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Amy E. Mendes

# *Entitled Transgression as Status Work: A Grounded Theory of "Asshole Style" in Contemporary Political Performance*

**Abstract**

This study develops a substantive grounded theory of a recurring political performance repertoire that converts moral entitlement and gleeful norm-subversion into status and visibility. This "asshole style" follows James's (2012) account of entrenched entitlement and contempt. Adopting a constructivist grounded-theory approach, I analyze a purposively and then theoretically sampled corpus of Donald J. Trump's public artifacts (rallies, debates, press exchanges, leader-authored statements), using constant comparison, memoing, and iterative coding to elaborate categories, test boundaries against internal contrast cases, and assess theoretical saturation. The analysis yields a core category, Entitled Transgression as Status Work, composed of four interlocking processes: entitlement claims (self-exemption, grievance-based license), gleeful norm-subversion (taunt, ritualized disrespect), accountability refusal (paralipsis and "just joking" shields), and dominance displays (belittling humor, humiliation bids) that invite uptake. A process model shows how grievance narration cues entitlement, transgression is staged and then shielded, and audience, journalistic, and opponent responses feed a repeating cycle. The theory differentiates this performance repertoire from demagoguery's identity-reductive discourse while explaining how rule-breaking can secure attention and leverage without cross-partisan persuasion. I outline decision rules for recognizing the repertoire, identify boundary conditions, and discuss implications for rhetorical analysis and institutional gatekeeping. The single-case scope limits claims of prevalence or causality, but the middle-range concepts and procedures support analytic transfer to other leaders, venues, and media environments.

**Keywords:** demagoguery, political performance, grounded theory, masculinity, rhetoric

## Introduction

Political discourse in the United States increasingly rewards performances that treat rule-breaking as proof of authenticity. Taunts, nicknames, and spectacles of dominance set the news agenda; audiences cheer and chant; journalists and opponents answer on the performer's terms. This study investigates a recurrent repertoire within that environment—an asshole style of political performance that converts moral entitlement and gleeful norm-subversion into attention, leverage, and in-group solidarity (James, 2012; Tosi & Warmke, 2016).

These performances unfold within a media environment that increasingly rewards spectacle and provocation. Hart (2000, 2013) and Jamieson (1992) show how campaign discourse and "dirty politics" have long relied on attack, simplification, and distraction, while Delli Carpini and Williams (2011) and Herbst (2011) describe how shifting media regimes and talk-based formats blur boundaries between news, entertainment, and public opinion. Wu (2016) characterizes this system as an "attention merchant" economy in which outrage and novelty are prized commodities. In digital networks, false or emotionally charged content travels especially quickly (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Against this backdrop, a particular style has emerged that allows leaders to secure visibility by turning norm-breaching performances into repeatable attention strategies. Building on the work of Aaron James (2012), I call this the "asshole" style.

I distinguish this style from demagoguery. Demagoguery names a discourse that collapses complex policy into identity-reductive antagonism—an us-versus-them logic that substitutes scapegoating for deliberation (Roberts-Miller, 2017; Stanley, 2015). Asshole style, by contrast, names a mode of performance: open claims to special exemption from ordinary constraints, enacted with visible relish in the breach and shielded by accountability refusal (e.g., paralipsis, "just joking"). The two frequently braid—asshole performance often animates demagogic messaging—but they are analytically separable. Making the distinction clarifies why public norm-breaking can function as an asset: not merely generic incivility or trolling, but a repeatable performance stance with predictable payoffs in attention markets and group dynamics (Roberts-Miller, 2017; Stanley, 2015).

To theorize this repertoire, I take Donald J. Trump as an instrumental case. His public speech repeatedly couples demagogic discourse with rule-breaking performance, and the immediate uptake—laughter lines, chants, press exchanges, opponent replies—renders the style's payoffs visible in real time (cf. Mendes, 2016; Mercieca, 2019, 2020). The aim is not to estimate prevalence or effects across leaders, but to generate theory that specifies the moves, stances, and tonalities that constitute the style; the conditions under which it braids with demagoguery and masculinized dominance; and the ways proximate audiences and institutional interlocutors read and respond in the moment (James, 2012; Tosi & Warmke, 2016).

Accordingly, this article adopts a constructivist grounded-theory approach. Rather than testing a predefined codebook, I use constant comparison across a purposively and then theoretically sampled corpus (rallies, interviews, debates, press gaggles, leader-authored statements) to derive categories, refine decision rules, probe boundary cases, and model the performance cycle. The result is a substantive theory—entitled transgression as status work—that differentiates demagoguery as discourse from asshole style as performance and accounts for real-time uptake. The discussion integrates the model with scholarship on demagoguery, political style, trolling aesthetics, and masculinities, and outlines response implications for rhetorical practice and democratic norms.

**Literature Review**

Demagoguery is well theorized as identity-reductive discourse (Roberts-Miller, 2017; Stanley, 2015; Mercieca, 2019, 2020). Rather than treating "political style" as a generic feature of populism (Moffitt, 2016), I inductively develop asshole style as a distinct, codable performance repertoire that often animates—but is not reducible to—demagogic discourse.

Research on incivility and norm violation underscores that such behavior can generate short-term gains despite long-term relational or civic costs (Herbst, 2011). Porath and Pearson (2013), for instance, document how rude and demeaning conduct in workplaces can temporarily elevate the perpetrator's sense of power even as it erodes collaboration and trust (Sutton, 2007). My analysis of asshole style parallels these dynamics in the political arena: transgressive performances reliably command attention and in-group bonding even as they degrade deliberative norms.

Recent and historical work on authenticity and deception reinforces this picture (Jamieson, 1992). Hahl et al. (2018) show how a "lying demagogue" can be perceived as more authentic than conventional politicians when supporters see his norm violations as exposing a deeper truth about elite illegitimacy. Their findings help explain why followers treat brazen boundary-breaking as a sign of honesty rather than disqualification. My analysis extends this insight by specifying the performance repertoire—entitlement claims, gleeful norm-subversion, accountability refusal, and dominance displays—through which such authenticity is enacted and rewarded in real time.

Work on assholes (James, 2012), assholism (Nunberg, 2012), bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005), and moral grandstanding (Tosi & Warmke, 2016) supplies important sensitizing concepts. James and Nunberg trace how the "asshole" label has come to mark entrenched entitlement and contempt for others' claims, while Sutton (2007) examines the organizational costs of tolerating such actors. Frankfurt's (2005) account of bullshit as speech indifferent to truth and Tosi and Warmke's (2016) analysis of moral grandstanding as status-seeking moral talk both help explain why self-regarding performance can crowd out deliberation. Phillips' (2015) mapping of trolling and mainstream culture further

clarifies how transgressive play and deniability are baked into contemporary mediated publics. These works illuminate facets of the repertoire but do not yet specify an integrated, codable style in political leadership, which is the task I take up here.

Scholarship on masculinities and authoritarianism further contextualizes the repertoire. Connell's (1995) account of hegemonic masculinity and Kimmel's (2017) analysis of aggrieved manhood illuminate how performances of toughness, aggression, and grievance signal status in patriarchal cultures. Ben-Ghiat (2020) documents how twentieth- and twenty-first-century strongmen cultivate legitimacy through displays of virility and ruthless will, while Stanley (2018) and Klemperer (2000) trace how fascist movements normalize exclusionary language in everyday political talk. My analysis draws on these insights but focuses more narrowly on how a contemporary U.S. leader performs entitlement to break rules and humiliate opponents as evidence of masculine fitness to rule.

**Problem Statement**

Existing scholarship richly describes demagoguery as a discourse—an identity-reductive logic that substitutes scapegoating for deliberation—and separately examines incivility, trolling, and masculinized dominance as interactional or cultural phenomena. What is missing is an integrated, qualitative account of style that is analytically separable from demagogic discourse yet often braided with it.

Studies of presidential rhetoric and political masculinity provide essential context but have not been systematically integrated to explain when rule-breaking is interpreted as authenticity and power rather than as disqualifying breach (Roberts-Miller, 2017; Stanley, 2015). We therefore lack an integrated qualitative framework that (a) analytically separates demagoguery as discourse from asshole as style, (b) specifies how the style braids with demagoguery and masculinized dominance scripts, and (c) interprets real-time uptake by proximate audiences and institutional interlocutors (supporters at rallies, reporters, opponents). Without such a framework, we risk collapsing distinct phenomena into a generic "incivility" label and missing the patterned payoffs the style reliably produces.

**Purpose and Contribution**

This study addresses the gaps outlined above by (a) theorizing asshole style as a codable performance distinct from (but often braided with) demagogic discourse, (b) formalizing clear decision rules with exemplars, and (c) analyzing proximate uptake among supporters, reporters, and opponents. The result is a portable framework that clarifies overlap and non-overlap between discourse and style and explains why public rule-breaking can function as an asset rather than a liability.

## Analytic Focus and Sensitizing Concepts

This study develops a substantive grounded theory of a recurrent performance repertoire in U.S. political communication—here termed the asshole style. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the analysis proceeds through constant comparison, memoing, and theoretically driven sampling to elaborate categories and specify their conditions of emergence. Three sensitizing foci orient (but do not constrain) early coding.

- Performance Repertoire: I attend to recurring moves, stances, and tonalities that constitute the asshole style in rallies, interviews, and press exchanges—such as entitlement claims, gleeful norm-subversion, and accountability refusal (James, 2012; Tosi & Warmke, 2016).
- Braiding and Boundaries: I trace when and how this repertoire braids with demagogic discourse (in-group/out-group logics) and agonistic/juvenile masculinity, and record boundary cues that distinguish it from adjacent phenomena such as generic incivility and trolling aesthetics.
- Uptake and Response: I treat proximate audience and interlocutor uptake (laughter lines, chants, journalistic framing, opponent counter-performance) as data that jointly produce the performance and disclose its payoffs.
- As categories stabilized, theoretical sampling refined properties (e.g., forms of entitlement claim), articulated conditions (venues, moments of grievance), and modeled processes (how taunt → chant → framing consolidates status), culminating in an integrative theoretical statement of the asshole style and its mechanisms.

One early analytic surprise was the prominence of what I came to call accountability refusal. I initially treated “just joking,” “people are saying,” and similar moves as minor hedges that softened transgressive lines. Through constant comparison, however, it became clear that these shields were doing more than modulating tone. They repeatedly appeared at moments when Trump’s comments neared legal, ethical, or institutional limits, and they enabled him to preserve the benefits of a breach while denying full intent or responsibility. This pattern recurred often enough—and with sufficient variation across venues—that I elevated accountability refusal from a subcode under norm-subversion to a distinct category in its own right.

## Methods

### *Approach*

This constructivist grounded-theory design proceeded via constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical sampling, treating prior scholarship as sensitizing concepts rather than a priori codes (Charmaz, 2014). Coding iterated from initial line-by-line to focused and then axial/theoretical integration following Corbin and Strauss (2015).

Categories were judged by fit, relevance, and explanatory power. Saturation was assessed pragmatically—when additional artifacts no longer added properties to core categories or shifted boundaries (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Rather than aiming for numerical saturation, I also followed Malterud et al.'s (2016) principle of "information power": because the study uses an instrumental single case with a focused aim, theoretically guided sampling, and high within-case specificity, a relatively modest number of strategically selected excerpts can yield robust conceptual development.

***Corpus and Sampling***

The corpus comprises publicly available, time-stamped performances by Donald J. Trump across venues—rallies, debates and town halls, press gaggles and interviews, and leader-authored statements and posts. Initial purposive sampling (2017–2021; 2023–present) maximized variation by venue and moment; theoretical sampling then elaborated properties and pressed boundaries with contrast cases (e.g., sharp criticism without entitlement or delegitimation). Inclusion required verifiable provenance and, where available, audio/video to code tone and uptake; unverifiable montages and purely private communications were excluded.

***Procedures***

Initial coding used in-vivo, line-by-line codes that stayed close to action and language (e.g., "claims special exemption," "humiliates target while grinning," "paralipsis/'just joking' shield"). Focused coding consolidated frequent, analytically potent codes into candidate categories (entitlement claims; gleeful norm-subversion; accountability refusal; dominance displays). Axial and theoretical coding articulated relations among conditions, strategies, and consequences (grievance cue → entitlement claim → taunt plus jocular shamelessness → audience heat → opponent scripting). Constant comparison across venues, time, and negative/contrast cases sharpened boundary criteria, while memoing and diagramming tracked hunches, specified properties and dimensions, and visualized the emerging process model.

In an intermediate memo stage, I experimented with a more granular set of eight provisional "code families" (e.g., delegitimation of institutions, scapegoating and out-grouping, strongman masculinity, norm-breach-as-virtue, epistemic exceptionalism, uptake and amplification). Co-occurrence counts and sequence diagrams, however, suggested that these patterns rarely operated in isolation. Instead, they clustered reliably as properties and subcodes of four higher-order processes: entitlement claims, gleeful norm-subversion, accountability refusal, and dominance displays. The decision to reorganize around these four processes therefore followed—rather than preceded—the co-occurrence and pathway checks and reflects an effort to model the repertoire at the level where it travels most coherently across venues.

### *Trustworthiness and Rigor*

Credibility is supported by an audit trail (artifact register, sampling log, memo archive), and triangulation across venues and contrast cases. Quality is assessed using Tracy's (2010) "big-tent" criteria and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) standards for trustworthiness. Ethically, all materials involve public figures and public artifacts; analysis is confined to performance.

## Findings: Core Category and Categories A–D

The core category of the analysis is entitled transgression as status work: a statusful actor claims exceptional standing by openly breaching norms with visible relish and then refusing ordinary accountability; the cycle reliably commands attention and in-group bonding. Four interlocking categories elaborate this pattern:

### *Category A: Entitlement Claims*

Properties.

a. Self-exemption – "rules don't apply to me."
b. Grievance entitlement – "I am owed latitude because I'm being treated unfairly";
c. Lone-truth-teller stance – "only I can fix it / see it."

Entitlement claims are most likely when Trump narrates a grievance—an election result, an investigation, hostile media coverage—and pairs it with delegitimation of institutions. Complaints about "rigged" processes and "witch hunts" prime the sense that normal rules are already broken by others, so exemption is justified.

On election night and in its aftermath, Trump describes late-counted mail ballots as suspicious, insists that if "you only count the legal votes" he has already won, and treats any contrary outcome as evidence of theft. Courts, state officials, and journalists are cast as obstacles to enforcing a result he portrays as already known and rightful.

Entitlement claims supply the moral warrant that initiates the cycle. They translate grievance into a claim of special standing --"I alone can fix it" -- (Trump, 2016), positioning subsequent norm breaches as acts of necessary correction rather than deviance.

### *Category B: Gleeful Norm-Subversion*

Properties.

a. Taunt and ridicule – mocking nicknames, exaggerated impressions;
b. Ritualized disrespect - violation of expected decorum toward opponents, institutions, or norms of office;

c. “Bit” structure - recurring jokes or routines that the crowd recognizes and co-performs
d. Affective tone – levity and enjoyment lubricate sanction evasion.

Gleeful norm-subversion often follows an entitlement claim. Trump’s nickname repertoire illustrates gleeful norm-subversion—a running bit that turns insult into a shared joke. Since first debuting the term “Crooked Hillary” in an April 16, 2016 speech, Trump “returned to the insult at least 50 times” over the following weeks (Jamieson, 2016). He often framed himself as unfairly constrained or persecuted, and before pivoting to a “bit”: a nickname (“Crooked Hillary”), a dramatic re-enactment of an opponent’s gestures, or an off-color aside about a rival’s looks or toughness. The performance is calibrated to draw laughter and chants.

At a rally, after denouncing investigations as a “witch hunt,” Trump reenacts and exaggerates a critic’s mannerisms, prompting laughter and jeers. He pauses, smiles, and repeats the bit, timing the delivery to build a chant. When commentators later object, he frames the episode as “just having a little fun” and evidence that he “says what others won’t.”

Gleeful norm-subversion turns the entitlement claim into a spectacle. Humor marks the transgression as play, making it harder for opponents and journalists to sanction without appearing humorless, thin-skinned, or out of touch with “what people really think.”

***Category C: Accountability Refusal***

Properties.

a. Paralipsis – “I’m not saying X, but people are talking”;
b. Just-joking and irony shields – retroactively recoding attacks as jokes or sarcasm;
c. Frame-shifting – treating literal readings as naïve and recasting statements as “obviously” metaphorical or “locker-room talk.”

Accountability refusal is activated when transgressive lines draw criticism or when a remark hovers near legal or normative limits. It allows Trump to float damaging insinuations or threats while denying full intent or responsibility.

After a rally comment that appears to invite “Second Amendment people” to act if he loses, Trump insists that critics “know it was a joke” and accuses them of dishonesty for taking him literally. He treats the offense as a creation of “fake news,” even as supporters keep repeating the line approvingly. His famous invitation to Russia to hack Hillary Clinton’s email is another example: “Russia, if you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you would probably be rewarded mightily by our press” (Trump, 2016).

These moves pre-empt or blunt consequences. Paralipsis and "just joking" shields permit the performance to court offense and signal alignment with in-group resentments while maintaining plausible deniability. They are central to asshole style as a performance, not merely as a set of positions.

***Category D: Dominance Displays***

Properties.

a. Belittling humor – reducing opponents to punch lines;
b. Humiliation bids – public shaming of individuals or institutions;
c. Toughness posturing – strongman stance, promises of punitive action;
d. Staging and delivery – volume, pacing, gestures that visually mark superiority.

Dominance displays often come at the end of the entitlement–norm-subversion–accountability sequence, once the audience is primed and responsive. They are also common when Trump narrates personnel decisions or interactions with elites (Cabinet members, generals, foreign leaders) as tests of toughness.

Trump's removal of Rex Tillerson exemplifies dominance as public spectacle. In March 2018, he announced on Twitter that he was firing his Secretary of State and nominating Mike Pompeo—before Tillerson had been formally informed. News accounts note that Tillerson "only learned [the firing] was official when the announcement was made … in a tweet" (CBS News, 2018). The platform is used not merely to convey an HR decision but to stage the dismissal as a public power flex: subordinates are reminded they can be humiliated in front of the world at the leader's discretion. The fired official's name becomes shorthand for weakness, while Trump depicts himself as decisive and ruthless in protecting "our people."

Dominance displays convert transgression into a visible status claim. They script opponents as weak, corrupt, or ridiculous, and the leader as the only figure prepared to "hit back" hard enough. In rallies, these moves often coincide with the loudest cheers, boos, and chants.

**Reception and Consequences**

Across the corpus, audience and media uptake are not incidental; they are constitutive of asshole style as status work.

- Audience "heat." Laughter, chants ("lock her up," "build the wall"), and call-and-response validate entitlement claims and dominance displays. They show that the crowd accepts the leader's exemption from decorum and joins in the transgression.
- Journalistic laundering. Coverage frequently reframes breaches as "gaffes,"

"controversy," or "unfiltered style," replaying the most outrageous lines as color without fully naming the entitlement logic. This extends reach while softening the description of harm.

- Opponent scripting. Rivals and institutional critics often respond on the performance's terms—fact-checking the taunt, trading insults, or expressing outrage about the latest "shocking" remark—supplying fresh grievances and raw material for the next cycle.

Uptake is the mechanism through which discrete acts become a repertoire. It teaches the performer which combinations of entitlement, norm-subversion, accountability refusal, and dominance reliably generate attention and in-group bonding.

**Process Model**

Taken together, the four categories form a recurring cycle of entitled transgression:

a. **Grievance narration → Entitlement claim**

   The speaker attributes loss, criticism, or scrutiny to a rigged system or persecutory elites and claims special exemption ("they're treating me very unfairly," "only I can fix it").

b. **Gleeful norm-subversion**

   The leader launches into taunts, ritualized disrespect, or taboo commentary, performed with visible enjoyment and framed as "telling it like it is."

c. **Accountability refusal**

   When challenged, the leader shifts frames ("just joking," "people are saying"), disowns literal readings, or blames "fake news," while leaving the insinuation intact.

d. **Dominance display → Uptake**

   The sequence culminates in humiliation bids and toughness posturing, eliciting chants, laughter, and media replay that consolidate the leader's status.

Feedback loops run from uptake back to grievance: coverage, criticism, and institutional pushback become new evidence of persecution, justifying fresh entitlement claims. The cycle tightens when demagogic us/them discourse supplies moral warrant, and when a strongman, masculine register renders humiliation legible as strength. It loosens when interlocutors refuse the bit—explicitly naming the move, declining to replay it as "color," and rekeying the encounter around institutional standards and care for publics.

**Boundary Cases and Near Misses**

To avoid collapsing asshole style into any "strong" or "angry" Trump speech, I tracked stretches of talk that lie near but outside the core pattern. These internal contrast cases clarify what does not count as entitled transgression even within the same events. First, the corpus includes conventional ceremonial and phatic passages. Rally openings with thanks to supporters, routine praise for the venue or state, and standard patriotic lines ("we love our country," references to veterans and police) follow familiar presidential scripts. They may be grandiose or self-referential, but they do not assert exemption from rules, taunt targets, or invite humiliation. I log these segments as non-asshole talk embedded in the same performances.

