day (Haltiwanger, 2020). Counting ballots after Election Day has, of course, always been a part of the normal election process, and so this was yet another example of Trump attempting to overstep his legal authority. Even after it became clear that Biden would win the election by earlier to mid- November, Trump did not immediately back down and seemed to be preparing to challenge the result in a legal battle. Trump began exploring other avenues to bring this protest to the people who had voted for him in the form of unsolicited mass texts and emails (Romm & Stanley-Becker, 2020), and through a new political action committee, “Save America”, which certain experts have accused of being a slush fund that funnels directly to Trump himself (Slodysko, 2020). I believe it is these oversteps and the media coverage surrounding them that contributed to the current state of the election.

The advertisements in this election cycle have been interesting as well, with Biden’s strategy seeming to be 80% warm hugs and smiles, and Trump’s strategy seeming to be floating between visions of apocalyptic hellscapes and cheesy clickbait, of coursed perpetuated by the idea of a Biden presidency. For ease of understanding, I will refer to the first advertisement on my Tracking Excel Sheet as “Advertisement 5” and so on because that’s the number that appears next to it on Excel. In my opinion, neither campaign had very many effective advertisements, but I especially believe the majority of the Trump campaign’s advertising was ineffective. The very first advertisement I recorded, Advertisement 5 on 8/26/2020 at 9:45AM, was of the apocalyptic hellscape persuasion. This ad by the Trump campaign quite literally depicted a scene full of fire and brimstone, where the 1st and 2nd Amendment were essentially void and where the whole country is locked down in fear because of the pandemic. I believe this sort of sensational, exaggerated depiction began to turn people off to Trump. Advertisement 13, recorded on 9/5/2020 at 1:05PM, is very similar to tone to Advertisement 5. Advertisement 13 depicts a person calling 911 and being redirected to an automated call line that tells them “due to defunding of the police department, we’re sorry, but no one is here to take your call” and then proceeds with automated options for various crimes. Alongside the all audio, scenes of riots and flames are shown which finally culminate into the ultimate message of the ad: “You won’t be safe in Joe Biden’s America.” I think any reasonable person could see these claims are exaggerated, fear-mongering and not credible. Advertisement 17, recorded on 9/8/2020 at 7:42AM, has a more decidedly feel-good tone and is essentially an “inspirational” montage of people in MAGA hats smiling and celebrating a victory lap because Trump was “destined” to be the president. I believe this messaging is especially ineffective because it could only possibly appeal to people who already support him so it’s wasted messaging and campaign money. Advertisement 29, recorded on 9/28/2020 depicts an African-American construction owner describing his view of Trump as a “way out” of the typical political cycle as some sort of people’s champion. The ad is framed as though the man is recording himself in a “real” moment and as such the man says “frickin’” and “god damn” frequently throughout the ad. I suppose this is supposed to make the man and the ad relatable, but in my opinion, it comes off as tone-deaf and pandering. Towards the end of October, Trump’s advertising converted almost completely to clickbait-style, with grabby titles that the reader would have to watch the advertisement to understand and complete with the types of images popular with other clickbait videos, such as emoticons and cartoon graphics. Advertisements 62 and 63, recorded on 10/29/2020 at 9:11AM and 12:02PM respectively, were the first advertisements when I noticed this trend that would stick through the rest of the ads I recorded. The title of Ad 62 is “Herschel Walker supports Trump for this reason” and the title of Ad 63 is “Only watch if you love America”, both indicators that the campaign was beginning to scrape the bottom the barrel in terms of techniques to generate support. The bottom-scraping continues in Ad 65, recorded on 10/30/2020 at 4:56PM, titled “How to prevent a zombie apocalypse” which contains the thumbnail image of a green, “zombie” Biden. I believe as the Trump campaign became more desperate as they realized how close the race was turning out to be, they doubled down on their approach to appeal to their idea of the middle class and without much understanding of the people they were targeting, missed the mark with the tone of their advertising as they tried to appeal to as many people as they could at once.