Second, there are passages of hard-edged policy and demagogic blame that never resolve into entitlement. For example, Trump sometimes describes immigration or crime in apocalyptic terms, singles out specific cities, or criticizes "radical Democrats" in Congress as dangerous. These moments are clearly demagogic and stigmatizing, yet within the sampled unit he does not claim that rules or procedures do not apply to him, does not frame norm-breaking as a prerogative, and does not retreat behind joke shields. I treat these as demagoguery without entitlement: harmful, but analytically distinct from asshole style.

Third, some segments contain delegitimation without full self-exemption. Trump criticizes "fake news" coverage, complains about bias, or claims that certain judges are unfair. In these near-misses, he attacks credibility but stops short of insisting that only his preferred outcomes are "real" or that he can simply set aside institutional decisions. These passages share properties with entitlement claims (complaint, us/them framing) but do not complete the move to special exemption.

Finally, the corpus includes occasional moments of restraint and acknowledgment. At points, Trump reads prepared remarks that call for unity after a crisis or express sympathy for victims of violence, with little improvisation. Whatever one makes of their sincerity, these segments adhere to expected norms of presidential consolation and are not played for laughs or dominance; they function as baseline genre performance rather than asshole style.

Taken together, these internal contrast cases reinforce the scope conditions of the concept. Within the Trump corpus, asshole style appears not whenever he is uncivil, emotional, or demagogic, but when entitlement, gleeful norm-subversion, accountability refusal, and dominance displays are activated together and rewarded through uptake. Recognizing the difference matters because it prevents the theory from treating all of his rhetoric as the same and because it identifies specific moments—and mechanisms—where status work through entitled transgression is doing its distinctive work.

### What the Theory Explains

The model helps explain how Trump's rule-breaking can be politically powerful even when it does little to persuade across difference. The cycle of entitled transgression yields three payoffs: spotlight control (his remarks dominate coverage), in-group bonding (supporters participate in chants and jokes that affirm his special status), and dominance displays (opponents and institutions are publicly humiliated). Because the repertoire rewards reaction rather than agreement, interlocutors who respond on its terms—fact-checking the bit, trading insults, replaying the most outrageous clips—often end up serving as foils that confirm his story of persecution and exemption.

### Relation to Adjacent Literatures

The theory clarifies how asshole style is related to, but distinct from, several adjacent phenomena. It overlaps with demagoguery in its use of scapegoating and us/them logics but focuses on performance: the entitlement to break rules, the pleasure taken in norm-breach, and the systematic refusal of accountability. It complements work on incivility and organizational norm-violation by specifying one mechanism through which norm-breaking yields short-term gains despite civic costs: transgression is framed as a rightful prerogative of a persecuted yet superior leader, and uptake provides immediate rewards.

The analysis also aligns with scholarship on trolling (Phillips, 2015), spectacle (Wu, 2016), and agonistic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 2017), showing how irony, "just joking" frames, and macho bravado allow attacks to be both serious and deniable, mobilizing audiences while blunting criticism. The model resonates with work on performance grammars such as professional wrestling's kayfabe, where performers "get heat" by provoking the crowd while maintaining a shared pretense (Mazer, 2020), and with studies of trolling that show how irony and playfulness can shield harmful speech while amplifying its reach (Phillips, 2015).

### Boundary Conditions and Transferability

Because the corpus is limited to a single, highly visible leader, the theory demonstrates mechanisms and scope conditions rather than prevalence. The repertoire appears most potent where visibility markets reward provocation, strong us/them frames supply moral warrant, and audiences are primed for agonistic, masculinist display. Within those conditions, the four categories and their sequencing offer decision rules for identifying asshole style in other contexts: Is a statusful actor claiming exemption, breaking norms with relish, dodging accountability, and staging dominance in ways that invite and receive uptake? Future comparative work can apply these rules to other leaders and media systems.

**Practical Implications**

For journalists, opponents, and civic actors, the model suggests that familiar responses—amplifying every shocking line as "color," treating breaches as isolated "gaffes," or trading insults—often feed the cycle. More promising responses (though not yet empirically tested here) include naming the moves ("this is an entitlement claim," "this is a humiliation bid"), refusing deniability ("it matters even if it was framed as a joke"), and re-centering coverage on institutional stakes and affected communities rather than on the leader's persona. The aim is not to ignore harmful speech but to disrupt the conversion of breach into clout.

**Limitations and Next Steps**

As a grounded theory from a single instrumental case, the model invites further work. Comparative studies across leaders and contexts can test how far entitled transgression travels and where it breaks down. Audience-focused research can specify how supporters and opponents actually interpret and enact the repertoire. Intervention studies can explore whether alternative responses can withhold its rewards without mirroring its incivility. For now, the contribution is conceptual and diagnostic: a vocabulary and process model for recognizing how asshole style operates as status work in contemporary political communication.

**Conclusion**

This study identifies entitled transgression as the core pattern that organizes asshole style across Trump's rallies, press events, and platforms. In this configuration, grievance, entitlement claims, gleeful norm-subversion, accountability refusal, and dominance displays work together—often through underlying moves like delegitimating institutions and scapegoating out-groups—to turn rule-breaking into status work. By specifying these four major categories, their typical sequencing, and their boundary conditions, the grounded theory explains how transgressive performances accrue clout and shape visibility without necessarily persuading across difference. It also offers diagnostic language and concrete intervention points for scholars, journalists, and civic actors who seek to recognize—and at times disrupt—the cycle by which asshole style converts norm breach into durable political power.

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Jack McKinney

# *The Nation Wears Prada: A Transnational Rhetorical and Ideological Critique of the 2025 Met Gala Through a Banal Nationalistic Framework*

> *"It takes two to maintain a silence: the one who remains silent,*
> *and the other who either doesn't ask questions*
> *or who is satisfied with unsatisfactory answers."*
>
> —Michael Schneider

**Introduction**

A$AP Rocky made a startling appearance at the 2025 Met Gala, such that he appeared 'superfine' per public sentiment. As designed by his own high-fashion company (AWGE) in collaboration with Bulgari, Christian Louboutin, and Briony Raymond, many saw his accessorizing of a ninety-carat diamond-encrusted umbrella not merely as a suture of wealth and power, but Black progress, representation, and excellence (Atkinson, 2025). Never mind Briony Raymond sourcing her diamonds in A$AP's outfit from the 'world's top suppliers'; never mind the tens of thousands of Black workers that died in 'Closed Labour Compounds' from working over fourteen hours per day with severe malnutrition for the largest diamond manufacturing company, De Beers; never mind current operations in Botswanna where some workers claim to be treated "...like slaves..." yet nonetheless are employed by large diamond companies; never mind these relationships as Black progress is marketed by the 2025 Met Gala to be 'superfine' – a transnational dilemma embedded with hierarchy and cultural affiliation (Raymond, 2025) (Blasi, 2016) (Freedom United, 2024).

Considering the art of rhetoric as a rational dynamis – that rhetoric is dependent upon ethical and epistemic dispositions of the polis (public) in configuring rationality – this transnational situation transcends sociological matters to also involve rhetorical matters (Garver, 1994). Communicative frameworks that nationally condition 'community' now provide a rash justification that is far removed from realizing modern globalization, a sociological phenomenon that makes ethical commentary imbued in transnational capitalist structures – for, who are we to settle ethical realizations without understanding our personal relationship between nationalized consumption and foreign production (Baum, 1996) (Singer, 2002) (Singer, 2016)? To conduct rhetorical analysis that registers these foreign producers in communicative frameworks is to utilize inclusive rhetorical analysis and ideological critique, ultimately serving global solidarity as opposed to nationalist ideology – the strategic bridge between abstraction and reality that manifests societal belief systems overarched by national symbolic boundaries (Dingo, 2013) (Lamont, 2015) (Van Dijk, 1995) (Collett, 2025).

Using a constructed rhetorical ecosystem as a method of analysis – Micheal Billig's 'banal nationalism' as the framework, disavowal as the mechanism, and Philip Wander's 'Third Persona' theory as the rhetorical expression –, this essay provides a transnational rhetorical and ideological critique of the 2025 Met Gala with the ultimate goal of showcasing a cohesive transnational rhetorical situation. The following sequence will be used in this essay to foster key findings: a 'literature review' will be provided to showcase the rhetorical ecosystem in full; a 'critical approach' segment will then summarize how and why this ecosystem can and should be used as a method of analysis; an 'artifact' segment will follow to explain the scholarly relevancy of the 2025 Met Gala as well as to provide information about the event and its impacts; an 'application' segment will then apply the rhetorical ecosystem to rhetorically analyze and ideologically critique the 2025 Met Gala; and lastly, a 'discussion and conclusion' segment will summarize key findings and reaffirm the importance of transnational critique in an ever-globalized world.

**Literature Review**

Due to the overwhelming preference for transnational rhetorical and ideological theorists to utilize multi-scaler analysis, this literature review will not solely focus on a single theory, but take the form of a rhetorical ecosystem – a dynamic network that involves multiple theories where each theory takes on a role that is specific to this case study and its interdependence to other theories (Dingo, 2012) (Xiang, 2022) (Tambe, Ashwini, and Thayer, 2021). In this ecosystem, banal nationalism is the overarching communicative and ideological framework; disavowal is the mechanism through which banal nationalism excludes populations; and Third Persona theory reveals how this dynamic manifests rhetorically, specifically through the symbolic exploration of who is 'I', 'you', and unregistered in given communicative frameworks. The following contents in the literature review will focus on each of these theories in a top-down approach, first looking at banal nationalism (framework), then disavowal (mechanism), then Third Persona theory (rhetorical expression).

Regarding banal nationalism, the framework of this analysis, it is understood to reference the ideological habits that enable the established nations of the West to be repro-

duced; this notably includes the seemingly mundane and 'banal' affairs of everyday life that reinforce the ideological conceptions of nationhood and the common rhetorical frameworks that symbolize national boundaries (Billig, 1995). Prominent rhetorical theorist Micheal Billig coined this term in 1995, though for this essay, banal nationalism will be referenced alongside his, Bart Bonikowski's, and Stephen Gibson's interpretations, that nationalism is an ideology, can be expressed as a social practice, and identifiable through capitalist frameworks (Bonikowski, 2016) (Gibson, 2015). It is also noteworthy to affirm Billig's latest publication "Banal Nationalism, 30 Years On—A Review" in this essay, upon which he validates using banal nationalism for transnational critique, arguing that the natural world is seen as the world of nations (Billig and Skey, 2025). As such, identifying banal nationalism through social practices/capitalist frameworks ought to be referenced transnationally, not merely to reflect the truth of globalization, but also to build upon existing scholarly works that point in that direction.

Given these premises, banal symbolic acts such as posing in front of a camera while wearing Prada or Louis Vuitton can reinforce nationalist ideology by dictating the bounds for national applicability of specified consumerism (Kakkad, 2024). Especially when this 'national' specification of consumerism includes a reliance on exploiting migrant labor (Prada and Louis Vuitton rank below a 10/100 on the scale from the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre), are national symbolic boundaries distinguished between high-fashion wearers and high-fashion producers. While nationalism is severe, its banality can manifest unconsciously through these symbolic acts.

Paired as the mechanism of this unconscious exclusion from banal nationalism, disavowal was originally coined in psychoanalytical interpretation by Sigmund Freud's pioneering and Jacques Lacan's revolutionary subsequent scholarship. However, more contemporary scholarship suggests that disavowal – more broadly the discipline of psychoanalytics itself – is inherently multidisciplinary, implying that connections should be made between cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, and rhetorical theory to fully grasp the 'big picture of the human influence' (Freud, 1961) (Lacan, 2006) (Bremer, 2025) (Gorvrin, Aner, and Herzovich, 2025). Definitionally, disavowal refers to the gap between what people claim to believe (expressed ideology) and what is actually conveyed. This gap can be revealable by ideological critique; and in this essay, ideological critique will be used to uncover the intricacies of nationalism as an ideology as it contains a gap between its beliefs and its social practices. Scholarship suggests that disavowal can be structured in two primary forms: cynical disavowal (I know quite well, but still...) and fetishistic disavowal (I don't only know how things are, but also how they appear to me, and nonetheless...) (Kuldova, 2019) (Black, 2025). The overarching mechanism, nonetheless, still follows the premise that knowledge of a problem is not parallel to action upon such problem; the function and existence of the term 'ignorance' rationally supplements this idea; and, it is of this unconscious disconnect that can form and influence nationalist ideology (Zupančič, 2022).

However, there are murky waters as to whether communicators of banal nationalism fall into those categories, especially as it relates to determining nationalist ideology from globalized economic relationships. Precisely, one may never know the full extent to how their purchases manifest across the world. The very act of declaring "I know..." relies on

epistemological-actualized knowledge, a highly unlikely scenario for this essay's transnational focus of banal nationalism, arguably a deceitful utterance itself in the form of an object-fetish rather than legitimate knowledge (Zupančič, 2024). Regardless, disavowal is still applicable as banal nationalism merely amplifies the state of unconscious expression of ideology. Ignorance from disavowal can still be achieved if the statement of "I know..." is reimagined as a rhetorical utterance as opposed to an epistemic construct, meaning that nationalist ideology disavows populations on the basis of its rhetorical expression of ignorance, not simply ignorance itself (Zupančič, 2024). If one claims to 'know' of unfair labor practices in the fashion industry whilst actively participating in it, it is rhetorically applied ignorance where they are directly disavowing the unrepresented laborious population.

And, since the ecological mechanism of disavowal occupies itself as a rhetorical utterance, Philip Wander's Third Persona theory works in parallel as a rhetorical expression to identify who is precisely excluded (disavowed) from national symbolic boundaries. In his essay, "The Third Persona: An Ideological Turn in Rhetorical Theory", Wander notes that Third Persona theory refers to negation in discourse, that there is a First Persona that take the form of an implied speaker 'I', a Second Persona that takes the form of 'you', and a Third Persona that does not hold a form in discourse due to the referenced population(s) being alienated from language and negated in history (Wander, 1984). Precisely, when ideology specifies morality, compassion, and 'community' in a manner that justifies its own existence within its applied communicative framework, rhetorical and ideological criticism are thereby conjoined and specified, Third Persona theory being in itself a bridge between these two (Wander, 1984).

As such, the disavowal of others in rhetorical utterances of "I know...", can be traceable through the use of applied (or the lack-there of) personal pronouns/symbolic identifications. When one wears Prada to uplift representation of marginalized communities and utters "I know..." about the marginalization of people of color, Third Persona theory identifies the First Persona (themselves), the Second Persona (marginalized communities in question), and Third Persona (the victims of the high-fashion industry, disavowed by the focus of the First and Second Persona). Collectively, all centered around a banal symbolic act, these theories provide grounds for how banal nationalism functions and is rhetorically expressed.

In the following 'critical approach' segment, this ecosystem will be analyzed as a central method of analysis as opposed to a theoretical showcase. As Billig argued, the natural world is a world of nations, and one theory alone will not demonstrate the nuance needed to grapple with tensions between national boundaries and global ethics.

**Critical Approach**

Often the goal of transnational critique, this essay's analysis will focus on discovering a nuanced rhetorical situation in the 2025 Met Gala – not an ultra-specific analysis on one particular aspect of an artifact, but an overarching analysis on the transnational dimensions of it. To get there, this essay will utilize the previously established rhetorical ecosystem as a method of analysis from a bottom-up critical approach, looking at how rhetor-

ical expressions construct specified ideology: first, by looking at who the Third Persona is and how rhetorical expressions from the event serve towards excluding them (representative pronouns used/unused); then, how this population(s) is disavowed through "I know..." utterances in the listed rhetorical expressions; and lastly, how these findings serve to develop a banal nationalistic framework.

While the method is theoretically dense, the thematic emphasis on Black dandyism from the 2025 Met Gala makes analysis streamlined. For example, while superfine wool and Pharel Williams' involvement in the gala appear separated, Black dandyism enables direct connections to be made with ease. These two examples are among many in the analysis; all of them provide interconnections that build the theme and ultimately develop a transnational rhetorical situation. The following 'artifact' segment will provide additional commentary on why, precisely, the 2025 Met Gala works for a transnational rhetorical analysis and ideological critique.

**Artifact**

The Met Gala, in spite of its international collaboration, has historically privileged U.S. cultural narratives that exemplifies embedded hierarchy of Hollywood elitism and American cultural memory (McLean, 2023). While the event is not commonly portrayed as ideological by the general public, it nonetheless portrays the banality of nationalism through its implicit symbolism, whether it be in the fashion choices themselves to reflect ideology as "...prosthetic of our souls... [with the] power to shape the conversation about where we are today and where we need to go..." or in the capital transaction of fashion worn and fashion produced (qtd. in Intarasuwan) (McGhee, 2022) (Nemli, 2021). As such, to discuss fashion is to reaffirm or contest with a presented ideology, mainly ideology grounded in national symbolic boundaries rhetorized by the Met Gala. However, some scholars further specify the presented nationalist ideology, claiming that the event embraces socially progressive issues without addressing political-economic concerns, civil rights issues, or, rather notably, various global crises (Nemli, 2021). Precisely, humanitarian crisis that happen across borders are essentially ignored by the very celebrities and designers so quick to establish progressive social critique (Ushe, 2024).

What is particularly interesting about the 2025 Met Gala, is the global dimension embedded in its theme of Black dandyism (as marketed, "Superfine: Tailoring Black Style") as opposed to the national dimension of previous galas such as the 2021 gala, "In America: A Lexicon of Fashion" and the 2022 gala, "In America: An Anthology of Fashion" (Vogue, 2025). Nationalist ideology, consequentially, is implicitly framed in the 2025 Met Gala in spite of its transnational appeal, leading to a cognitive disconnect that disavows populations across geolocated, national symbolic boundaries. Especially when the focus of Black dandyism – Black men using fashion as a means of declaring identity to rebel against racist institutions and history – is ethically motivated and politically charged, is critique necessary to distinguish this cognitive disconnect between marketed rhetoric and implicit rhetoric (Crumpton, 2024) (Efunnowo, 2025).

Based upon these disconnections, it is appropriate to utilize this essay's constructed ecosystem to conduct rhetorical analysis and ideological critique.  In the applications

segment, many specific microcosms of how Black dandyism is thematically utilized in the Met Gala – such as the gala's emphasis of 'superfine' tailoring – as a means of creating and maintaining national symbolic boundaries will be presented and analyzed.

**Application**

The design of the 2025 Met Gala was largely operated from the event's designated chairs – consisting of one honorary chair (Lebron James) and five subsequent co-chairs (Coleman Domingo, Lewis Hamilton, A$AP Rocky, Pharrell Williams, and Anna Wintour) – and Monica Miller, who influenced the adoption of the theme of Black dandyism from her 2009 novel, "Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity". To the committee, a thematic adoption of Black dandyism meant the transcendence of social and cultural hierarchies by being 'superfine', not only in the act of wearing superfine wool, but also in the act of being comfortable in one's own body (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2025). And, as implied by the use of 'transcendence' of hierarchy, this Gala is marketed towards past progress and present completionism, a concept reaffirmed by Miller when discussing Black dandyism, "I show the ways in which Africans dispersed across and around the Atlantic in the slave trade – once slaves to fashion – make fashion their slave." (Miller, 2009) While Pharrell William's statement, "...we celebrate the plight... we celebrate the progress and success..." and Anna Wintour's commentary, "...when I look at the show, I see freedom. I see liberation..." can be assumed to be ethically sound, what is left out is both the deliberative – future oriented concerns – and the logical consistencies of the present scope of completionism (Anderson, 2025).

Rather specifically, it is in this reflection of present completionism from the Met Gala's portrayal of Black dandyism where the Third Persona can be identified. It is clear that the First Persona ('I') are Black men in elite Hollywood circles, the Second Persona ('you') are people of color that consider the rise of Black representation in Hollywood-elite fashion to be 'massive' and representative of completing progress from civil rights movements (disproportionately U.S citizens), and the Third Persona (unregistered) are people of color that do not feel nor believe in the idea that this event sponsors completionism of civil rights and opportunity (Routledge, 2025). Precisely, when Lewis Hamilton claims that "...for Black people, that night was massive...", or when Al Sharpton claims that "... pioneers like André Leon Talley fought to have a night like this...", or when A$AP Rocky conflates tailoring Black style to being 'diamond-encrusted' – 'superfine' – , the transnational marketing is not actualized in the transnational reality of people of color in exploited work – in many situations, the term 'slavery' can also be appropriate –, especially in the high fashion and rare earth industry that is notorious for forced and child labor (U.S. Department of Labor, 2024) (Anderson, 2025) (Bahr, 2025). More implicitly, over fifty six big-name celebrity attendees wore outfits that were made by the LVMH group (Louis Vuitton, Dior, Loro Piana), Prada, Girorgio Aramani, Valentino, Fendi, Gucci, and/or Michael Kors, which are all under numerous investigations related to large scale migrant worker exploitation (Richemont, 2025) (Freedom United, 2025) (Kakkad, 2024) (Ethos, 2025) (Business & Huamn Rights Resource Centre, 2025) (Parodi, 2025) (Danziger, 2025) (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2023). The night may have been massive, that is, for only those that consider it to be: those inside of the American

symbolic boundaries.

The Third Persona is not merely excluded from these rhetorical expressions, however – they are disavowed. As previously alluded in the 'artifact' segment by various scholars that suggest that the gala's American social progressivism ignores global crises, the very rhetorical utterance of 'I know... how people of color are marginalized' manifests to enact ethically contradictory ideology, that being nationalism. If the event were to market civil completionism in the national sense, per se, disavowal will be less notable in application; but the subject of the noun 'people of color' and the involvement of international collaborators such as Lewis Hamilton are not bound to national boundaries, and as such, the Third Persona is disavowed by the cultural appearance of transnational progressivism with embedded national framing.

Any rhetorical utterance from the gala that attempts to lend itself to civil completionism – Black dandyism – in the vein of progressing Black marginalization ('I know...'), is merely effective in the manner that it attempts to justify contradictory ideology ('... but still'). The completionist outlook from the gala interpreting Black dandyism to push boundaries 'post-slavery' acknowledges lasting impacts from system racism ('I know...'), whilst negating the continuity of global slavery for people of color that are actively working to fulfill the nationalist requirements of the Met Gala ('...but still') (Crumpton, 2024). I affirm Venetia La Manna's conclusion that the 2025 Met Gala's cognitive disavowal of people of color from other nations (specifically those from low median income nations) greater represents concepts of dystopia than legitimate civil completionism (La Manna, 2024).

In spite of the ethical weight and universalism from 2025 Met Gala's disavowal of the Third Persona, it is also relevant to affirm its compositional banality as being unseparated from national symbolic boundaries that dictate who is included and excluded in preconceived notions of 'nationhood', unexclusive from being repeatable in many other symbolic acts. Granted this artifact offers a microcosm that allows for ease of access for how rhetorical theory prompts nationalist ideological construction, specifically in the applied thematic use of Black dandyism as being transnationally marketed and nationally framed, I personally urge readers to identify that the precise reason why the gala's nationalist ideology is banal is because the common (national) social reality deems it to be – the repetitious nature of rhetorically disavowing the Third Persona is interdependent with how nationhood displays it as an ideology, a social practice, and within capitalist structures. Indeed, the ethical turmoil of such findings goes unnoticed, unrepresented without transnational rhetorical analysis and ideological critique as it is a mere part of day-to-day life for many citizens in the United States. The scale of banal nationalism is immense, but its banality obscures the even greater global impact: fortitude of two billion workers in completely unregulated labor by faith that we are 'making the right purchase' (Torkington, 2024).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

By utilizing a multi-scaler rhetorical ecosystem as a method of rhetorical analysis and ideological critique, this paper builds a transnational rhetorical situation of the 2025 Met

Gala that considers both the formation of banal national symbolic boundaries and the necessary influence of global ethics in judging them. The findings affirm that while the 2025 Met Gala is celebrated for its apparent representation in lifting Black representation in national cultural discourse, the embedded civil completionist outlook within their rhetorical utilization of the central theme – Black dandyism – cognitively disavows the Third Persona, being, people of color in foreign exploited labor, especially those that are in such positions from the high-fashion companies that ran the event and claim to promote cultural awareness. Ultimately, the implicit ethical contradictions between the gala's transnational marketing and banal nationalist framing are troubling in a world currently dominated by globalized economic systems, where ethical relationships persist between nationalized consumption and foreign production.

To conclude, the impact of globalization is too large to be shrugged in rhetorical analysis, both in the means of analyzing public ethical and epistemic dispositions, but also in the means of constructing inclusive messages; and, it is within this necessity that makes this essay's constructed ecosystem between banal nationalism, disavowal, and Third Persona theory all the more notable for future, theoretically precise transnational rhetorical/ideological analysis.

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# *The Lack of a Lack: Anxiety, Conspiracy, and the Allure of Anti-Science in RFK Jr.'s Rhetoric*

**Abstract**

Communication studies of anti-science discourse often proceed from classical persuasion models, focusing on rational social actors, but fail to account for the psychic dynamics that underpin the rejection of scientific consensus in favor of alternative explanations, sham treatments, and quacks. The COVID-19 "infodemic" underscores the importance of developing theoretical and methodological approaches that can explain the attraction of pseudoscience. Suspicion of expert authority persists even when people can access information and safe, effective therapeutics, diagnostics, and vaccines. Studies of anti-science focused solely on rhetoric and argument fall short of explaining its endurance or the violence, risk, and excess sometimes associated with it. Its allure stems from the production of jouissance–a Lacanian concept that describes excessive unconscious enjoyment beyond pleasure. My wager is that accounting for enjoyment better explains the appeal of anti-science discourses and their rhetorical mechanisms. I focus on the production of anxiety through phobic objects in the discourse of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who has led the destruction of federal health infrastructure, and the ways in which this anxiety is redirected away from infectious pathogens (which typically demand universal public health responses) towards manufactured "threats" (which invite commodity-based solutions rooted in the idea of "health choice"). In particular, I focus on the function of disgust and its disavowal in RFK Jr.'s public statements and on the counterfactual temporality implicit in a Letter to Congress he used to sow doubt of the Covid-19 vaccine, after its removal from the list of recommendations for healthy children and pregnant women in 2025. The allure of anti-science discourses, like those perpetuated by RFK Jr., stems from their ability to conceal the existential contingency and fragility of our social world in the face of serious threats to public health, all the while undermining the very federal agencies tasked with keeping us safe.

What explains the allure of anti-science and how have purveyors of health disinformation come to influence public health and disease prevention policy in the U.S.? In February 2026, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Robert F. Kennedy Jr. appeared on the podcast *This Past Week* with Theo Von. During the interview, he downplayed the risks of Covid-19, stating, "I'm not scared of a germ. You know, I used to snort cocaine off toilet seats" (Theo Von, 2026). Earlier that year, in May, RFK Jr. (2025), an anti-vaccine advocate and super-spreader of medical disinformation (Yandell, 2023), had posted on X photographs of himself bathing with his grandchildren in Washington, D.C.'s Rock Creek, a waterway so contaminated with bacteria and sewage runoff that it is under an official swimming and wading ban (Powers Health, 2025; Richards, 2025).

Personal health choices aside, as the nation's top health official RFK Jr. has wielded his power to dismantle federal health infrastructure. Weeks after frolicking in Rock Creek, he announced the removal of the COVID-19 vaccine—which he calls "the deadliest vaccine ever made" (Huynh & Rosenbluth, 2024)—from the list of recommendations for healthy children and pregnant women.[1] An HHS letter circulated in Congress spelled out RFK Jr.'s justification. In it, he engages in fearmongering, misrepresenting three studies as showing "statistically significant increases in preterm birth," "higher rates of fetal loss if vaccination was received before 20-weeks of pregnancy," and an "increase in placental blood clotting in pregnant mothers who took the vaccine" (Fleischman, 2025; Fortiér, 2025; Gardner & Gardner, 2025). Then, in June 2025, he fired all seventeen members of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP)—the career experts who recommend FDA-licensed vaccines[2] —and replaced them with individuals known for anti-vaccine positions, science denialism, and financial ties to the for-profit wellness industry (Armour, 2025).

What can we make of, on the one hand, RFK Jr.'s dismissal of high-risk behaviors and infectious pathogens, and on the other hand, the panic-inducing, fallacious claims that a bioscientific technology causes irreparable harm to "pregnant women"? Taken seriously, these statements reveal a fractured relation to scientific authority and hidden dynamics that buttress the allure of anti-science. Rhetorical studies of science, health, and medicine often proceed from canonical persuasion models, theories of embodiment, Foucauldian discourse theory, and new materialist frameworks (Ceccarelli, 2011; Lawrence, 2020; Oreskes & Conway, 2022; Scott et al., 2013), but fail to account for the psychic dynamics that underpin beliefs and behaviors. Studies of anti-science focused solely on rhetoric and argument fall short of explaining its endurance or the violence, risk, and excess sometimes associated with it. Rejection of the scientific consensus and suspicion of expert authority persists even when people can access quality information and care.

1 Most recently, the CDC has delayed the publication of a report "showing the Covid-19 vaccine cut the likelihood of emergency department visits and hospitalizations for healthy adults last winter by about half" (Sun, 2026).

2 Insurance companies only cover vaccines recommended by ACIP for specific populations.

To understand these dynamics, I turn to psychoanalysis and its distinctive theory of the subject. I argue that psychoanalysis, specifically the Lacanian concept of *jouissance*—excessive, unconscious, often painful enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle—offers a privileged framework for understanding the logics and stakes of anti-science rhetoric.

My focus is on the rhetorical production of anxiety through phobic objects in RFK Jr.'s discourse and the ways in which this anxiety is redirected away from infectious pathogens (which typically demand universal public health responses and vaccination programs) towards manufactured "threats" like fluoride in community waters (which invite commodity-based solutions rooted in the idea of "health choice," like buying fluoride toothpaste). In particular, I analyze how disgust and its disavowal functions as a hinge that swivels away from existential threats and towards pseudoscientific threats that can be managed through the right consumer choices. I also attend to the implicit counterfactual temporality at work in RFK Jr.'s FAQ Letter to Congress and the ways in which it sows doubt of the Covid-19 vaccine.

Although distinct, these examples all share a rejection of scientific and government authority. Anti-science produces enjoyment through the illusion of transgression, while at the same time protecting its followers from encountering the contingency and fragility of the symbolic. The examples in this study reveal that anti-science subjectivity recoils from the what Lacan calls the real: the traumatic kernel extrinsic to signification; the Thing impossible to symbolize that threatens to destabilize the social order and disrupt capitalism's smooth functioning. Anti-science operates as a bulwark against this real as it attempts to reinstall a substantial authority through the discourse of conspiracy and wellness ideology. This conspiratorial subjectivity did not materialize out of thin air. Anti-science has a long U.S. history spanning the political spectrum, though it increasingly reflects positions on the political right (Green, 2013). A troubling trend during the pandemic, it has now been legitimized within Donald Trump's second presidential administration, underscoring the need for theoretical and methodological approaches that can explain its allure. Psychoanalysis offers a valuable framework for rhetorical analysis of anti-science because of its singular concept of the subject and its relation to anxiety.

**The Subject of Psychoanalysis and Anxiety as the Lack of a Lack**

The subject of psychoanalysis "is not simply an autonomous, free agent, but it is also not simply a mere effect of the structure as fully consistent in itself. It is rather an effect of the gap in this structure, of its inherent inconsistency or incompleteness" (Zupančič, 2018). In other words, the subject is not simply an effect of rhetoric—not just a product of discourse—because the signifying order itself is structurally lacking one signifier. According to philosopher Alenka Zupančič, "it is not simply the presence of the signifier that induces the entire human and social 'dialectics' and their contradictions, but rather . . . a gap that appears together with the signifying order, built into it." This gap is "not simply nothing," she explains, "it is a minus that materially affects the structure with which it

appears" (Zupančič, 2018). This consequential gap in the symbolic is important because it is "precisely the place where a surplus (enjoyment) is generated" and the place where we encounter the object of anxiety. Anxiety plays a key role in the rhetorical production of phobic objects in anti-science discourse, and its articulation with *jouissance* contributes to its appeal.

In *Seminar X*, Lacan (2016) develops his theory of anxiety. While Freud distinguished fear, which has a specific object, from anxiety, which for him is without an object, Lacan claims that anxiety "is not without an object" (*n'est pas sans objet*). The double negative suggests that anxiety has an object of a very particular kind–what he will call the object-cause of desire or *objet a*—not an ordinary empirical object but an object that is constitutively lost. It is precisely by virtue of its being unattainable that the *objet a* sets off the subject's desire. Contra Freud, Lacan argues that anxiety emerges with the proximity of the object rather than its loss, that anxiety is the lack of a lack.

Anxiety—the experience of a suffocating presence of unspecified origin and location—surges during moments of crisis due to the disorienting loss of symbolic coordinates. And because the object of anxiety itself cannot be symbolized, various subjective formations (phobias and fetishes)—which can enter the realm of rhetoric—emerge in its stead to both express the anxiety and to shield us from the encounter with the even more traumatic real. Renata Salecl (2004) traces the historical permutations of such objects, noting the shift from external threats in the 1950s (communism, the Bomb) to internalized threats of the 1970s and 1980s (biological weapons, HIV, and the AIDS crisis), and finally, to the blended post-9/11 threat of terrorists and viruses–invisible and ubiquitous, impervious to annihilation. In late 2019, anxiety once again exploded with the emergence of the highly contagious, novel SARS-CoV-2 (an arbitrary Thing that disrupted the symbolic—and that conspiratorial and anti-science narratives attempt to tame).

The ontological status of this pathogen helps explain its relation to anxiety. From a scientific standpoint, viruses, which until the invention of the electronic microscope were impossible to visualize, are microscopic non-living packages of genetic material that cannot reproduce on their own but require host cells to replicate (often killing the host) (Taylor, 2014). But from an ontological standpoint, according to philosopher Mladen Dolar, "Virus appears as an external contingent peril, but at the same time it points to a dimension at the (extimate?) core of the human" (Hamza & Ruda, 2020, p. 482). Adopting Lacan's neologism extimacy, Dolar conceives of the virus as something external (a piece of the Real) and also intimate; something that "inspires anxiety, unease, disgust, but also, at the same time, its reverse side—enjoyment and its excess" (Dolar, 2022). The portmanteau "extimate" conveys the paradox of an exterior that is already present within the interior—a traumatic kernel, a perturbation, or a remnant that prevents the interior space from becoming fully enclosed and self-identical.[3] Indeed, SARS-CoV-2 ruptured

3 "The most interior—this is how the dictionary defines 'intimate (l'intime)—has, in the analytic ex-

the symbolic and revealed not just global structural injustices but the very fact that "our social life along with our biological life are contingent and exposed to contingency" (Hamza & Ruda, 2020, p. 483). The specter of total collapse invokes anxiety.

But moments of crisis also open up the space for change. For Dolar, as the pandemic forced "a halt, a derailment of the capitalist economy," it also reoriented us towards "an opening, hence a possibility of an event, of a serious transformation, a bifurcation" (Hamza & Ruda, 2020, p. 483). In the U.S. and other parts of the world, governments intervened (albeit imperfectly, in hindsight), sometimes leaning into "socialist" measures that gave citizens a taste of universal basic income and universal healthcare through government subsidies in the form of individual stimulus checks and the distribution of free personal protective equipment, Covid-19 testing kits, and vaccines. Paradoxically, the very "[m]easures to protect human life" also revealed that "life is expendable in the ways that capitalist economy is normally run" (Hamza & Ruda, 2020, pp. 484–485), which led to further indictment of the system and created an opening for change. Anti-science rhetoric, by channeling anxiety into phobic objects effectively closed down this opening, reestablishing the symbolic coordinates of capitalist individualism.

Well-funded, organized, and politically motivated anti-science and anti-vaccine groups championed by the Trump administration (Hotez, 2021) forged alliances with anti-government, right-wing populist, white supremacist, and neo-fascist groups. They propagated the rhetoric of "freedom" and "individual choice" and opposition to government and medical "tyranny." In this discourse, viruses and other pathogens as extimate objects that expose the gaps in the symbolic must be ignored, their existence denied, or be pulled into the symbolic nexus of conspiracy where some external enemy can be blame for our woes ("lab leak theory," the "China virus"). It is within this broader context that RFK Jr.'s rhetoric must be understood today. This rhetoric patched up the symbolic through paranoia and conspiracy, transposing existential contingency onto a metonymic slew of phobic objects.

Some of these objects represent internal threats wreaking quiet havoc within the "black box" of the body. Vaccines—especially those made with messenger RNA—are the phobic object par excellence. But other "toxins," "chemicals," or "poisons," help sustain anxiety that drives people to wellness products or anti-government policies that promise to eliminate such impurities. For instance, in his interview with Theo Von (2026), RFK Jr. dedicates specific attention to fluoride, pesticides, and processed foods, among other things. Other phobic objects within anti-science discourse represent external threats, often expressed in the paranoid fantasy of being subjected to government surveillance and

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perience, a quality of exteriority" (Miller, 2008). This idea is linked to Lacan's famous aphorism that the unconscious is structured like a language, which means that just as language comes to us from "outside" as we become social subjects, so then there is something already external within our innermost interiority that is ties to the desire of the Other. See also (Zupančič, 2018).

persecution or mind control through microchips implanted via the vaccine by "super villains" like billionaire Bill Gates or Dr. Anthony Fauci (Siraki & Mohammad, 2023). In this worldview, everything is a conspiracy–especially federal responses to public health crises that smack of universalism and disrupt the capitalist economy. Such conspiracies have long-standing roots, but in the context of Covid-19 they are reconfigured in ways that simultaneously critique the capitalist system of which the pandemic is part and sustain it by luring followers to "alternative" treatments promoted by influencers and quacks who fulminate against vaccines, masks, and government encroachment on liberties and individual choice.

**Disavowing Disgust, Enjoying Transgression**

In short, anti-science gets to have its capitalism and enjoy it, too. To do so, it has to repress the real dimensions of infectious pathogens and relegate them, instead, to the realm of fantasy. In RFK's rhetoric this maneuver occurs through the disavowal of disgust. His cocaine and Rock Creek stories both revolve around direct exposure to pathogens, contamination, and abjection that should produce anxiety and disgust because they breach the separation between inside and outside. But both narratives circumvent the matter of disgust, albeit in different ways, and instead depict him as a figure who courts danger and ignores prohibitions. These instances of narrative evasion of abjection are consequential. Before discussing them in some detail, it is important to understand the concept of disgust and its relation to enjoyment.

This basic human affect concerns "the violent repulsion vis-à-vis a physical presence or some other phenomenon in our proximity, which at the same time . . . can also exert a subconscious attraction or even an open fascination" (Menninghaus, 2003, p. 6). Furthermore, disgust mediates between conscious perception and unconscious reactions triggered by some intrusive, "unassimilable otherness." Already in Freud, disgust is tied to repression and the passage into culture, where barriers are maintained through "civilizing taboos and social distinctions." Simultaneously, disgust is entangled with "strong libidinal impulses" (Menninghaus, 2003, p. 2).

From a Lacanian standpoint, there is a direct relation between disgust, anxiety, and *jouissance*: "[t]he object of enjoyment is by definition disgusting" due to "a weird superego injunction that appears to emanate from it, a call to enjoy it even if (and precisely because) we find it ugly and desperately try to resist being dragged into it" (Krečič & Žižek, 2016, p. 64). In other words, we can't help not to react. Moreover, the object of disgust threatens our corporeal integrity and "destabilizes the line that separates the inside of our body from its outside," which is why enjoyment attaches to it (p. 64).

Exposure to contamination in public bathrooms and polluted waters does, at least hypothetically, pose a serious threat to RFK Jr.'s corporeal integrity, and yet this point is glossed over in the narratives. This foreclosure redirects enjoyment away from abjec-

tion and towards the transgression of authority. The mechanics of rhetorical evasion are distinct in each case. For instance, RFK Jr.'s X post uses familial and naturalistic fantasies to foreclose disgust from the symbolic. He writes: "Mother's Day hike in Dumbarton Oaks Park with Amaryllis, Bobby, Kick, and Jackson, and a swim with my grandchildren, Bobcat and Cassius in Rock Creek" (Robert F. Kennedy Jr [@RobertKennedyJr], 2025). Here, the narrative enacts "a split between abjectal objects or acts and the symbolic ritualization meant to cleanse" (Krečič & Žižek, 2016, pp. 71–72). In other words, the idyllic "nature hike" with family blocks off the "filth" of Rock Creek (Powers Health, 2025; Richards, 2025). The official health advisory from the U.S. National Park Service, "Stay safe while enjoying Rock Creek Park! Swimming and wading are not allowed due to high bacteria levels" (U.S. National Park Service, n.d.), serves as a prohibition to be transgressed and enjoyed.

Transgression and enjoyment also figure prominently in RFK Jr.'s interview with Theo Von, whom he has known for many years through a recovery support group. His story about snorting cocaine off public toilets reveals something more than the disavowal of disgust—it points to the jouissance associated not just with the drugs themselves but with the self-destruction attached to their use. As Todd McGowan (2019) points out, "enjoyment occurs through destruction rather than the advancement of self-interest. We enjoy through forms of self-sacrifice, and . . . we enjoy the sacrifice of our own good" (p. 206). The loss that results from harmful behavior "creates the excess excitation that leads to enjoyment, which is why the subject must suffer its enjoyment rather than finding pleasure in it" (p. 217).[4] But the cocaine story also serves as a segue into implicit (and explicit) anti-government positioning.