Several of the aspects of Trump’s campaign site and social media that I initially took note of in my Website Analysis as possible boons for Donald Trump actually seemed to contribute to his loss when I view them retroactively. Firstly, I believe that Trump focused too much on his existing base instead of trying to branch out to more voters. As I mentioned in my Website Analysis, Trump’s website put a particular emphasis on the promises he had kept, a section on his campaign site named appropriately, “Promises Kept”. The large problem with this emphasis is that most people who are not already his supporters do not necessarily believe or agree that he has kept his promises. Like I said in my initial Web Analysis, it was obvious even then that his target audience was obviously his existing supporter base. I believe the tone of the “About” section on Trump’s site came across as gloating, describing Trump as “the very definition of the American success story”, when in fact he had the head start of being the son of an extremely wealthy man. There has also been quite an emphasis on Trump’s Twitter as part of his campaign. On the bottom of his campaign site homepage, there were links to Trump’s most recent Tweets in lieu of the recent political statements that were featured on Biden’s home page. In the “News” section of the site one could find biased “news” stories that refer Biden as a “Pinocchio” as well as other instances of name-calling, which I believe ultimately served to make Trump himself look foolish and childish. It also seems to me that allowing Trump to continue to Tweet messages from his Twitter personally was a bad move as he often made unsubstantiated personal attacks on various people and he seemingly operated this account with little oversight because of frequent falsehoods and misspellings in his Tweets. The perceived accessibility he gained by operating his Twitter personally ultimately worked against him in my opinion.

There was a veritable mountain of media to dig through in the months leading up to this election, the majority of which was about Trump. For all the things that Trump is not, no one can deny that the man is a walking headline- generator. However, many of these headlines did not do his re-election efforts any favors. The first of these articles from my SCTM, “Trump just lost his go-to debate move”, details the way that the second presidential debate would have to change its rules in order to prevent Trump from repeatedly interrupting his opponent, which he did 128 times in a 90-minute debate (Cillizza, 2020). I believe Trump’s childish performance and lack of substance during the first presidential debate contributed to his loss significantly. My second article details Trump’s hostile relationship with Dr. Fauci and contains warnings from Dr. Fauci about “Donald Trump’s dangerous coronavirus strategy” (Iadorola & Jackson, 2020). I think it was very foolish of Trump to turn on Dr. Fauci concerning the pandemic, as Fauci was the man that Trump put in place to be the expert on this topic and by Trump attempting to discredit him, he actually discredited himself and his leadership. The final article from my SCTM I have chosen for this project includes a video analysis that shows the various mistakes that Donald Trump has made as president alongside Trump himself claiming he has made “ZERO mistakes” (Iadorola & Chambers, 2020). This lack of humility and the ability to be honest with the American people about his mistakes ultimately contributed to his loss as well.

I’m sure people will be analyzing and applying communication theories to both this election and Trump himself for a long time to come. The effect of media has made more measurable impact in this election than it perhaps ever has before. Cultivation theory is one theory that seeks to explain the relationship between the long-term effects of television consumption and the people who consume it. Cultivation theory says “the danger of television lies in its ability to shape not a particular view point about one specific issue but it its ability to shape people’s moral values and general beliefs about the world (Mosharafa, 2015). One could say that this theory was wielded effectively and was used in Donald Trump’s favor in order to get him elected and to control what his supporters thought during the first couple years of his presidency. However, this theory served to work against him as most popular media sources, both in America and abroad, began an all-out ideology war against Trump. The majority of the stories written about Trump were not in favor of him, and in spite of themselves, some of this information had to have shaped even his previous supporters’ opinions of him. When one of the last bastions of mainstream Trumpism, Fox News, began to shy away from him, Trump’s insistence of “fake news” fell on deafer and deafer ears.