The Health Secretary, who has been public about his 14-year heroin addiction he overcame in his late 20s (Cervantes Jr., 2026), reminisces about the "pirate" support group that met in secret during the government pandemic lockdowns in California when in-person meetings were prohibited. Continued support, Kennedy says, was more vital for him than avoiding a Covid-19 infection: "I said I don't care what happens, I'm going to a meeting every day. I know this disease [addiction] will kill me, right? It's just bad for my life. So, for me it was survival" (Theo Von, 2026). Indeed, Kennedy raises an important public health issue. Drug use increased dramatically during the pandemic and by 2022, 111,000 people in the US died of an overdose. Loss of physical connection due to social distancing, increased stress, isolation, and anxiety that aggravated the mental health crisis, and disruptions in medication access and delivery contributed to high rates

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4 Journalist Olivia Nuzzi depicts RFK Jr. as a just such a figure of excess--ablaze in the infernal extasy of jouissance—in her memoir, American Canto, where she recounts a personal scandal involving then-presidential candidate Kennedy. She describes him as "insatiable in all ways, as if he would swallow up the whole world just to know it better if he could." He was, she writes, "the mouse and the architect of his maze. The giver of his own pleasure and torment. He desired. He desired desiring. He desired being desired. He desired desire itself" (quoted in Oh (2025)).

of addiction relapse. At the same time, addicts were at higher risk of infection and negative outcomes, which is why providers pivoted to virtual support as a lifeline, albeit one with new barriers to recovery (Bergman et al., 2021; National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), 2023). But universal access to mental health and addiction support programs is not RFK Jr.'s focus during the interview. Rather, he offers an indirect critique of government by emphasizing the "societal impacts" of the pandemic that he sees as more destructive than exposure to "a germ"—an argument that rests on the assumptions of the individualist/libertarian market-based ideology that informs MAHA ("Make America Healthy Again").

**The COVID Vaccine as a Phobic Object and the Temporality of Catastrophe**

If disgust can be foreclosed or redirected in ways that hedge existential anxiety but still allow the subject to enjoy, then what happens when the phobic object is not a pathogen but a biomedical technology? The vaccine as a phobic object operates through a different rhetorical mechanism: fear of irreparable harm through the temporality of catastrophe. I now turn my attention to RFK Jr.'s Letter to Congress.

The FAQ Letter, which public health groups swiftly condemned, paints a grim picture. As mentioned earlier, RFK Jr. cites three studies as showing the Covid-19 vaccine causes serious harm to pregnant women (Fleischman, 2025; Fortiér, 2025; Gardner & Gardner, 2025). What interests me here is the future perfect temporality of harm; the high certainty that the irreparable will have occurred if one chooses the vaccine. This is the temporality of catastrophe (Dupuy, 2018), and it suggests that the decision to vaccinate should be avoided at all cost so as not to disturb the privileged fantasy of motherhood—the desire, above all, for a healthy baby ("as nature intended").

The trouble is that the Letter doesn't just misrepresent the studies' findings—it directly contradicts them or invents language that is not included in them. Dr. Paul Offit (2025), vaccine and immunology expert, coinventor of the rotavirus vaccine, and former member of the FDA Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee and of the ICEP, lays out the discrepancies in some detail:

> Study #1: RFK Jr. wrote that the study found that, "… pregnant women showed higher rates of fetal loss if vaccination was received before 20-weeks of pregnancy." In fact, the study concluded that "SARS-CoV-2 vaccination was not associated with miscarriage."
>
> Study #2: RFK Jr. wrote that the study "showed statistically significant increases in preterm birth," when in fact the authors concluded that "SARS-CoV-2 vaccine appears to be safe during pregnancy with no increase in incidence of preterm labor."
>
> Study #3: RFK Jr. wrote that the study "…showed an increase in placental blood clot-

> ting in pregnant mothers who took the vaccine," when the term "placental blood clotting" doesn't appear anywhere in the paper. RFK Jr. counts on the fact that few people will read the studies he references. This level of misrepresentation is at least cynical and at worst fraudulent. (Offit, 2025).

The studies' lead author herself, Dr. Maria P. Velez of McGill University, explains that the FAQ Letter ignores confounding factors. She and other experts point to growing evidence for the protective effects of Covid-19 vaccines in pregnant women, who are at elevated risk of adverse outcomes from infection (Gardner & Gardner, 2025). Given the demonstrable untruth of the FAQ Letter, what is its rhetorical function?

Several phobic objects surface in the FAQ Letter. "Placental blood clots"—a phrase that does not appear in the referenced vaccine studies—invokes the horrific image of the thrombus-Thing threatening the vital organic unity between mother and child. The presumed risk of "birth defects" implies irreparable damage done to an otherwise naturally perfect child made defective by the vaccine, and only revealed as such too late–ex post facto–when the decision to take the vaccine cannot be revoked. The anxiety-inducing proximity of the object of the vaccine is an effect of narrative temporality. In this scenario, the subject occupies the position of witness for whom the inevitability of injury rooted in the decision to take the vaccine is revealed only retroactively. The traumatic kernel of the injury that *will have occurred* functions as the extimacy that disrupts the fantasy of motherhood.

This rhetorical trick conceals the real of mass suffering and death caused by uncontrolled infections in the absence of vaccines and other public health measures.[5] We are already living with the consequences of damaged public health infrastructure in the U.S. and globally (Paun, 2026). The man leading the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), has dismantled the federal health infrastructure, purged experts, slashed research funding, canceled life-saving clinical trials, and made vaccines harder to obtain,[6] more expensive, and more feared by the public (Protect Our Care, 2026). Trust in childhood vaccines continues to decline (Kearney et al., 2026; Yam et al., 2025), especially among Republicans, while illnesses are on the rise, with nearly 1,800 measles cases in the U.S. as of April (CDC, 2026).

Yet, the persistence of anti-science beliefs in the face of these very consequences reveals something public health messaging—and traditional rhetorical studies—often misses. The allure of anti-science discourses, like those perpetuated by RFK Jr., stems precisely

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5 The acting head of the CDC, Dr. Jayanta "Jay" Bhattacharya cancelled a publication showing the COVID vaccine "sharply cut the odds of hospitalizations and emergency visits last winter"—citing methodological concerns (Mandavilli, 2026).

6 In February 2026, the American Academy of Pediatrics and other health organizations asked the courts to block the Trump administration's revisions to the childhood immunization schedule.

from their ability to cover up the gap in the symbolic. Anti-science rhetoric floods the gap between subject and object with phobic things, creating the lack of a lack. The appeal and endurance of these rhetorics suggests that mere facts are not enough to counter them. Disinformation alone is not the culprit. The culprit is a structure of *jouissance*. And understanding this structure is no longer just an academic exercise but a political necessity. Psychoanalysis expands the study of rhetoric because it asks not only what arguments are being made but what unconscious satisfaction they provide. At the end of the day, architects of anti-science like RFK Jr. who now control the federal government will not make America healthy again, but they will make it enjoy again. And again.

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Jhazzmyn Joiner

# *How Issa Rae Used* Insecure *to Reclaim Narrative Authority*

Black women did not have authority over our narratives in the media. Initially, white male executives controlled the narrative and presented us from their perspective, which was often racist and/or sexist (Levy, 2020), using inaccurate stereotypes, such as the Mammy and Jezebel. From minstrel shows to the rise of television, white executives have been perpetuating these tropes. It was not until more recent years, with the rise of Black women in executive roles, that we were able to create more accurate representations of Black womanhood in the media.

This paper argues that Issa Rae's show, Insecure (2016), was such a landmark in the Black community because of the narrative strategies used to reclaim narrative authority of the images of Black women in media. By narrative authority, I mean marginalized groups (in this case, Black women) taking back ownership over how they're represented, challenging tropes, and shaping stories through their own lens. Some of the ways that she did that through her show include the creation of more complex Black characters that, making them easier to identify with, which makes a difference in the way we see ourselves and the way others see us. Some of her narrative strategies include some of the storylines, references made, and themes found in the show. First, we start with the rise of television and early portrayals of Black women in media.

This is followed by a critical analysis of the show, Insecure, looking deeper into the narrative strategies used, both positive and negative. There have been other studies that have assessed narrative strategies employed in Insecure, such as looking deeply at voice-over and internal focalization, audience assessments, and racial politics. However, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have looked at Insecure's narrative strategies in the same way they will be looked at throughout this paper.

**The Rise of Television**

Before there was television, there was the radio, and minstrel shows before that. Minstrel shows were stage plays where white men would dress up in black face to imitate Black people. These same imitations found their way into radio stories and television shows. Amos 'n Andy (1928) and Beulah (1945) are examples of radio shows that were created by white people, with the former being created by two white minstrel actors (Cheers, 2020). Both would later become television shows. Though Black actors would be hired to star in these television shows (i.e. Hattie McDaniel as Beulah), white men would still control the narrative and perpetuate stereotypes. Three networks controlled radio, National Broadcast Company (NBC), Columbia Broadcast System (CBS), and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) (Bogle, 2002). These companies still dominate the television world, along with others, today.

Radio prepared people for televisions in that it involved the similarity of hearing stories being told within one's home. Radio stories were often dramatic or comedic and shared lessons for people to take away. Television did the same, except now the actors could be seen, adding an exciting visual element. However, people feared the television, as so often happens with new technology. Sponsors were worried that people would not sit at home to watch television, as people loved going to the movies back then, and that they would not be able to sell to consumers. However, after World War II, some television hits were created, which increased the number of viewers.

**Tropes/Stereotypes**

I will be using tropes and stereotypes interchangeably. Some of the tropes related to Black women include the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire (Bogle, 2002; Boylorn, 2008; Cheers, 2019). The Mammy is a fat, irritable or pleasant (depending on who's creating the narrative), servant figure who is desexualized (Bogle, 2002; Cheers, 2019). Jezebel is a promiscuous woman (Cheers, 2019). Sapphire, based on the character of the same name from the show Amos 'n Andy (1951), is an angry Black woman who often berates men (Cheers, 2019). "Black women are situated on television sitcoms, dramas, and comedies to reflect these stereotypes" (Boylorn, 2008, pg. 417-418), and many of these tropes were used to justify the mistreatment of Black women. For example, if Black women are shown as promiscuous, to justify much of the sexual assault that took place during slavery, and that still takes place today. Over the years, these tropes have taken on new lives and grown into more modern versions, some being a combination of a few different stereotypes.

For example, the Sista with Attitude (SWA). SWA represents the working-class woman who's a bitchy but educated, materialistic, promiscuous, strong Black woman (Boylorn, 2008). Strong as in she doesn't need a man, or anyone, because she's independent. This trope is connected to the Strong Black Woman (SBW) trope that Joan Morgan, author

and journalist, made famous, as well as the educated Black bitch and Academic Alpha Bitch tropes. There's also a modernized version of the Mammy that portrays Black women as working too hard and seeming so independent to the point that Black men do not desire them. People often point to Phylicia Rashad's character, Clair Huxtable, in The Cosby Show (1984) when talking about this modernized version of the Mammy. This modernized version also relates to the previously mentioned tropes. I think of them as all different names for a similar stereotypical Black woman who's educated, independent, hardworking, and somewhat bitchy. Several Black women were forced to play these stereotypes for many years, though not all, until Black people started to become media executives, providing agency over Black images.

**The History of Black Women in Media**

At the inception of television, Black people were often seen singing and dancing. Take Hazel Scott for example. In 1950, the DuMont Network launched The Hazel Scott Show (Bogle, 2002). Hazel Scott was a prodigy from a young age, having perfect pitch by age 3 and a half, and learning to play the piano after that. On her show, she played the piano, often putting her own spin on some classical music, which many criticized her for. She was progressive in that she never played a maid or any of the traditional tropes; her manager put in her contract that she could only show up as herself. She married a Black politician, Adam Clayton Powell, making them an outspoken power couple. She did not perform in front of a segregated audience in the south, and she sued a restaurant who refused to serve her and won the case (Bogle, 2002). She was a commanding presence, and many loved her personality. It was one of the reasons viewers tuned in week after week. However, she wound up in trouble when Red Channels, which listed those they thought were Communists or Communist Sympathizers, listed Scott. She sued and won the case, but her reputation was tarnished, and her show was cancelled.

Another Black woman who helped to pave the way was Ethel Waters (singer and actress) who hosted her own program (Bogle, 2002; Cheers, 2020), The Ethels Water Show (1939), which was more theatrical. Her show debuted on June 14, 1939, on the National Broadcast Company (NBC). It was a variety program where she performed many dramatic skits with guest stars. She went on to earn two Emmy Nominees, a first for Black women and men alike, paving the way for others, such as Diahann Carroll who won a Golden Globe Award in 1968 for her leading role in Julia (1968). This was only the start for Black women. Fast-forward to today, self-representation of women as who are authors and performers has grown, allowing for more complex women and their sexualities (Levy, 2020). We have media moguls such as Shonda Rhimes (Scandal, 2012), Ava DuVernay (Queen Sugar, 2016), and Issa Rae (Insecure, 2016) dominating the world of media and creating images of Black women that move beyond simple stereotypes and flat characters. These showrunners feature Black women protagonists, but Rae both stars in and executes her show (Levy, 2020). So, what narrative strategies does the show Insecure

use that makes it a landmark of modern-day television shows of Black women and what are the implications of these strategies?

**Methodology**

For this study, I chose the show Insecure because it's received a great deal of support from the Black community. Insecure is a Dramedy created by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore that follows the life of a contemporary Black woman as she navigates romance, friendships, work, and more in Los Angeles. It's an extension of Issa Rae's popular web series, The Misadventure of Awkward Black Girl (2011). Issa Rae mentioned, in an interview with Good Morning America in 2016, that she wanted to make Black people relatable, to see us on screen, put us in situations we all go through, and to address race, relationship issues, and highlight Black female friendships.

I specifically chose to do a critical analysis because it's a heterogeneous approach that allows me to examine "historical and sociopolitical dimensions" of a body of work and it "attempts to expose hidden power and taken-for-granted assumptions" (Holland & Novak, 2017, pg. 295). Given the cultural context of the show and the reception of it by the Black community, this method is a good way to analyze the show for both positive and negative aspects, and to highlight why some of the positive aspects may have resonated with the Black community.

**Season One**

I looked at the narrative arc of season one, as this is the season that paved the way for other seasons and the ultimate success of the show. Spoilers follow. Season 1 follows Issa Dee, played by Issa Rae, and her rocky relationship with her long-time boyfriend, Lawrence Walker (Jay Ellis). Issa is dissatisfied with her relationship (Sobande, 2019), as she feels Lawrence is not trying to be successful and find a stable job, and that their relationship is missing some excitement. This is exacerbated when she reconnects with an old romantic interest, Daniel King, (Y'lan Noel), that excites her. Lawrence feels as though Issa is being hard on him and not supportive. He ends up connecting with a woman who he sees each time he goes to cash his unemployment check at the bank. Her name is Tasha (Dominique Perry). She supports Lawrence's plans and dreams and recognizes in him what Issa does not. This, in a somewhat predicable way, sets the stage for drama that ends up driving Lawrence and Issa apart, though they do try and make things work at first. Issa gets closer to Daniel and ends up sleeping with him while they're alone at his studio one night. Lawrence finds out in episode 7 of the season, and leaves to stay with a friend, leaving viewers unsure as to whether the two will end up together. In the last episode, episode 8, while on a trip with friends in Malibu, Issa gets a call from Lawrence saying he misses her and that they should talk. Issa returns home early to find that Lawrence has taken everything except his BestBuy shirt, which feels symbolic. He's leaving behind the man that Issa could not bear to be with because she didn't feel that he was

good enough. This is the main storyline.

Another storyline is the relationship between Issa and her best friend, Molly Carter (Yvonne Orji). Molly is a successful lawyer with an unsuccessful dating life. She keeps it real,she's a little bougie, and she always has thoughts on Issa's choices. Sometimes they argue, but they are always there for one another. There are also storylines where viewers are exposed to the professional lives of Issa and Molly, and often racially charged experiences they have. Additionally, viewers get to see Issa trying to find herself in season 1. Some of the major themes identified are friendship, career, relationships, identity, and desirability. I will mention some of the ways the show may have fallen flat, and the strategies used that make the show relatable and more representative of Black women.

**Falling Flat**

I'd be remiss to not acknowledge some aspects of the show that were not done well. Tropes were visible within season 1. Molly has traits of the Educated/Academic Alpha Bitch/SWA and a mix of the modern-day Mammy. She's a successful lawyer, but she does not have an easy time dating. She dates this guy named Jered (Langston Kerman) off and on throughout season 1. However, she continues to find things wrong with him, such as his low- paying job and the fact that he'd sexually experimented with a man once. The latter leads into a conversation about double standards, given that Molly had an experience with a woman. In episode 7, when Molly and Issa get into an argument, Issa tells Molly that she's hard to please and cannot keep a man. Molly is a woman who wants a man on her level but also ends up finding things in every man she dates in season 1 that she does not like, which are valid in some cases. In the end, she ends up losing Jered because she keeps putting him down for things she deems wrong with him, only to realize that she likes him and should accept him for him. By then, though, it's too late.

In another example, she dates a guy named Chris, played by musician, Jidenna, who comes to an event with Molly out of obligation. He tells her that he feels she is asking for too much too soon in the relationship. Molly is like the trope in that she is hardworking, but she's also hard to please and is so demanding that she drives men away.

Issa Dee, on the other hand, is characteristic of the Sapphire trope. She's often seen berating Lawrence in parts of season 1. For example, Issa and Lawrence have a spat where Lawrences expresses that Molly's standards are way too high and that she takes dating way too seriously. Issa responds by saying that maybe Molly should settle like she did. She gets upset with Lawrence throughout the beginning of the season for his laziness, and the lack of excitement she feels in their relationship.

Their mutual friend, Kelli (Natasha Rothwell) is a mix of a jezebel and the Mammy. She's hypersexual, often talking about sex, yet she's never shown with a man. She's also a curvier woman, the curviest of the friend group. So, she's sexual and desexualized at the same

time.

Another way that the show fell flat was in its portrayal of only one friend as happily married, and that's their friend Tiffany (Amanda Seales). She's a light skinned woman, the lightest skinned of the friend group, and she's the only friend who seems to be happily married/in a happy relationship in general. Often, light skinned women have been portrayed as more desirable in media, with light skinned women often playing love interests, for example, Tisha Campbell in Martin (1992) or Lauren London in ATL (2006). Darker skinned women have often been shown as less desirable, and this season perpetuates that idea in making the light skinned friend the only one in a happy relationship.

Lastly, we do not get a lot of background information on the characters in this season, such as what their parents are/were like. Often, family life influences who someone grows up to be. There are no family members shown in this season, though it does come in other seasons, and there aren't many conversations around the family, either. Molly does mention, at one point, that she did not go to the beach when she was younger, even though she had access to it living in Los

Angeles. This is what inspires Issa's idea to take the underprivileged youth to the beach later in this season. However, there are hardly any other mentions of childhood. This backstory would have given the characters and decisions they made more context. While the show does perpetuate some stereotypes and fall flat in certain areas, there were many narrative strategies used that contributed to the show's success.

Scholars have argued that the show perpetuates stereotypes, but Levy (2020) maintains that Rae uses the history of representations of Black women and their representation as sexual subjects to construct antiracists, feminist resistance through this show.

**Narrative Strategies**

***Themes of Desirability***

Historically, Black women have been hypersexualized, such as Sarah Baartman whose curvy body was put on display for Europeans to fetishize, and portrayed as hoes, hoochies, freaks, and more (Levy, 2020). Black women's sexuality was often either avoided so as not to perpetuate stereotypes or shown in a stereotypical way. However, Rae uses sexuality as a characterization for characters to explore their identities and how they want to be seen (Levy, 2020).

One noticeable theme in season 1 is desirability. In episode 1, Issa is in a classroom talking to some of the kids in the "We Got Y'all" Program. They start asking Issa questions, such as why she talks white and why she isn't married, with the student assuming that she's not married because she's bitter (based on a comment the student's dad made

about "bitter ass Black women") to which Issa responds that Black women aren't bitter, just tired of settling for less.

Issa's response speaks to standards. It also points to the Sapphire stereotype where Black women often berate and don't appreciate their men, which is an interesting juxtaposition given characteristics of the Sapphire trope can be found in Issa. Another student also talks about Issa's hair, which is in a natural, short afro. The student says that her cousin could put a sew in into her hair. This comment is a reminder that representation matters and that "the media is a powerful tool in disseminating societal ideals about image and beauty to children from an early age" (Steele, 2016). These young women are likely basing beauty ideals on things they've seen and heard. Issa defies this beauty standard in several ways, exposing the students to a different kind of Black woman.

Desirability is a big topic in Molly's life during season 1 as well. She's seen on various dating apps, both free and exclusive, and going on dates with many men but not being wholly satisfied with any of them. At work, her coworker talks about her Black boyfriend and Molly says that Black men love Asian women and women of other ethnicities. Basically any kind of woman but the Black woman. This perpetuates this idea that Black men do not want to date Black women, likely for some of the stereotypical reasons that the student mentioned when she referred to Black women as "bitter." Season 1 both perpetuates and debunks the idea of Black men not desiring Black women. It perpetuates it by only one happily married Black couple on the show and one happily married interracial couple (the coworker and her Black boyfriend). However, the show debunks the idea because most of the Black men on the show during this season are engaged to, dating, married to, or flirting with Black women.

Lastly, Insecure features many darker skinned women, such as the main characters, which is positive because there's been a history of colorism in media. I mentioned the pervasiveness of colorism above, but they also defied colorism in media in other ways. This show placed darker skinned Black women in the limelight after being forced to the margins for so long, not only by including them in the show, but by making them the main characters. Plus, "the lead characters... are neither portrayed as simply a fetishized object of another's lust nor as desexualized" (Sobande, 2019, pg. 440). The standard of beauty in the United States has historically been European beauty standards, so traits typically associated with African American women, such as dark skin, coarse hair, and fuller figures oppose media and society's images of beauty in America (Steele, 2016). Additionally, as previously mentioned, many shows pair lighter skinned Black women with darker skinned Black men. In addition to the shows I mentioned earlier, other examples of this are A Million Little Things (2018) (Rome and Regina Howard) and This is Us (2016) (Randall and Beth Pearson), which are two modern-day shows.

Here, however, they do not do that, which is another way that this show defies standard media practices in that. Molly is seen dating lighter skinned men, such as Chris. Issa is

dating men who are about her color or darker, Lawrence and Daniel. Tiffany is dating a man who is a similar tan color. These are positive moves, highlighting darker skinned women as desirable.

***Black References***

There are many references in this show that Black people would understand, from the music used to the comments made. Music in movies and television shows can drive a story and add another element to help tell the story. Scary movies often include ominous music to cue that something is about to happen. In a romance, music can be used to heighten the feeling of chemistry between two characters. It's used during television introductions where they name the actors playing the characters, and the introductory music is usually related to the contents of the show. Sometimes music is used to examine other topics such as class, race, or gender (Way and McKerrell, 2017). Much of music's power lies with listeners and how they interpret it, but authenticity tends to be a major factor in the success of music and the message a song is attempting to convey. The multimodality of music, the lyrics, the sound, and so on, can evoke nuanced (ie. based on memories) and unnuanced (ie. joy and fear) emotions (Way and McKerrell, 2017). Throughout season 1 of Insecure, a lot of Black musicians are highlighted, such as Kendrick Lamar, Drake, D'Angelo, BJ The Chicago Kid, Dreezy, and others. Incorporating Black music helps to establish cultural connections and make the show feel like it's for the community.

Aside from the music, and in some cases including it, the references made also helped to establish the cultural connection. One example is the name of Molly's dog, Flavor Flav, which is connected to the rapper of the same name who had a reality show called The Flavor of Love (2006). Her dog walks around with a chain on, which further points to the rapper because he walked around with a large clock chain around his neck on the reality show.

In episode 2 of season 1, Molly mentions that she needs a full maintenance day where she gets her hair, nails, and everything done, to which Issa responds: "Like a fancy day!" This is a reference to the song, "Fancy," by Drake, featuring T.I. and Swizz Beatz. Some lyrics read: "Nails done, hair done, everything did," which is why Issa makes that remark.

The name of the program that Issa and her coworker oversee is called "We Got Y'all." This program is catered to underprivileged youth in a classroom, mainly Black students, at a local school. The name of the program uses Black Vernacular, likely to appeal to the kids she's working with, and to emphasize the kind of youth they aim to connect with.

There's also a point in the story where Daniel says, in episode 1, "Every Black girl that went to college likes Drake," which is a generalization, but this second reference is likely used because Drake has several songs highlighting successful, Black women, specifically

those who went to college. There are lyrics about college educated women in the song, “Fancy,” mentioned above. Drake is likely reference so much because in an interview with Genius (2020), Rae mentions that she’d be excited if Drake name dropped her in a song. These are some examples of the Black references and music artists incorporated into season 1 of Insecure, which help draw in the Black audience.

***Real Issues***

Season 1 of Insecure did not shy away from talking about real issues, even if it was sometimes done in humorous, satirical ways. These issues play out in the workplace.

Issa’s coworkers often view Issa as the “token Black,” as she mentions in the show. They ask her questions about Baldwin Hills, a Black neighborhood, and what terms like, “on fleek” mean. Sometimes, there are scenes of Issa responding to them in an inner focalized way. Viewers are met with a scene where Issa tells her coworkers exactly what she’s thinking so that what’s in her head is played out on screen. Then, that scene is followed by a scene that reflects her actual response to questions. Usually her response is “I don’t know,” even if she does know. This strategy displays the need for Black women to be professional at work, even when they experience racially charged situations. Issa and Molly’s characters often display this idea of the Black woman being tired of the onus being on her to educate white people about Black issues.

Issa also advocates for the kids in the “We Got Y’all” Program. She explains to her coworkers that they cannot treat the kids as if they are all the same. She also asserts the program as an opportunity to expose the kids to experiences within their own backyard, such as a beach cleanup day. In a meeting about the “We Got Y’all” Program and what to do with the kids, a coworker mentions that the kids like sports and that they should do something related to sports, but Issa fights against this as it’s a common stereotype that Black people are naturally athletic and often use sports as a way out of the hood. In fact, sports are one of the only domains in which Black people are deemed superior in performance (Harrison, 2001). Issa does not want to perpetuate this stereotype.

Discussions around therapy were another extremely relatable real-world issue that Black people face. There’s a stigma around therapy in the Black community. Black families are reluctant to seek counseling and often quit after the first session when they do (Terrell 8t Terrell, 1984; Thompson & Cimbolic,1978; as cited in Wilson and Stith, 1991), which could be due to the lack of attention to understanding and treating non-Whites (Wilson and Stith, 1991). Often, people in the Black community use religion to deal with their problems, but the narrative is starting to shift with resources such as “Therapy for Black Girls” that now exist. At the end of this season, Molly runs into an old friend who mentions that she’s been doing better since starting therapy. Later, Molly talks to Issa about it and makes fun of the idea, but Issa brings up that therapy could be helpful for Molly given all that she’s gone through, which upsets Molly. In later seasons, we see Molly navigate

therapy.

One final example of real-world issues can be found in episode 1 when Issa mentions that her boss developed a program to help Black students from the hood, but that she did not hire anyone from the hood. This speaks to two issues. One, people often want to create programs to help those in need, but they do not hire the appropriate staff or get the opinions of those they are helping. This happens a lot in politics, with laws being created for people without actually understanding the issues that people face and how to effectively help them. So, it may be in good faith, but the execution will be poor if programs are implemented without the input of those who will ultimately be impacted. The second issue is that Issa is the only Black woman at her job and the only Black woman working on this program, furthering the narrative that all Black people go through the same struggles, so one can speak for the masses. This is problematic because Black women are as complex as anyone else, and we all have different backgrounds.

***Black Female Friendship***

One of Rae's goals in creating Insecure was to show Black women's friendships. This season did just that. Molly and Issa are honest and blunt with one another. They often curse around each other. There's established trust and familiarity between them, and they often tell each other things first. Sometimes, conversations or situations result in arguments, such as in episode 1 when Issa rapped about Molly's "broken pussy" at an open mic night. This comes about because Issa and Molly meet up for lunch and Molly talks about her frustrations as it relates to sex and romance. Issa tells Molly that she thinks her pussy is broken. Molly thinks she must succumb to the idea that Black women must dismiss their desires to act in a way that is more in line with men's behavior, but Issa debunks this by showing that adhering to men seldom leads to success for Black women, through the "broken pussy" line (Ohman, 2020). Later, Molly and Issa go out to a club where Issa raps about this. After the rap, there's a car scene where Molly says to Issa, "You don't think about how the shit you do affects others." In the end, Issa apologizes by bringing Cheetos and dip as a peace offering, then they sing the theme song from the show, Girlfriends (2000), by Mara Brock Akil, one of the shows Rae identified with growing up (Good Morning America, 2016). This is another reference that Black people, specifically Black women, would likely understand.

I'd also like to mention that the "broken pussy" scene came about because Rae said something similar to her real-life best friend and when she told co-producer, Wilmore, about it, he said they had to use the material, making it an essential element of this episode (Genius, 2020). So, the show does pull from real-life experiences, further highlighting why it's so relatable. While I have never had this particular conversation with any of my close friends, I have talked to them about sexual topics, so I could relate to this scene in that way. I believe that the best art imitates real life, and this is one example of how this show does that.

Another example of how they show up for one another takes place at the end of the season. Molly and Issa have a huge fight at Issa's fundraising work event. Molly tells Issa that she never commits to anything and doesn't deserve Lawrence. Issa says that Molly is mad she can't keep a man. Shortly after, Lawrence leaves their apartment because he learns of Issa's sexual indiscretion. Issa and Molly's fallout make the trip to Malibu to celebrate their friend Kelli's birthday awkward. Towards the end of episode 8, Issa gets a call from Lawrence saying he misses her and would like to talk once she gets back. So, Issa asks her friends to drive her home. No one is willing (Kelli and Tiffany are not sober, and Molly is still upset) so she says she will figure it out and goes to pack. In the end, Molly offers to drive her. In the car, Molly asks Issa to practice what she will say to Lawrence. Instead, Issa apologizes to Molly and they are back on good terms again. It's important to show that Black women also have strong female friendships, especially with all the reality television shows that perpetuate that Black women fight with one another all the time.

#### ***Issa's Identity***

I'd lastly like to highlight the storyline of Issa trying to find herself and figure out what she wants. At the beginning of season 1, Issa says, "How different would my life be if I actually went after what I wanted." She answers by saying that she'd probably be more like her best friend, Molly. Rae, on Good Morning America (2016), explains that her character, Issa Dee, is insecure, socially awkward, inept, and aggressively passive.

Issa is told who she is by those around her. For example, Issa says she's going to break up with Lawrence and Molly responds, "No you're not," and Issa says she knows that she isn't. Issa is a predictable, play-by-the-rules woman, but she's at a point where she no longer wants to be that person. She's not someone who's confident in what she says. When Molly asks if she and Lawrence are broken up, Issa responds, "I think so."

Issa also rapped and talked to herself, mainly in the mirror (sometimes in the car). In the Genius (2020) interview, Rae mentioned that it's a good way to hype yourself up. She also said, in another interview, that her character raps to get her feelings out (Good Morning America, 2016). So, it's a way of hyping herself up through her awkwardness and dealing with her frustrations in a healthier way.

Towards the end of the season, Issa says she's now "Miss give all the fucks" and that she likes who she's becoming. We see a shift in her to a more confident and fulfilled person. At least before everything falls apart. This is a great character arc, showing growth, which is important character development that shows portraying Black women often fail to give Black female characters, and Black characters in general.

### **Why Insecure is a Landmark Television Show: Representation Theory**

Representation Theory was developed by Stuart Hall in the 1970s and describes how the media produces messages that are staged versions of reality and that includes the encoding/decoding model which the audience uses to make sense of media (Hammer & Kellner, 2010). When communicating, we speak of our own experiences, but who speaks and who's spoken of are not in the same place because identity is constituted within representation (Hall, 1989). These negative representations recreate hegemony. Hammer and Kellner (2010) also explain that through encoding and decoding, complex layers of meaning are communicated, which is integral through this process, and there are situated logics, which assimilate media messages according to the audiences' life circumstances. Hall wants to "establish the principle that decoding is an ordinary accomplishment of audiences through the practices of reflexive assimilation and critical exchange" (Hammer & Kellner, 2010, pg. 51). There's also an oppositional code where the audience responds to the media message once the message is understood through decoding. Media is impacted by what Hall refers to as privileged access, which is when the upper echelon, often politicians, celebrities, and the like have access to the media and contaminate what's being shown (Hammer & Kellner, 2010).

This representation theory by Hall is related to Insecure because the show works to produce messages that are not staged versions of reality, rather more representative and relatable versions of reality. This show centers the perspective of Black women whereas, historically, Black women have been secondary characters in many shows, such as Bonnie in The Vampire Diaries (2009), for example. Black women have been stereotyped as mammys and other tropes and the media has had an active role in perpetuating those. However, the characters in Insecure dismantle these tropes to an extent, through centering perspectives of Black female characters, providing complex characters and story arcs, and stepping into the narrative space that Black women have long been denied. This show is reclaiming the narrative because Issa Rae, a Black woman, gets to tell it and has creative control over how the story is told.

Additionally, "Insecure's unashamed emphasis on Black women's lives and relationships, including sexual ones, is partly why the show has been held up as revolutionizing how 'millennial' Black women are depicted on primetime television" (Sobande, 2019, pg. 441-442). This show has been such a landmark in the Black community because of narrative strategies adopted, such as the use of cultural references, and the inclusion of real-world issues that Black people often face, such as racism within the workplace. Still, it's not without its flaws. There are stereotypes used in season one of this television series, but the narrative strategies, such as Issa trying to find herself, the showcasing of Black female friendships, and more, help to create more complex characters, which makes this show a success and reflects more nuanced experiences of Black womanhood to viewers. "Insecure is highlighted as having facilitated complex depictions of young Black women often lacking from television" (Sobande, 2019, pg. 443). The strategies used make the show more relatable to Black audiences and expose viewers to how Black women navigate

daily life.

## Limitations

This paper is not without limitations. First, I only studied one show, Insecure, and one season of the show. Future studies should look across multiple shows by various Black female executives to identify more narrative strategies that may be being used. Additionally, a study looking at and critically analyzing the show as a whole would offer deeper insight into the narrative strategies used. However, this paper opens the door for more conversations surrounding the show and narrative strategies used. Additionally, this analysis only shared my opinions on the narrative strategies and the ways the show fell flat versus the ways that it succeeded in creating a narrative that's more representative of Black female experiences. Future research should consider audience reception through focus groups, or through another method, for more opinions on whether and how Black women resonated with the show. Focus groups are useful when done properly, because they allow for co-creating knowledge (Rodriguez et al., 2011) and discourage isolation of research subjects from their social context (Kook et al., 2019).

## Conclusion

Identifying the narrative strategies used in Insecure highlights why this show is paramount in the Black community, especially among Black women. Understanding how shows portray Black women and the strategies that work could change the landscape of television for Black women for the better. Some strategies that worked in Insecure include the use of Black references, topics of desire, real-world issues, such as racism in the workplace, the storyline of Issa and her identity, the position of darker skinned Black female characters, and more. These strategies helped to develop more nuanced and complex characters.

When it comes to television portrayals, "Black women are misunderstood, misrepresented, and mis-portrayed" (Boylorn, 2008, pg. 418). "Television Network executives are ultimately responsible for the images and representations that audiences see on television" (Cheers, 2020, pg. 7) and when there is diversity in these creative spaces, it can lead to more accurate depictions of people, which brings me to another reason that this show was likely successful. Insecure had a great deal of Black writers in the writer's room, including Natasha Rothwell, who was meant to be a writer but ended up being cast on the show (Keith, 2025).

While Black actors and writers have been hired in shows since the origination of the television, it was not until the 80s that Black people began to have creative control over our own images. Bill Cosby was one of the first Black people to have creative control over his shows (Cheers, 2019; Cheers, 2020). Black women, such as Oprah Winfrey, who started

the Oprah Winfrey Show in 1986, and Debra L. Lee (the media mogul behind BET Networks), started to take on executive roles and take ownership of Black women's images, and later women like Shonda Rhimes, Ava DuVernay, and Issa Rae. This is when a cultural shift in the representation of Black women began (Cheers, 2019) and we were able to have narrative authority over our perception in media. Even though Black women are portrayed at a higher status today, and there are more Black women media executives, having narrative control of our own images does not mean that stereotypes or underrepresentation have disappeared (Tyrell & Powell, 2022). In Insecure, while we do see more complex characters, scholars such as Tyree & Powell (2022) have mentioned that this has not erased stereotypical images and the impact they've had, nor does it absolve media outlets and their actions in perpetuating these images.

Similarly, April Lundy (2018) calls for a shift in power relations in American politics and in the media industry, stating that this can help transform the media landscape and positively impact representations of Black womanhood. She also mentions that women must develop a more critical gaze and alter self-perceptions until they're devoid of social myths and stereotypes that have been pervasive (Lundy, 2018). There does need to be a shift in power relations, and it is happening slowly with more Black women media moguls taking on executive roles within the media industry, such as Issa Rae, who is also attempting to shift the gaze and self-perceptions through shows like Insecure. However, there is more work to be done on both fronts.

While representations of Black women are still not where we want them to be, there's a stark contrast between shows that were created at the onset of television and those that have been created today. Rae injected awkwardness into sexual scenes in the show, which destabilized traditional objectifications of Black women and humanized and recoded the jezebel stereotype (Levy, 2020). Having more Black women in writer's rooms and as executives gives us more autonomy over our images and the ability to shift the narrative, using strategies that resonate more with the community and that are more representative of Black women today, which, in this case, was the creation of more complex characters.

Much like Boylorn (2008) stated, "I want there to be more than one way to be seen as authentically Black" (Boylorn, 2008, pg. 422). Shows like Insecure are starting to broaden the conversation and representations. Plus, they show that there is more than one way to be seen as authentically Black.

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Amy E. Mendes

# *Six Seasons and a Thesis: Teaching Group Communication (Tucker, Fisher, SCT, Kolb) via* Community

**Abstract**

Students in undergraduate group-communication courses often struggle to connect abstract frameworks to lived teamwork. This paper presents an applied pedagogy that pairs each unit of a semester-long COMM 3320 course with a curated episode of Community (NBC, 2009–2015). Units are mapped to core models—from Tuckman's stage framework (1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) to Poole's Multiple Sequence Model (1983) and Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory (1988)—using television narratives as living case studies.

Each episode serves a dual function: (1) to illustrate concepts such as conflict management, leadership emergence, norms, and decision processes; and (2) to provide a low-stakes site for application, where students diagnose and redesign interactions before transferring insights to their own team projects. Tracing the Greendale study group through forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning enables students to identify communication climates, power dynamics, and decision patterns in familiar contexts.

Qualitative assessment artifacts (reflections, peer-evaluation data) indicate increased use of precise theoretical vocabulary, higher metacognitive awareness of group processes, and stronger perceived relevance of theory to experience. The approach offers a replicable model for teaching group communication: integrating popular culture with narrative case studies to translate theory into practice and to enhance engagement, conceptual retention, and applied group-learning outcomes.

Keywords: group communication, scholarship of teaching and learning, communication studies, experiential learning, narrative pedagogy, popular culture pedagogy, symbolic convergence theory, teaching with television

## Introduction

Undergraduate students in group-communication courses often find the landscape of group models, leadership functions, norms, and conflict styles abstract and disconnected from their lived team experiences. Lack of group work experience, or group experiences limited only to in-class assignments can limit students' ability to fully embrace understanding. Traditional lecture formats and textbook case studies may not sufficiently engage students or prompt application of theory to their own collaborative work. This paper presents a pedagogical design in which each unit of a group-communication course is paired with a culturally familiar episode of the NBC situational comedy show Community, offering students a common narrative world in which to observe group dynamics, apply theory, and reflect on their own teamwork. Doing so leverages students' familiarity with pop culture, provides a low-stakes fictional group case, and scaffolds applied learning.

## Literature Review

Scholars increasingly argue that popular culture can be a productive vehicle for learning in higher education, inviting "critical curiosity" about complex theoretical issues and professional dilemmas (Sharma, 2013). In culturally responsive approaches, popular culture and critical media literacy help students interrogate ideology, power, and representation—outcomes emphasized in work by Morrell and Duncan-Andrade and by Kellner and Share (Kellner & Share, 2007; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Within communication studies, Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT) explains how groups cohere around shared "story worlds": dramatizing messages can chain into fantasy themes and, ultimately, a rhetorical vision, providing a live illustration when a cohort analyzes the same media text (Bormann, 1972). Complementing SCT, Fisher's Narrative Paradigm clarifies why stories are such powerful sense-making devices: people evaluate accounts through narrative probability (coherence) and narrative fidelity (fit with values and lived experience) rather than by formal logic alone (Fisher, 1984). Mechanistically, narrative "transportation" research shows that absorption into stories can shift beliefs in story-consistent directions—one reason shared narratives can shape team meaning-making (Green & Brock, 2000). Finally, using television episodes as cases aligns with Kolb's experiential learning cycle by supplying a concrete experience that is then processed through reflection, concept building, and experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

### *Why case-based and video-based approaches?*

Systematic review evidence in professional/health education finds case-based learning

reliably supports engagement and perceived learning value, even as achievement effects vary—making case methods a defensible design choice when paired with structured prompts and assessment (Thistlethwaite et al., 2012). A higher-education meta-analysis likewise indicates that video improves learning outcomes when implemented with evidence-based practices such as segmenting and signaling (Noetel et al., 2021). Cross-disciplinary proof-of-concept work shows similar promise: "physics in films" courses reported higher attention and retention when scenes concretized abstract concepts for general-education students (Efthimiou & Llewellyn, 2004).