A similar yet subtly distinct communication theory is that of the Agenda-Setting Theory. Agenda-Setting Theory “describes the ability of the news media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda” (Lumen Learning, 2020). Essentially this means that the more often a news subject is covered, the more important the issue is perceived as important by its audience. While the media has attempted to make us, the audience, zone in on various aspects of Trump’s words and actions, the largest contributor to Trump’s loss has to be the media’s coverage on Trump’s coronavirus response. I am of the personal opinion that no president could have handled this pandemic in a way that would be satisfactory to a majority of Americans. That being said, Covid-19 fell into Trump’s lap and he handled the situation poorly, particularly by ignoring the advice of his self-appointed medical officials. The media pounced on this ineffectuality and reported Trump’s failings ad nauseum. I believe that Trump’s failed response and the news medias’ emphasis on reporting relentlessly and making sure we, the audience, believed his failed response was a very important issue was a significant contributor to Trump’s loss.

A third relevant communication theory comes in the form of Image Repair Theory. Image Repair Theory essentially describes the state after an accusation or suspicion is made of a person and their response in order to protect or repair their image. By definition, this theory does not include apologies. Image Repair Theory includes five general approaches “for responding to accusations or suspicions: denial and evading responsibility; address blame; reducing offensiveness concerns offensiveness; and mortification and corrective action attempt to repair an image without directly dealing with blame or offensiveness” (Benoit, 2015). Trump has employed various versions of some of these practices, particularly after the perceived failing of his Covid-19 response. Firstly, denial and evading responsibility are Trump’s bread and butter. As I said before, Trump has publicly said that he has made “ZERO mistakes” and he holds this to be true about his handling of the pandemic as well. Trump’s reaction to the worsening public opinion was to attempt to repair his image by holding rallies for his supporters without ever directly dealing with the blame for the pandemic or his offensive and dismissive remarks about the virus. In Trump’s mind, image is everything. This philosophy is a dangerous and foolish stance to take during this serious pandemic and I think that the strategies that won Trump his first election may have lost him his second one.

A personal experience that comes to mind is something that I witnessed at the beginning of November. While I had seen some general discrimination and unease around Asian-Americans after Trump’s remarks about Covid-19 being the “China Virus”, I had not expected to see it with my own eyes. While in the checkout line at Target, the cashiers switched out and the new cashier was an Asian woman. The woman checking out, who was wearing a MAGA-branded hat and clothing, was loudly insisting that wanted a different cashier because she “didn’t wanna catch the China Virus”. Long story short, she left without any of her items after a tantrum. This disgusting rhetoric perpetuated by the president is a serious problem for our country and a contributor to Trump’s loss. Another personal experience comes in the form of my observation of my Hispanic friend’s changing perception of the president. My friend voted for Trump in his first election, partly because, as was many people’s justification for doing so, Trump was “not a politician”. Another reason he voted for Trump is that Trump was cracking down on illegal immigration and my friend came here “the right way” and wondered why everyone didn’t just come to America the way he did. But as time went on, it became clear to my friend that not only was Trump not going to build his wall, but that many of the things Trump says are disingenuous and my friend came to believe that Trump was a liar and in fact, racist. I believe many of the minorities who voted for Trump became disillusioned with him in this way and did not vote to re-elect him.

To be perfectly honest, I expected Trump to win a second term. Every reason that I have listed as contributors to his loss have been as evident to me the day they occurred as they do today, it just seemed as though no one cared and the rules were truly different for Donald Trump. I am glad to see that this isn’t entirely the case and that American democracy has prevailed overall. In my opinion, it is extremely important that we keep this moment in time in our minds so that we can avoid repeating this tumultuous history in the future.

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**Appendix**

**Advertisement 5:**



**Advertisement 13:**



**Advertisement 17:**

 **Advertisement 29:**

 **Advertisement 62:**

 **Advertisement 63:**

 **Advertisement 65:**