***Why television—specifically episodic TV?***

Television's episodic/serial form yields bounded, repeatable cases that scaffold theory-to-practice cycles across a term while offering multimodal cues (dialogue, mise-en-scène, editing) that make constructs like power, conflict, and norms visible for coding and discussion (Mittell, 2015). Purpose-built or carefully curated video cases have also been shown to drive participation and structured assessment in undergraduate settings (Noetel et al., 2021).

***Why NBC's Community as a focal text?***

Community places a small group at its center, keeping group processes on screen, while its meta-storytelling and genre play often amplify recognizable interactional patterns (leadership, conflict, norming) for analysis (Mittell, 2015). Scholarship on bottle-episode aesthetics—exemplified by "Cooperative Calligraphy"—highlights how constrained settings surface character dynamics in analytically tractable ways for close reading and discussion (Engley, 2023). Additional criticism addresses the series' stylistic strategies and representational stakes, further validating it as an object of serious study (Sharma, 2013).

***Limitations and cautions.***

Engagement can outpace analytical depth without rigorous prompts, coding protocols, and assessment (Jubas, 2023). The empirical base for case-based learning is heterogeneous on achievement outcomes, so claims should remain appropriately bounded (Thistlethwaite et al., 2012). Instructors must also address access and accessibility (e.g., captioning) and anticipate uneven cultural familiarity by providing short primers or alternative artifacts (Kellner & Share, 2007; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2006).

***Application to the present intervention.***

The course design uses Community episodes as video cases (Noetel et al., 2021; Thistlethwaite et al., 2012), invites narrative sense-making (Fisher, 1984) that can chain into class fantasy themes (Bormann, 1972), leverages transportation mechanisms to explain

attitude-relevant effects (Green & Brock, 2000), and moves students through Kolb's cycle via reflective coding, principle extraction, and planned experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

**Theoretical Framework**

This intervention draws on four complementary frameworks: (1) Tuckman's five-stage model of small-group development, (2) Fisher's Narrative Paradigm, (3) Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), and (4) Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Together they provide (a) a developmental map for how teams evolve over time, (b) a logic for how participants make sense of group life through stories, (c) a mechanism for how shared stories crystallize group identity, and (d) a structured cycle for turning media-case analysis into transferable skill. Using Community episodes as cases, students first observe fictional group dynamics through these lenses and then diagnose analogous patterns in their own teams, closing the loop with guided practice and reflection.

***Tuckman: Developmental Map of Team Processes***

Tuckman's model—Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing (with Adjourning added later)—supplies a temporal scaffold for analyzing how real and fictional groups evolve: uncertainty and dependency in Forming, role/procedure conflict in Storming, emergent norms and cohesion in Norming, task focus in Performing, and closure/transition in Adjourning (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Mapping scenes from Community onto these stages helps students locate their own teams and anticipate upcoming developmental challenges.

***Fisher: Narrative Paradigm and Narrative Rationality***

Fisher's Narrative Paradigm reframes human communication as fundamentally story-centered: people are homo narrans who evaluate accounts by narrative probability (coherence) and narrative fidelity (fit with values and lived experience), not only by formal logic (Fisher, 1984, 1987). In this intervention, students weigh competing accounts of events (in the episode and in their team) for coherence ("do the elements hang together?") and fidelity ("does this story fit who we are and what we value?"), shifting discussion from blame to shared sense-making and inviting explicit value work in team decision-making (Fisher, 1984, 1987).

***Bormann: Symbolic Convergence and Fantasy-Theme Dynamics***

SCT explains how group identities coalesce around dramatizing messages ("fantasy themes") that can chain through interaction and culminate in a shared rhetorical vision (Bormann, 1972, 1985). Media narratives like Community supply ready-made fantasy material (e.g., "the study group against the odds") that students can appropriate, adapt, or contest. Guided analysis helps them identify when a dramatizing message initiates a

"fantasy chain," how that chain organizes roles, norms, and motives, and when it becomes maladaptive (e.g., scapegoating or hero–villain simplifications) (Bormann, 1972, 1985).

### *Kolb: Experience → Reflection → Conceptualization → Experimentation*

Kolb's experiential learning cycle operationalizes the pedagogy: (1) Concrete Experience (watching a selected Community scene and/or engaging in a live team task), (2) Reflective Observation (guided debrief using prompts from Tuckman, Fisher, and Bormann), (3) Abstract Conceptualization (deriving team principles about conflict, roles, and norms), and (4) Active Experimentation (testing a new procedure or script in the next meeting) (Kolb, 1984). The cycle ensures students do not merely identify tropes but convert insights into testable changes in communication practice (Kolb, 1984).

### *How the Frameworks Interlock in the Intervention*

First, we identify when dynamics arise (Tuckman); second, how members render them as stories (Fisher); third, why some stories 'stick' and shape identity (SCT); and finally, what this implies for practice (Kolb). The students then code an episode segment for stage markers (Tuckman), evaluate character/team accounts for probability and fidelity (Fisher), trace fantasy-theme chaining and any emergent rhetorical vision (SCT), and plan one concrete communication experiment to test in their own team (Kolb). The same protocol is then applied to real project meetings, creating a recurring practice of narrative-aware team development.

## Pedagogical Design and Implementation

The course design for COMM 3320 (Communicating in Groups) organizes the semester into five instructional units that map directly onto Tuckman's model of small-group development—Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, and Adjourning—so that students encounter theory in the sequence groups typically experience it (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Each unit contains 3-4 chapters, which are coupled with an episodic television case from Community to provide a common "concrete experience," followed by guided analysis, abstraction, and a planned behavioral trial in students' own project teams, thus operationalizing Kolb's experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). The use of video cases is supported by evidence that well-designed video enhances learning outcomes in higher education and that case-based learning is effective for bridging theory and practice, particularly when paired with structured prompts and assessment (Noetel et al., 2021; Thistlethwaite et al., 2012).

In the Forming unit, students analyze uncertainty management, early role claims, and the meandering pathways of first meetings using episodes such as S1E1 "Pilot" and S3E4 "Competitive Ecology." Discussion links on-screen behaviors to Uncertainty Reduction

Theory's account of information seeking in initial interaction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and to functional and team-role frameworks that help name and distribute work (Benne & Sheats, 1948; Belbin, 2010). Each team then specifies a concrete practice (e.g., a rotating facilitator or a check-in protocol) to reduce uncertainty and clarify roles before the next meeting (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Benne & Sheats, 1948; Belbin, 2010; Poole, 1983).

The Storming unit foregrounds power struggles and conflict interaction through episodes such as S1E13 "Investigative Journalism" and S3E14 "Pillows and Blankets." Students classify characters' behaviors with the Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, identifying default modes and exploring strategic mode shifts to de-escalate or reframe disputes (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Because "Pillows and Blankets" adopts a mock-documentary style, the unit also introduces media framing—how select aspects of reality are made salient through narration, editing, and "talking-head" commentary—to illuminate how frames guide attribution and blame within groups (Entman, 1993). The combination positions students to see conflict not merely as disposition but as interaction structured by both communication choices and representational form (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Entman, 1993).

In Norming, students will examine how shared stories stabilize expectations and identity using S2E8 "Cooperative Calligraphy" and S2E22 "Applied Anthropology and Culinary Arts." Symbolic Convergence Theory will provide the mechanism: dramatizing messages can chain into fantasy themes and culminate in a shared rhetorical vision that organizes roles, norms, and motives (Bormann, 1972, 1985). Fisher's Narrative Paradigm will supply the evaluative lens: students judge competing accounts for narrative probability (coherence) and narrative fidelity (fit with values and experience) rather than formal logic alone (Fisher, 1984, 1987). A brief mechanism note on narrative transportation will explain how absorption into stories can shift beliefs in story-consistent directions, clarifying why shared narratives matter for team sense-making (Green & Brock, 2000).

The Performing unit addresses coordination, decision pathways, and workload management using episodes such as S3E20 "Digital Estate Planning" and S1E21 "Contemporary American Poultry." This semester-long course has not yet reached this point. Students will trace proposal growth, conflict bursts, and coordination demands across scenes with Poole's descriptive codes (tracks and breakpoints) and consider how multimodal cues—dialogue, staging, and editing—make otherwise tacit constructs like power, facework, and norms legible for analysis (Poole, 1983; Noetel et al., 2021). Each team will build a one-page decision playbook (criteria, roles, and escalation routes) to pilot in its next sprint (Poole, 1983; Noetel et al., 2021).

Finally, Adjourning will focus on handoffs, closure, and reflective transfer, anchored by S6E13 "Emotional Consequences of Broadcast Television." The session will guide students to plan project wrap-up and knowledge transfer and complete a structured reflec-

tion that explicitly walks Kolb's cycle—identifying a concrete experience, articulating insights from reflection, extracting portable concepts, and planning the next experiment for future teams (Kolb, 1984). The emphasis on deliberate closure will link emotional sense-making to practical continuity, reinforcing that endings are communicative events with downstream effects on future collaboration (Kolb, 1984).

Each class session follows the same instructional rhythm: a targeted mini-lecture to define the day's constructs, a short clip (5–8 minutes) or full episode screening to supply a common experience, and a guided analysis in which students code observed behaviors (e.g., uncertainty cues, role bids, conflict modes), evaluate narrative probability and fidelity, and identify any emergent fantasy themes and frames (Berger & Calabrese, 1975; Fisher, 1984, 1987; Bormann, 1972, 1985; Entman, 1993). Class concludes with an implementation commitment—one change to try before the next meeting—to close the experiential loop (Kolb, 1984). Assessment culminates in a capstone redesign project: teams will diagnose an episode using the course frameworks, script and justify a revised interaction (e.g., a conflict-mode shift or a reframed narrative that interrupts a maladaptive fantasy chain), and implement the analogous change in their real project, reporting outcomes in a final brief (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977; Poole, 1983; Fisher, 1984, 1987; Bormann, 1972, 1985). To support accountability and fair credit, students will also complete a peer-evaluation at two points in the term. Short reflective memos after each unit require students to cite one framework, marshal evidence from both the episode and their own experiences and specify a next-meeting experiment, thereby reinforcing the analysis-to-practice arc (Kolb, 1984).

**Results and Discussion**

Anecdotal and qualitative data from student reflections so far show notable shifts in student discourse. For example, one student wrote: "I never thought our group had a Jeff or Annie, but suddenly I could name the drama." Discussion boards reveal increased use of theoretical vocabulary such as face-threat, norm violation, and fantasy theme. While systematic quantitative measurement is not the primary focus, the pattern aligns with broader findings that pop-culture pedagogy supports relevance and engagement (Yuhas 2019). The narrative case-study approach also appears to foster deeper meta cognitive reflection: students identify not only what goes wrong in their teams but why, and propose redesigns grounded in theory. These outcomes suggest that linking theory to media narratives helps bridge the knowing-doing gap in group communication education (Yuhas, 2019).

**Challenges and Limitations**

The approach is not without challenges. Time management is critical: ensuring clips do not dominate class time requires discipline. But, with a class meeting length of 75 minutes, and average episode length of 21 minutes, even a full episode leaves room for

lecture and discussion. Accessibility must be addressed: ensuring all media clips are captioned and supported by alternative formats. In the present case, the instructor is using purchased video with closed captioning included. Use is covered by the classroom performance exemption (17 U.S.C. § 110[1]) for face-to-face teaching with lawfully made copies; instructors should still ensure accessibility (e.g., captions) and follow institutional policy (United States Code, 2018). Also, while the narrative appeal of Community is strong, instructors must explicitly reinforce that the show is illustrative, not vacuous entertainment. Finally, while student reflections are promising, more rigorous quantitative assessment (control groups, pre/post measures) would strengthen claims.

**Implications for Teaching Communication**

This method offers a scalable model for other communication courses (e.g., organizational communication using The Office, leadership using Ted Lasso, or interpersonal communication using Abbott Elementary). The emphasis is on linking curricular theory with narrative group-process case studies in a culturally familiar medium. Such integration supports relevance, engagement, and transfer of learning. This narrative model of teaching Group Communication has been developing over several semesters, and improvements are planned for the next iteration. For example, in future terms, teams will co-author a short "team story" and translate it into two explicit, testable norms (Bormann, 1972, 1985; Fisher, 1984, 1987; Green & Brock, 2000).

**Conclusion**

Using Community as a narrative scaffold for group-communication theory transforms abstract models into living case studies. By aligning episodes with developmental stages and guiding students through diagnosis and redesign of fictional team dynamics, this pedagogy anchors theory in accessible, emotionally engaging media. Results indicate richer theoretical discourse, improved metacognitive reflection, and greater relevance for student teams. While more empirical study would strengthen the evidence base, the approach is promising and readily replicable for communication educators seeking to enhance applied learning in group-communication courses.

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Kevin Cummings

# *Guiding Speech and Thought in the Age of Artificial Intelligence*

Educators take for granted the basic idea that thought nests within written and oral communication. That is, we judge the minds and thoughts of our students by their words. We know students have learned and understood material because we can assess their ability as authors and orators to make arguments and analyze ideas. An important challenge is to make sure our students do not present the words of others as their own. For a brief time, plagiarism in written communication was relatively easy to detect. Computers provided tools to show when student words matched the previously written text of others. With the advent of new forms of artificial intelligence, plagiarism no longer requires a previous work from which to pilfer. Academic integrity is much more challenging to maintain in the new milieu as artificial intelligence programs generate text that students can easily modify to present as their own labor.

In response to rising concerns about academic dishonesty related to the use of artificial intelligence, educators are turning to oral communication assignments that require students to speak aloud their knowledge of a topic. But the use of oral communication assignments is an imperfect solution to a very complicated problem. Several new programs such as Yoodli are now available to assist students with writing, practicing, and delivering speeches. In this essay, I explore how artificial intelligence shifts the paradigm of modern education and how new speech chatbots assist students and rhetors with oral communication. My gambit in thinking about speech chatbots includes three moments of reflection. First, speech is a communal activity and is a much more collaborative enterprise than previously thought. Second, the current iteration of speech chatbots pro-

vide useful assistance to speakers. Their capacity to productively coach students will no doubt improve over time. Finally, there is a lacuna between what the bots can teach us to do and what humans provide as mentors. Chatbots are becoming a useful tool, but they are not yet close to being capable of replacing humans in training students in the craft of speech.

**Speech, Collaboration, and Community**

If we think about pedagogy, best practice is to begin with the question of what learning target we have for our students. Or to use the lingua franca of the realm, what is our learning objective? We benefit greatly from being a discipline with roots in antiquity. Cicero provides five rhetorical canons that inform our endeavor: invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory. Teaching students to speak eloquently involves helping them learn how to research a topic and invent an argument, create a good organizational structure, find the right words to draw an audience in, practice movement and gestures, and remember their key ideas. I learned this process through competition in speech and debate in high school and college. The common method involved practicing out loud in front of a mirror. To this day at forensics tournaments, you will see students speaking to walls as they prepare for their rounds. But what really helped me the most was practicing in front of a real audience.

Unfortunately, many public speaking students do not get sufficient practice out loud in front of an audience. They perhaps assume that they can silently read over their speech a few times and be ready. I believe this misperception regarding speech preparation overlaps with a myth of rhetorical agency that originates in the idea that speechwriting is a solitary activity. An example might help unpack this myth. Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles have an excellent book titled, The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism, where they explore how we have collectively come to think about the rhetorical figure of the president. They critique fictional president Josiah Bartlet and reveal how a vision of a romantic heroic leader emerged in the show. In the concluding episodes of the first season, for instance, a decisively heroic president of the familiar romantic archetype emerges. At the end of episode twenty, "Mandatory Minimums," Bartlet is in bed as the entire senior staff, anxious over the events of the day, comes into his bedroom, one by one, seeking sage advice, solace, or forgiveness. The President ends the day by himself in his bedroom, preparing to dream of greatness as the lone romantic leader of the United States (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, 2006, 47).

There is something deeply Platonic about the idea of a philosopher king dreaming about greatness. As if through anamnesis, they will recall truth in the world. And while an interesting part of the show comes from the idea of a team of writers and thinkers who collaborate together in the West Wing, I think many Americans still imagine our presidents working in isolation in the solitary labor of writing a speech. Even in a television show about a team, there is a mythologizing and romanticizing of the president as a person who dreams words of greatness. Jon Favreau and Peggy Noonan are names not known to most of our fellow Americans. In an article titled, "Obama Inauguration: Words of History…Crafted by 27-Year-Old in Starbucks," we learn that Favreau was President Barack Obama's speech writer, who Obama described as his "mind reader."

Obama is the speaker I admire the most among the presidents of my lifetime, and most of his famous speeches were co-authored with Favreau and his team. On the other side of the political aisle, we have Peggy Noonan, who wrote speeches for Ronald Reagan. It was Noonan's words that consoled a nation after the Challenger disaster, quoting a sonnet by John Gillespie Magee, and delivered by Reagan when he told a grieving nation, "We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' and 'touched the face of God.'" The fact that many of our most celebrated orators presented speeches that were co-authored remains to this day a largely hidden transcript. What happens behind the curtain is not an individual working in isolation, but rather a team that collaborates together.

The myth of a heroic president who romantically dreams their speech is not useful for those of us trying to help students learn to give compelling speeches. Instead, the refrain should be about practice and collaboration. If you are lucky enough to have a student who interviews two environmental biology professors for their speech on the destruction of coral reefs, who then visits their creative writing professor to get help with the right poetic phrase to make their speech memorable, and who practices over and over in front of friends and classmates who share their useful feedback, that is exactly the sort of work that should be rewarded. My point is relatively simple. Speech is already a collaborative enterprise and when our students go into the world, they will be best prepared if we dispel the illusion of a solitary speech writer. Artificial agents who assist with speech preparation have the potential to be useful assistants in the process of speechcraft. But there is a danger when students abdicate their own responsibility for inventing, arranging, styling, memorizing, and delivering their speech and rely too much on co-pilots. At this point it is useful to describe what speech chatbots can do and whether they are blurring the lines of academic integrity.

**Differentiating Coaching and Co-authoring**

To get a sense of what speech chatbots can do, I used the Yoodli program to review my introduction to this essay read as a speech. The majority of the assistance runs parallel to the advice a person would get from a good public speaking textbook: A checklist of key ideas to remember to be an effective speaker. These generic reminders are accompanied by several specific comments that include quotations from my presentation along with strategic advice for improvement. The feedback is provided in four main areas including content, tone, visual presence, and a summary. The majority of feedback is productive and helpful.

In the content review, Yoodli started with a warm fuzzy to let me know my topic is relevant and I provide thoughtful insights, and concluding "Great work on engaging with modern issues in education" (Yoodli, 2026). The rest of the section includes bulleted feedback:

- Ensure clarity in transitions: The flow between topics could be reinforced by explicitly previewing main points early in the discussion or summarizing key takeaways during transitions.

- Group main ideas into threes: Structuring arguments or solutions into three key components would not only make the speech more engaging but also help listeners retain its core message effectively.
- Transitions between ideas need clarity: The speech shifts between the challenge of plagiarism detection to artificial intelligence without signaling the transition. Consider using a connecting phrase, such as "While technology has helped in one area, it also presents new challenges in another." This would help maintain audience focus.
- Leverage the Rule of Three: For your argument surrounding academic integrity challenges, you could frame the key points as: 1. The historical ease of detecting plagiarism, 2. The changes brought by AI, and 3. The call for updated approaches to maintaining integrity. This structure would make your content clearer and more persuasive.
- Call to action could be strengthened: The speech briefly mentions academic integrity but does not offer a solution or action plan. Adding a specific proposal, such as "In response to these challenges, educators need to implement rigorous AI detection technologies and revise monitoring processes," would provide greater impact.
- Rephrase for more concise language: In the statement "Computers provided tools to show when students' words match the previous written text of others," consider rephrasing as "Technology enabled the detection of matching text in prior works." This simplifies and strengthens the expression.
- Avoid redundancy: The phrase "plagiarism no longer requires a previous work from which to bill for" could be streamlined to "plagiarism no longer relies on existing works," enhancing clarity and readability. (Yoodli, 2026)

To provide this sort of feedback to every student of mine in a practice session would be very time consuming and would likely involve me creating a checklist that I could then draw from. I found most of the advice to be applicable and similar to what an introductory textbook would provide. My major concern with the ethics of this artificial agent emerges in the recommendations for a call to action. Yoodli presents me with specific wording advice for what a plan for my problem might look like, noting, "Adding a specific proposal, such as 'In response to these challenges, educators need to implement rigorous AI detection technologies and revise monitoring processes,' would provide greater impact" (Yoodli, 2026). I think a student who read these words as their plan in a speech would be engaged in a soft form of plagiarism. For me, the moment a student is pasting specific words into their manuscript, it is essential that they credit the author, even if the author is a chatbot.

The second section of feedback concerns tone and the chatbot is much more specific with examples from my delivery of my introduction. One portion of the feedback I found helpful dealt with vocal variety:

- The entire section from "With the advent of new forms of artificial intelligence, plagiarism no longer requires a previous work from which to pilfer" was delivered with a very uniform inflection. To improve, experiment with purposeful inflection changes. Try raising or lowering your pitch slightly at the end of sentences, or emphasizing specific words through increased volume or a slight pause to make your speech more dynamic and captivating. While your pace was consistent, it was also on the quicker side, which, combined with the limited vocal variety, made your delivery feel a bit rushed, especially in longer sentences like "Educators take for granted the basic idea that thought nests within written and oral communication." To sound more confident and in control, practice slowing down, particularly at the beginning of phrases or before introducing new ideas. Strategic pauses can be very effective in allowing your audience to process information and giving your words more authority. (Yoodli, 2026)

I confess that I rarely provide this level of detail and specificity in my feedback about tone to my students in a public speaking class. I just finished grading the first speech of the semester, and I decided to look back on how much depth I was providing. My limited comments on tone were decidedly more basic that Yoodli, with an occasional call for more vocal variety and a suggestion that students use pauses to slow their pace and keep their focus. I do spend a bit more time with feedback on content, and that is perhaps the area where my feedback would be more comprehensive and useful than Yoodli. But in terms of tone, I found Yoodli to be more than satisfactory.

The third area of feedback was visual presence and Yoodli again was very specific and helpful. Yoodli correctly identified that I was reading my introduction and had good advice for how to improve.

- Your eye contact is the most significant area for improvement. The fixed stare below the lens is a clear indicator of reading from a script. To mitigate this, try positioning your script as close to the camera lens as possible. More importantly, practice looking up from your text and directly into the lens, especially at the end of sentences. This small action simulates genuine eye contact and helps build a connection, making you appear more confident and trustworthy. (Yoodli, 2026)

I again found the level of feedback provided by Yoodli to be comparable to the basic sort of comments I provide my students on eye contact and movement in my feedback.

I do not think chatbots provide anything close to the knowledge and skill set a student could develop over the course of a semester in a public speaking class. And if the comparison group are competitors in a forensics and debate community, the chatbot is of very limited benefit. But there are some uses for this tool and there is no doubt in my mind that Pandora's Box is already open, and it is time for educators to make decisions about how to proceed.

**Pit Crews and Checklists**

Artificial intelligence represents a paradigmatic shift in how humans accumulate and

curate knowledge. Chatbots that coach speakers provide a useful list of ways to practice and can be a helpful partner. Many students cannot easily access other forms of assistance such as making repeated visits to faculty during office hours and practicing in front of parents and friends who may have limited availability to listen. In these cases, chatbots like Yoodli provide a checklist of items to work on and can function as a member of a collaborative team that students can draw from to become more proficient at oral communication. Atul Gawande has two key insights that I have found useful in thinking about the role that chatbots might play in speech classes. Gawande is a physician and health care administrator who argues for the importance of checklists and recommends that we collectively think of doctors as part of pit crews (care teams) instead of using the figure of the cowboy. I find each of these ideas incredibly useful for considering how we should make use of coaching chatbots.

In his book, The Checklist Manifesto, Gawande describes the value of having checklists across a range of different industries and occupations. Airline pilots use a checklist to make sure they do not forget essential safety when flying an airplane. Gawande discovered the same value for surgeons from prep to completion of a surgery. He writes, "They provide a kind of cognitive net. They catch mental flaws inherent in all of us – flaws of memory and attention and thoroughness. And because they do, they raise wide, unexpected possibilities" (Gawande, 2010, 48). Checklists are especially useful for simple problems where there are a specific set of parameters. With complicated and complex problems, there are times when an expert should deviate from protocols. Gawande tells us that we are often confronted with vast and diverse problems and a fixed checklist may be insufficient to the complexity of the task. An example he provides is the design and construction of the Citicorp building in midtown Manhattan. Rising more than nine hundred feet and towering above nearby buildings, the problem confronting the builders was windshear. To deal with the complex issue, engineer Frank McNamara suggested that a four-hundred-ton concrete block could be suspended on springs on the fifty-ninth floor such that when the wind pulled one direction, the block would sway the other (69). While this idea sounded good in theory and worked on small scale models, there was not a way to guarantee that every possible issue had been addressed. A final deliberation took place with the owner, architect, structural engineers, and a representative from the city buildings department, and they collectively reviewed and approved the building. Gawande describes why a collective decision is important, writing, "They in turn know better than to rely on their individual abilities to get everything right. They trust instead in one set of checklists to make sure simple steps are not skipped or forgotten and in another set to make sure that everyone talks through and resolves all the hard and unexpected problems" (70). The process of working collectively and using checklists produces a strong safety record for the construction of skyscrapers.

The other idea Gawande provides that can help us navigate the complexity of teaching the craft of speaking is in his work on medical teams. Gawande argues that we need to shift from thinking of doctors as solitary practitioners who he compares to cowboys to instead imaging them as part of a pit crew (Gawande, 2011, 4). Where medicine once involved a single care provider who individually knew all they needed to treat their patients, we are now in a moment where doctors specialize and are part of care teams. Instead of using the rhetorical figure of the cowboy as a lone individual, a better meta-

phor is the pit crew where various members each have expertise and each assist with the completion of tasks.

Pit crews and checklists each help explain how to best teach public speaking. There is a significant amount of material that faculty need to cover, and we also provide feedback and summative assessments of the speeches our students deliver. We can further help students during office hours where they can practice and get answers to questions. Students who participate in speech and debate as activities will get immense advantages as they get to work with other faculty and with talented peers. Finally, chatbots can provide students with checklist style feedback whenever they want to practice. Getting reminders of key concepts for effective speaking is a practical and accessible way for students to get ready for our classes. And after they graduate, these chatbots can certainly be useful when our students are called on to give a presentation and need a refresher on what they previously learned. While I am not ready to let the chatbots drive the racing car, they might be useful as a member of the pit crew.

I now close with words I hear all too frequently from students at the end of their first speech when they are still just beginning to learn the craft. I guess that is it. I am done. Thank you.

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Anna Deeb

## *Starting a Speech Competition at Your Institution*

Following four successful years of holding a speech competition at Brenau University, I am eager to encourage faculty (and students) to start a speech competition at their school, no matter the school's size. In what follows, I will explain why an institution should hold a speech competition, how to get started, and some tips and tricks for making it successful.

Why have a speech competition? Schools of every size can hold a speech competition. It's a relatively low-cost effort to showcase the work of speech and communication students as well as students from all majors. It can also serve as a community-building event that brings together students, faculty, staff, and community members. If you open the competition to high school students, as well, the competition could serve as a potential recruitment and admissions event.

Getting Started: Determine the date of the competition and begin to advertise it a few months before the event (watch out for holidays, university events, and other conflicts when you select the date). Look at other websites of schools that hold a speech competition. Create an information page about the competition that can be easily disseminated via email and QR codes. Include a link to rules that lays out how speeches will be judged, how prizes will be awarded, and what is and is not allowed (online speeches vs. in-person, for example). Create a submission form to collect entries, either through your institution (sometimes your admissions office can help) or even through Google form. Include a contact person for people to reach out with questions. Take as many entries as possible, but whittle down to the best 10-12 speeches if you plan for just one speech round. Larger schools might consider opening up an initial round to select finalists and then winnowing down to a shorter round to pick the final winners.

**Tips for success:**

- Open the competition far and wide to current students and high schoolers
- Pick a meaningful theme to guide speeches (perhaps related to your department's mission statement or a school-wide campaign or initiative).
- Don't go it alone: Get help from fellow faculty, staff, and students. Ask your development office and admissions office for support; Encourage your students to help through volunteer or extra credit opportunities (ex. Emcee for the night can put that on their resume)
- Get monetary support: contact local businesses and nonprofits for potential on-line donations and/or grants/ scholarships to cover prize money for winners
- Consider expanding with a Networking event, inviting local businesses, nonprofits, and other local organizations that may be interested in meeting your students and networking with them
- Advertise the competition early and often through flyers, emails, announcements inside and out of class, and (very important) speaking to students personally and encouraging them to submit an entry
- Ask a variety of people to be judges: Provost, professors inside and outside your department, alumni, current graduate students, past winners, etc.
- Top tips: Have some fine print about what is allowed, not allowed: the criteria for judging the speeches, how the prize money will be awarded, what happens if there is a tie, etc.

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## *Using Campus Recruiting Materials as a way to Apply Concepts from the Persuasion Course*

The persuasion class is one that can provide students with a variety of concepts and skills they will likely use in their daily lives, as well as in their careers. Ensuring students understand the utility of the material can be a challenge though. Engagement in the course is key (Hunt & Meyer, 2019), especially if the course is asynchronous online. Engagement can be increased if it is clear to students that they are learning concepts that are relevant to them (Harvard University, n.d.). Real-world application assignments are one way to increase relevancy and, by extension, engagement.

As Spadaro, Doyle, and Chatham-Carpenter (2024) point out, communication faculty teaching asynchronous courses can find it more difficult to add high-impact learning experiences into online courses. Instructors must focus on innovating their online classes though to reach all students within the course (Spadaro, Doyle, & Chatham-Carpenter, 2024).

But, finding an application assignment opportunity for an online class can be a challenge. However, sometimes the solution is right under our noses – in our campus's admissions offices! This article will describe a final persuasion application assignment that works well to not only help students summarize key concepts from the semester, but to also move them to putting these concepts and tools to use in analyzing recruiting materials. The assignment works particularly well to engage asynchronous online students as well.

For this assignment (see Appendix), the instructor must first earmark campus recruiting items students can review. For example, you may provide a digital copy of the campus viewbook and links to promotional videos. Other items that could prove fruitful are recruiting documents that focus on particular majors and/or departments.

Once recruiting items have been identified for the assignment, the instructor will develop a series of questions that ask students to link key concepts from their persuasion course to the recruiting materials. These questions can be connected to specific terms the instructor wants to highlight or can involve asking the student to find concepts from the course to apply to the documents/videos.

A key portion of this assignment has students including critiques of the recruiting items in terms of what the students believe work well and don't work as well. These critiques will come from their own perceptions/experiences of their university but also should be supported with course concepts. Depending on the quality of the responses, the instructor can choose to share some or all of the critiques with their campus admissions office to provide feedback on the materials from current students. These responses serve as a student "focus group" of sorts and can provide the admissions office with a sense of how their messages are coming across and lead to edits/revisions.

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## Appendix

COMM3250-Persuasion
Final Persuasion Application Assignment

### Overview

After a semester of studying communication and persuasion, it is time to put your expertise to work. The first two parts of this final assignment will have you conducting case study analyses of real-world persuasive materials produced by Augusta University.

It is essential that your responses reflect how concepts are presented in our class textbook and/or class instructional videos.

I may end up sharing some of your evaluations/critiques/suggestions with AU Admissions. If I do, the comments will be shared without attribution so you would remain anonymous. If you would not want your comments shared even anonymously, please let me know in a short statement at the start of your paper so I can honor your request.

The final part of this assignment asks you to reflect on your own experience in the course.

### Part 1

For Part 1 of your final assignment, you will refer to the "AU Admissions Viewbook 2024." There is a link to this document in the module for this assignment.

Please respond to the following prompts. Make sure you address each prompt separately.

1. Whom do you see as the main target audience for this viewbook? As you answer the other prompts for Part 1, keep this target audience in mind.
2. Given what you know about the target audience, which of the two routes of the ELM do you think they would most likely use when they are looking over this viewbook? Why?
3. Chapt. 4 ("Credibility") addresses the primary dimensions of credibility. In your opinion, which of the three primary dimensions does AU most display in terms of credibility through this viewbook based on how you think the target audience would view it? Focus on your experience of the viewbook and not on your own personal experiences as an AU student.
4. Given what you have learned about persuasion and your own experiences at AU, what do you believe is most persuasive about this viewbook? Why?
5. If you had a chance to change any element of this viewbook to make it more persuasive, what would you change? Why?

**Part 2**

For Part 2 of your final assignment, you will choose one of the videos linked to the module for this assignment ("Meet Carlos Rodriquez," "Lt. Col. Joseph Huitt's Winding Path to AU," or "This Could Be You.").

1. Which of the three videos will be you analyzing for Part 2?
2. Choose a concept from Chapt. 3 ("Attitudes and Consistency") and relate it to your chosen video. Define the concept and then show the connection you saw between this concept and an element of the video.
3. Choose a concept from Chapt. 13 ("Motivational Appeals") and relate it to your chosen video. Define the concept and then show the connection you saw between this concept and an element of the video.
4. Given what you have learned about persuasion and your own experiences at AU, what do you believe is most persuasive about your chosen video? Why?
5. If you had a chance to change any element of your chosen video to make it more persuasive, what would you change? Why?

**Part 3**

By taking this course, you have increased your understanding of communication and persuasion. Review the "Five Benefits of Studying Persuasion" listed in Chapter 1 ("Why Study Persuasion?").

1. Which of these five benefits most resonates with you now that you are completing the course? Support your response.

**Evaluation**

All three parts of this final assignment will be evaluated on how well you demonstrate an understanding of course content. You will also be evaluated on how well you can apply course concepts to real-world applications. It is also expected that your paper be written well (taking into account spelling, grammar, flow, etc.).

Michael North

## *The Medium is the Message in Today's Classroom*

In the book Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, Marshall McLuhan (1964) titled his first chapter: "The medium is the message." Media and communication professors have uttered this simple statement since the 1960s and students probably understood its meaning. And if students had trouble grasping the concept, McLuhan provided plenty of examples such as electric light representing pure information, railroads creating new types of cities, and air travel undoing rail travel (p. 8); Shakespeare's Romeo & Juliet, Othello, and Troilus & Cressida differentiating between media and content (p. 9-10); Napoleon understanding the impact of negative press (p. 13); and print culture affecting the English, American, and French revolutions (p. 14). But McLuhan's discussion of Cubism was his best example to illustrate that the medium is the message.

McLuhan (1964) called Cubism:

> an exercise in painting, not in illusion…cubism, by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back, and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole. Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that the medium is the message… The message, it seemed, was the 'content,' as people used to ask what a painting was about. (p. 13)

"Exercise" is a keyword in McLuhan's observation of Cubism. Cubism makes us think of Picasso but the style was cofounded by Georges Braque – Picasso's close friend – who likened their time developing Cubism as being roped together as mountain climbers (Babbs, 2024). Their Cubism paintings were almost indistinguishable from each other, and Picasso and Braque would often sign the back of their paintings to avoid clouding the viewer's perception of the artwork with the influence of name and reputation (Museum of Modern Art, 2011). Because Cubism does not try to say anything through overt or even underlying messaging, the style's value is derived in the execution of the artwork, so the medium is the message.

McLuhan's genius is his ability to include Alexis de Tocqueville and Cubism on the same page to make a point. But today's students do not receive these examples all that well. Picasso and Braque were contemporaries of McLuhan. To McLuhan, Cubism was everyday conversation. Today's students need a modern example to illustrate that the medium is the message.

I observed this issue while lecturing in my intro to mass communication course. I am not an expert in nonverbal communication, but the glances at smartphones, fidgeting, and glassy-eyed stares into the abyss made me realize the following: 1) Today's students aren't familiar with Cubism 2) I am not an art professor and 3) Cubism is not my example.

Cubism may have been small talk in the 1960s, but the style is rarely mentioned and never emulated in Middle Georgia State University's art courses, and I would know as the Media, Culture & the Arts Department chair. Sure, I schedule art courses, but I can barely tell the difference between an easel and a pottery wheel. I know I lack the credentials to use Cubism as an example to show that the medium is the message. And speaking of examples, Cubism is not my own. My best teaching occurs when I generate an initial thought while stopped at a red light, develop that thought into a point while doomscrolling on social media before bed, and deliver that point as a finetuned example to a classroom full of students. I needed to develop my own example.

That was my thinking while I rocked my baby daughter, Valerie, to sleep after that fateful intro to mass communication lecture. To help my daughter drift off, I sang "Valerie" in the style of The Zutons because I lack the vocal range of Amy Winehouse. I also supervise the music program as MCA Department chair, so I am also well-aware of my deficiencies as a singer.

But that is when it hit me: When musical artists cover original songs, the song's lyrics are no longer the message; rather, the execution of the song becomes the message, so the musical artist becomes the medium. The musical artist, then, is the medium and the message.

The song "Valerie" when performed by Amy Winehouse is iconic. Her version topped out at #2 on the UK Singles Chart in 2007 while "Valerie" by The Zutons – the original version – peaked at #9 the prior year (Official Charts, 2026ab). The Zutons version is catchy for a 2000s era romantic comedy montage, but that version is not certified four times platinum like the Amy Winehouse version (BPI, 2026). Objectively, people prefer the Amy Winehouse version but to echo McLuhan: No one asks what the song "Valerie" is about. We hear the song, nod our head, tap our feet, and try to sing along. But our takeaway after listening to "Valerie" is not who she is or why she will not just come over. Instead, our takeaway is appreciation of how talented Amy Winehouse was as a vocalist.

The moment she covered "Valerie" by The Zutons, Amy Winehouse became the medium to deliver the message of her talent.

With this modern example of the medium is the message in mind, I task my students to find their favorite cover song, compare it to the original version, and explain which version is better to the class. Before I can say "go" students are on YouTube to find songs and some are jotting down notes. I reconvene the class after about 15 minutes and there is usually a student or two raising their hands to present first. But everyone in the class – even the students who have not said a word all semester – delivers a solid impromptu speech with their songs on YouTube as visual aids. It is the first rule of public speaking: Know your material (Deaton, 2019). And if you are passionate about that material, even better because that passion is perceived as charisma by the audience.

If you are keeping score, I showed my students that the medium is the message and they had some fun engaging with impromptu public speaking in one 75-minute class period. But I like things in threes, so assign a writing activity on the medium is the message. Now that your students are familiar with McLuhan's concept, present his friend John M. Culkin's (1967) quote: "We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us" (p. 70). Ask these questions: How have social media shaped us? How will AI shape us? Is the medium still the message in today's digital environment?

LinkedIn and Facebook are now more than 20 years old. That is two decades worth of social media interaction that have undeniably shaped who we are today as individuals and as a society.

To counteract its perils, we often read about AI as a "tool" which is clever framing by the AI that likely wrote the articles. Anyway, we know AI is here to stay. ChatGPT's adoption rate far surpassed fun applications such as TikTok and Instagram (Hu, 2023). More than half of teens chat with AI for help with schoolwork and 1-in-10 children between the ages of 5 and 12 have interacted with an AI chatbot (Faverio & Kikuchi, 2026). With AI infiltrating every aspect of our lives from GPS suggesting a faster route to our home to applications assembling playlists based on our listening history to AI's answers to our queries appearing above search results, we know AI is shaping us little by little every day.

Lastly, all media is on the internet. With a few taps on your smartphone, you can go from reading the Atlanta Journal-Constitution to listening to Braves baseball to watching CNN to following Coca-Cola on Facebook to liking a Georgia Aquarium photo on Instagram to reading Macon weather updates on X to watching the latest Marvel trailer on YouTube. Everything you do on your smartphone is on the internet. So if all content is on one medium, is the medium still the message?

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Andre Nicholson

# *Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in a Politically Divisive Media Landscape to a News Writing and Reporting Class*

> "In order to be a good news writer, you need to be a critical news consumer."
>
> Nicholson, 2026

In an era defined by a relentless 24/7 information cycle, the need to teach critical thinking skills has become more urgent than ever. Our media landscape, driven by social media platforms, algorithmic curation, and instantaneous sharing have transformed how we consume and interpret news. While access to information has expanded, so has the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. In politically divisive environments, where competing narratives can be polarizing, critical thinking needs to emerge not only as an academic skill but as a civic necessity. Teaching students to critically engage with media equips them to navigate complex information, make informed decisions, and contribute to a healthier democratic society.

Our current information environment is characterized by speed and scale. Social media platforms amplify content based on engagement rather than accuracy, often privileging emotionally charged material over neutral or evidence-based reporting. Unfortunately, misinformation spreads more rapidly than corrections, largely because sensational or emotionally resonant content captures attention and encourages sharing. This dynamic has significant implications: poor media literacy can influence elections, distort public health issues, destabilize markets, and erode public trust. In this context, critical thinking serves as a protective measure that enables individuals to actively engage with information rather than passively consume it.

Understanding the distinct categories of problematic information is a foundational step in cultivating critical thinking skills. Misinformation refers to the unintentional spread of incorrect information. For example, during May and June 2020, regions with high levels of misinformation circulating on Twitter, later experienced increases in COVID-19 cases in July, suggesting a tangible link between inaccurate information and public health outcomes (Otto 2021). Disinformation, by contrast, involves the deliberate creation and dissemination of false information intended to deceive. Mal-information occupies a distinct category, encompassing the use of personal information in ways to be of shock-value, which is designed to cause harm. A notable example occurred in 2020, when the FBI reported a 73% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes (Venkatraman, 2021). This surge has been linked by many scholars and observers to media narratives that emphasized unverified claims about the origins of COVID-19, demonstrating how harmful framing and repetition can fuel real-world consequences.

To counter these challenges, educators must emphasize the core components of critical thinking. At its foundation, critical thinking involves 1) questioning assumptions, 2) evaluating evidence before accepting claims, 3) distinguishing facts from opinions, 4) recognizing uncertainty, and 5) remaining open to revising one's beliefs. These skills are particularly important in politically polarized contexts, where individuals may be inclined to accept information that aligns with their preexisting views and rejects information that challenges them. By encouraging students to interrogate their own assumptions and biases, educators can foster intellectual curiosity, a key disposition for critical inquiry.

One effective pedagogical approach involves teaching students structured strategies for engaging with news. The "READ" framework—Research, Evaluate, Ask, and Disengage—offers a practical guide (Nicholson, 2022). Research encourages students to investigate the sources of information, considering factors such as credibility, expertise, and potential bias. Evaluate prompts self-reflection, asking students to consider why they are drawn to certain narratives or emotional responses. Ask emphasizes the importance of dialogue, encouraging students to engage with diverse perspectives and challenge their own viewpoints. Finally, Disengage recognizes the cognitive and emotional toll of constant media exposure, advocating for periodic breaks from social media to allow for reflection and recalibration.

Importantly, critical thinking must be framed as a skill that develops over time rather than an innate ability. It requires practice, patience, and, crucially, the willingness to slow down. In a media environment that rewards immediacy, slowing down almost seems like an act of defiance. Taking time to verify sources, cross-check claims, and reflect on one's reactions counters the impulse to share or react impulsively. This deliberate approach not only improves the accuracy of one's understanding but also reduces the likelihood of contributing to the spread of misinformation.

Teaching critical thinking in politically divisive contexts also necessitates addressing the emotional dimensions of media consumption. Emotional content, particularly content

that evokes anger, fear, or outrage, tends to travel further and faster than neutral information. Educators should help students recognize how emotional appeals can be used to manipulate perceptions and encourage them to pause before reacting. By analyzing the rhetorical strategies employed in media messages, students can become more aware of how narratives are constructed and how they influence interpretation.

Furthermore, fostering a classroom environment that values open dialogue and respectful disagreement is essential. Political divisiveness often discourages meaningful conversation, as individuals may fear conflict or social repercussions. However, engaging in diverse perspectives is a cornerstone of critical thinking. Structured discussions, debates, and collaborative analysis of media content can help students practice articulating their views while considering alternative interpretations. This process not only enhances analytical skills but also promotes empathy and understanding across differences.

The broader societal implications of teaching critical thinking are profound. Democracies rely on informed citizens capable of evaluating information and making reasoned decisions. When individuals lack the skills to critically assess media, they become more susceptible to manipulation, polarization, and distrust. A population equipped with strong critical thinking skills is better positioned to hold institutions accountable, engage in constructive dialogue, and resist the influence of misleading or harmful information.

One assignment that can be used to help develop students' critical thinking abilities is by analyzing their news consumption from social media:

**Scrolling for Truth: Evaluating News on Social Media**

Learning Objectives:

- Evaluate credibility of news shared on social media
- Identify reporting as either hard news, opinion, or satire
- Analyze algorithms, bias, and audience targeting

For this assignment students will select two - three news-related posts from social media (Instagram, X/Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) and critically analyze them using journalistic standards. Posts must include: 1) A breaking news post; 2) A politically or socially charged post.

***Part 1: Source and Credibility Analysis***

- Who created this content?
- Is the creator a verified journalist or organization?
- What is the original source of the information?
- Are primary sources linked?

- Is this reporting, commentary, satire, or opinion?
- What evidence is presented?
- What is missing?

Students should reference professional outlets for comparison such as:

- Associated Press
- Reuters
- The New York Times
- CNN

***Part 2: Algorithm and Audience Reflection***

Students reflect on:

- Why did this post appear in my feed?
- What previous engagement patterns may have influenced this?
- Who is the target audience?
- Does this post reinforce my existing beliefs?
- How might this story look different if told to another demographic group?

In conclusion, the teaching of critical thinking skills is indispensable in an age of pervasive media and political polarization. By equipping students with the tools to question assumptions, evaluate evidence, and engage thoughtfully with diverse perspectives, educators can empower them to navigate complex information environments with confidence and integrity. The challenges posed by misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information are significant, but they are not insurmountable. Through deliberate instruction, practice, and reflection, critical thinking can be cultivated as a personal competency and a collective safeguard. In doing so, education fulfills one of its most vital roles: preparing students not only to consume information but to understand, challenge, and ultimately shape it in ways that strengthen a democratic society.

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Cindy B. Montgomery

## *Media Ethics for Critical Thinking*

While the Society for Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (2014) is regularly part of the curriculum for journalism and broadcast media majors, most everyday media consumers are unaware of the Code and how it is meant to govern the actions of those who present the news. Teaching undergraduate college students about SPJ's Code of Ethics strengthens their critical thinking abilities and media literacy skills while making them better-informed media consumers.

The preamble of SPJ's Code of Ethics states, "Members of the Society of Professional Journalists believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. Ethical journalism strives to ensure the free exchange of information that is accurate, fair and thorough. An ethical journalist acts with integrity" (SPJ, 2014). What better way to enlighten the public than by bringing the code to students in freshman and sophomore level communication classes that include students of all majors? In these classes, students can learn the principles of the code: "seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; and be accountable and transparent" (SPJ, 2014). As students gain an understanding of these principles, they learn how journalists should abide by these principles in their reporting. Then students gain an understanding of how to hold journalists accountable for their actions. Rather than passive recipients of news feeds, students become critical consumers of news, watchful for bias, unethical practices, conflicts of interest, and harmful investigative practices.

In a 2016 issue of Quill, SPJ's professional magazine, Andrew Seaman, then-chair of the SPJ Ethics Committee, explained that many people emailing the SPJ Ethics Hotline did not understand the First Amendment or the SPJ Code of Ethics. Some of the concerns came from people who did not agree with "unflattering – but truthful – stories about politicians or other public figures" (Seaman, 2016). Based on his experience, Seaman

wrote about the need for the Code's principle of accountability and transparency to extend well beyond the newsroom. "While that principle is usually applicable when encouraging transparency about a recent story or reporting practices, people can broadly interpret its words to suggest journalists and news organizations should engage the public in discussions about the press and how it works," Seaman explained (2016). One of his suggestions included invitations for journalists to speak with students in college journalism, government, and English courses.

Teaching non-journalism students about the SPJ Code of Ethics provides them with critical thinking skills to understand how journalists should approach news coverage. These students also gain an understanding of how journalists use First Amendment rights to gather accurate information, present that information honestly, build trust with their audience, hold government officials accountable for their actions, and practice journalism without influence from advertisers or others. By learning the Code, these students may question the news-gathering process in order to understand it better. This transparency provides non-journalism students with an authentic exchange of information that may improve their opinion of journalists and enable them to be better-informed and more critical media consumers.

**Critical Thinking Exercise for the Classroom**

1. To help non-journalism students better understand the SPJ Code of Ethics, first the instructor should introduce the Code to students and explain the meaning of each principle.
2. The instructor shares a news story with students and asks them to determine whether the writer(s) followed the SPJ Code of Ethics.
3. Together, the instructor and students discuss how following or not following the Code affects the news story's credibility.
4. The instructor explains how journalists apply the SPJ Code of Ethics in special situations, such undercover reporting, reviewers receiving free product samples, and when revealing the truth may harm an innocent person.

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Soumitro Sen

# *Teaching Critical Thinking to Public Relations and Crisis Communication Students*

Critical thinking is a crucial skill for public relations practitioners especially when the organization they represent or work for, is facing a crisis. In such a situation, it is important for a public relations practitioner to critically examine how the crisis is being reported in the traditional media, and what stakeholders are saying on social media regarding the crisis. What is of primary importance is to see who is getting blamed for the crisis. This examination of traditional and social media becomes further complicated when one considers the amount of misinformation and disinformation that tends to circulate on social media. Thus, for public relations educators it is essential to teach students (i) how to examine traditional media coverage and social media critically, and (ii) how to be aware of the presence of misinformation and disinformation on social media and their negative impact on an unfolding crisis situation.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) – one of the most widely-used crisis communication theories – posits that when a crisis occurs, stakeholders tend to make attributions about the cause of the crisis (Coombs, 2010). The more the organization is held responsible for the crisis by stakeholders (which may include the media), the greater the reputational threat of the crisis to the organization (Coombs, 2010). SCCT

recommends crisis managers to organize the crisis response keeping in mind how much their organization is being blamed for the crisis. In order to assess how an organization is being blamed in the light of a crisis in today's media environment, a public relations practitioner must be able to critically evaluate how the traditional media – newspapers, television, online media outlets – are covering the crisis as well as what stakeholders are saying about the crisis on social media platforms. The latter in today's world is particularly important because as soon as a crisis occurs, people witnessing it or impacted by it take to their social media and start talking about it. Invariably, there is a lot of misinformation and disinformation that gets circulated on social media – often aggravating the crisis.

Take, for instance, the riots that broke out in 17 towns and cities in the United Kingdom between July 30 and August 5 in 2024 after the fatal stabbing of three schoolgirls in Southport, England (Drury et al., 2026). What triggered the riots was disinformation (Specia, 2024) spread mainly via the social media platform X – formerly known as Twitter – that the suspect was a Muslim immigrant, when in fact the 17-year-old was born to non-Muslim Rwandan parents in Cardiff (Mohamed, 2024).

The World Economic Forum in its Global Risks Report 2025, ranked misinformation and disinformation as the number 1 risk over the next two-year period – placing it above extreme weather events (no.2), cyber espionage and warfare (no.5), pollution (no.6), and erosion of human rights and/or civic freedoms (no. 10). The World Economic Forum's concerns are not unfounded: A 2025 study of six very large online platforms (VLOP) – Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, X/Twitter, and YouTube – in France, Spain, Poland and Slovakia revealed TikTok had the highest prevalence of misinformation (20%), followed by Facebook (13%), X/Twitter (11%), YouTube and Instagram (8%), and LinkedIn (2%) (Science Feedback, 2025).

Keeping the above information as context, one can see why it is essential for public relations students in a crisis communication course to learn to critically examine social media especially in the context of a crisis. I propose the two following assignments.

**Class Activity**

Learning Outcome:

- To help students see how crisis can be triggered by or aggravated by misinformation.

***In-class Activity***

**Step I:** Students are asked to use either ChatGPT or Gemini and find an example of a crisis case that was either triggered and/or aggravated by misinformation or disinformation on social media.

**Step II:** Students are given 5-7 minutes to come up with a case.

**Step III:** Once they have a case, students will be asked to team up with a peer or two – depending on the class size – and they will be asked to share their cases with their teammates. They will be given 10-12 minutes to do this.

**Step IV:** Each team is asked to share its most remarkable case with the class.

**Step V:** Once all teams have shared their most remarkable cases, the class is asked what are some takeaway lessons pertaining to crisis prevention and/or crisis response that one can learn from these cases?

**Step VI:** The takeaway lessons that emerge from the discussion will be jotted down on the blackboard by the instructor.

**Homework Assignment**

Learning Outcome:

- Students critically examine a crisis that was aggravated by or triggered by misinformation.
- Students critically analyze the crisis response that was used to respond to the crisis.
- Students propose steps that can be taken to prevent or address a similar crisis in future.

***Reflection Paper***

In 500-700 words examine a real-life crisis that was triggered or exacerbated by misinformation on social media. In your discussion address the following:

1. How could the crisis response be improved upon?
2. What steps can be taken to prevent or address a similar crisis in future?

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Christopher Thompson & Ian Peters

## *Inside Institutions of Modernity: Strengthening Pathways for Teaching Faculty Success*

This workshop examined how governance structures shape the experiences, representation, and advancement of teaching faculty across higher education institutions. The session was designed for communication faculty, graduate teaching assistants, department leaders, and instructors working in teaching-centered, limited-term, part-time, or hybrid faculty roles.

The workshop grew out of a broader conversation about faculty pathways, institutional change, and the evolving higher education job market. Rather than comparing institutions, the session invited participants to examine how different governance systems support or limit teaching faculty success. The discussion placed Kennesaw State University's large public institutional context in conversation with Brenau University's teaching-centered model.

The session asked one central question:

**If higher education has changed, have our governance structures changed with it?**

Participants explored this question through discussion, institutional reflection, and a governance mapping activity focused on the systems that shape teaching faculty labor.

**1. Teaching Faculty Pathways Are No Longer Singular**

Across higher education, faculty enter academic life through many pathways. Some arrive through tenure-track appointments, while others teach through part-time, limited-term, professional practice, lecturer, teaching-track, graduate instructor, or hybrid roles. However, many governance structures still operate from an older model of faculty life, one that assumes faculty are full-time, tenure-line, research-active, and structurally embedded in institutional decision-making. This mismatch creates practical challenges for teaching faculty, including:

- Limited access to governance
- Unclear promotion or progression pathways
- Evaluation systems that may not reflect teaching-centered work
- Inconsistent departmental norms
- Unstable schedules or contract structures
- Limited voice in decisions that affect teaching labor

The workshop emphasized that these challenges are not merely individual or departmental problems. They are often produced across multiple institutional systems.

**2. Governance Must Be Mapped Across Multiple Levels**

Participants were introduced to a four-level governance model for analyzing teaching faculty challenges:

1. **University Level**
   Faculty handbooks, academic freedom policies, faculty classifications, senate structures, and institutional definitions of faculty work.
2. **College Level**
   Dean-level interpretation of policy, workload expectations, resource allocation, evaluation practices, and voting eligibility.
3. **Department Level**
   Course assignments, scheduling norms, communication practices, leadership expectations, mentoring, and informal authority.
4. **Operational Level**
   Human resources, payroll, contracts, onboarding, technology systems, and employment classification.

The workshop emphasized that many faculty challenges are experienced at the department level but are caused or sustained by decisions made elsewhere. Mapping helps identify where authority actually resides.

**3. Representation Is Not the Same as Authority**

A key theme of the workshop was the difference between faculty voice and faculty power.

Teaching faculty may be invited to serve on advisory councils, committees, feedback sessions, or listening spaces. These structures are important, but they do not always redistribute decision-making authority.

For example, the Part-Time Faculty Council at Kennesaw State University provides a formal mechanism for part-time faculty representation. It allows concerns to be elevated, patterns to be identified, and feedback to be communicated to institutional leadership. However, advisory representation does not automatically control contracts, classification, workload, scheduling, or departmental implementation.

The workshop encouraged participants to ask:

- Where does the teaching faculty's voice enter governance?
- Who has the authority to act on that voice?
- What happens after concerns are raised?
- Is the structure symbolic, advisory, or decision-making?

**4. Institutions Make Design Choices About Teaching Faculty**

The workshop included a discussion of Brenau University as a teaching-centered institution. Dr. Ian Peters shared insights into how teaching-centered values can be reflected in governance, evaluation, workload, and institutional identity. This contrast helped participants consider the difference between constraints and design choices.

Some institutional conditions are shaped by budget, system policy, accreditation, and history. Others are choices about what the institution values, rewards, protects, and makes visible. Participants were invited to consider:

- How does an institution define teaching excellence?
- How are teaching faculty evaluated?
- Are there clear progression pathways?
- What policies codify those pathways?
- How are teaching faculty included in governance?
- How does the institution align faculty work with student success?

**5. Workshop Activity: Mapping Modernity Design Challenge**

Participants completed a governance mapping activity designed to move from problem identification to structural diagnosis. They were asked to identify a teaching faculty challenge and map it across the four governance levels:

- University
- College
- Department
- Operational

Participants examined:

- Where formal decision-making authority resides
- Where operational or interpretive tensions emerge
- How the issue appears across institutional layers
- Which level of governance offers the most viable intervention point

One example discussed was whether part-time faculty schedules are protected by academic freedom language or explicitly included in faculty handbook definitions. At first, this appears to be a scheduling issue. When mapped, however, it becomes a

university policy issue, a college interpretation issue, a department implementation issue, and an operational employment issue.

The workshop also included a visual model placing teaching faculty at the center of overlapping governance systems, with university, college, department, and operational layers surrounding the faculty experience.

**6. Major Takeaways**

The following insights emerged from the workshop:

1. Teaching faculty challenges are often systemic rather than isolated.
2. Governance structures may not reflect the current realities of faculty labor.
3. Faculty voice is necessary, but voice alone does not guarantee authority.
4. Mapping governance helps identify where change is possible.
5. Teaching faculty success is directly connected to student success.
6. Communication studies is well-positioned to examine these issues because the field already engages questions of voice, power, identity, institutions, and public life.
7. Applications for Communication Educators

Participants were encouraged to use governance mapping as a practical tool in their own institutions. This framework can help educators:

- Diagnose teaching faculty challenges more clearly
- Identify whether a concern is policy-based, departmental, operational, or cultural
- Advocate at the appropriate level of authority
- Build a shared language around faculty roles
- Support teaching faculty pathways more intentionally
- Connect faculty working conditions to student learning and institutional effectiveness

**8. Reflection**

The workshop demonstrated that conversations about teaching faculty governance require shared language, practical examples, and careful facilitation. Governance can feel abstract until it is connected to lived faculty experience. Once participants map a concrete issue across institutional layers, they can better see how authority, policy, and practice interact.

The session also reinforced that teaching faculty success is not simply a personnel issue. It is a governance issue, a communication issue, and a student success issue.

If institutions depend on teaching faculty to deliver core instruction, then their governance structures must reflect that dependence. Before governance can change, it must be named, examined, and mapped.

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# THE CASANOVA KILLER

DIRECTED AND EDITIED BY BOBBY JOHNSON
PRODUCED AND GRAPHIC EDITED BY RYAN GRANT

**RUN TIME:** 00:09:56
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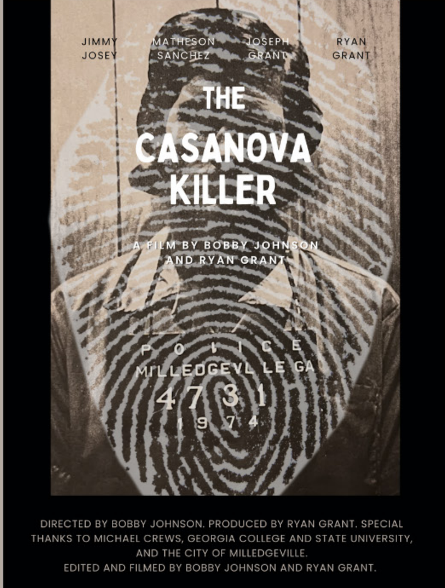
**PICTURE QUALITY:** 1080P




ABOUT RYAN: A MASS COMMUNICATION SENIOR FROM CARTERSVILLE, GA. HE HAS DONE A FEW OTHER SHORT FILMS AS A MEMBER OF BOBCAT MEDIA PRODUCTIONS, AND THIS IS HIS FIRST AWARD-WINNING SHORT FILM HE HAS BEEN A PART OF. HE WILL BE DIRECTING ANOTHER SHORT FOR HIS FILM AND TELEVISION CAPSTONE ENTITLED "BUBBLE MAN 4".
ABOUT BOBBY: A MASS COMMUNICATION SENIOR FROM GRAY, GA. WORKED WITH BROADCASTING AND VIDEO EQUIPMENT TO PRODUCE SEGMENTS FOR HIS HIGH SCHOOL'S NEWS STATION. SINCE ATTENDING GCSU, HE LEARNED HOW TO DEVELOP STORIES THROUGH SCRIPTWRITING. NOW HIS EFFORTS HAS BROUGHT HIM TO BE THE DIRECTOR AND WRITER OF HIS CAPSTONE SHORT FILM "RADIO SILENT". HE PLANS TO CONTINUE SHARING IMPACTFUL AND MEANINGFUL STORIES

**SYNOPSIS:** IN THE AMERICAN 1970S, THE VIETNAM WAR INTENSIFIED MEDIA EXPOSING AMERICANS TO AN ALMOST CRIPPLING AMOUNT OF DESTRUCTION IN THE WORLD. MAJOR SERIAL KILLERS IMPRESSED THEIR CRIMES ON NEWSPAPERS BEFORE AND THEIR STORIES WERE BEING RETOLD TO A GLOBAL EXTENT. JEALOUS OF THIS FAME AND TIRED OF HIS OWN UNFORTUNATE EVENTS, PAUL JOHN KNOWLES WOULD BECOME THE CASANOVA KILLER.

PHOTO OF BOBBY JOHNSON (CENTER) AND RYAN GRANT (RIGHT) WITH THE AWARD FOR BEST IN CATEGORY AT THE GCA CONFERENCE

Paul John Knowles

"WOMEN THOUGHT HE WAS HANDSOME, I DIDN'T"

Jimmy Josey, the lead investigator of the Milledgeville Carr case when asked about Knowles' public image.