

JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

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This, That, and the Other V



*'If a nation expects to be ignorant and free ...
it expects what never was and never will be.'*

– Thomas Jefferson letter to Charles Yancey, Jan. 6,
1816 [1]

Are you suffering from post-election analysis fatigue?

Rather than parsing numbers about whether President-elect Donald Trump's victory constitutes a "landslide" (it doesn't) and is a decisive turning point in

American history (it might be), I want to take an exploratory look at the single most important thing the election revealed about American culture and its implications for American freedom.

Which is?

Americans no longer live in the “reality-based community;” they live in the *mediasphere*.

Dot #1: “Reality-based community” – what’s that?

Ron Suskind, the journalist who first used the phrase, has never revealed who actually said it, but it is commonly assumed to have been Karl Rove. At the time, Rove was one of the principal advisers to then-President George W. Bush. In a long 2004 piece in *The New York Times Magazine*, [“Faith, Certainty, and the Presidency of George W. Bush.”](#) Suskind quoted a Bush aide about how the administration made decisions. It deserves to be quoted at length. The aide told Suskind that guys like him lived:

‘in what we call the *reality-based community*,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, *we create our own reality*. And while you’re studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do. (*Emphasis Added.*) [2]

Two things about that quote demand any thinking person’s attention. First, beginning with the phrase, “We’re an empire now ...,” the speaker, whoever it was, reveals the neo-imperial tone that has crept into presidential politics and discourse in the past half-century. It might be older, but I can’t quite imagine Presidents George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Harry Truman, or any other (maybe Richard Nixon) expressing that idea. It is a profoundly un-democratic thought. It is not the thought that is so striking (although striking it is), but the unconscious arrogance to say it aloud. As if the time when one could be challenged for thinking it in American politics had passed.

Second, the speaker blithely admits that reality no longer counts; that people create their own realities and decide policy based upon their own perceptions and

aims. It is their perceptions and aims that count, not “discernible reality” that can be judiciously — that is, thoughtfully and responsibly — studied.

In short, the speaker implies, “We just make it up in order to justify doing what we already intend to do.”

So, if we want to invade Iraq, we say there are weapons of mass destruction (WMD), a “factoid,” even though we know, or strongly suspect, that there aren’t any WMDs, which is an uncomfortable fact (as opposed to our fabricated “factoid”) subsequent history has proven to be true.

Or, fast-forward 20 years. If someone who can’t find her cat then posts an internet meme saying Haitian immigrants have eaten it, and Vice President-Elect J.D. Vance, thinking it will help his electoral cause, jumps on the viral surge promoting the “factoid” that President-elect Trump seizes and repeats endlessly, then suddenly a new “reality” has been created even after the woman, Erika Lee, who first posted the story to her Facebook page, later recants it, saying she made the whole thing up. [3]

“Factoid” itself is an interesting new word minted expressly to capture the *faux* truth of a post-truth world. Norman Mailer coined it in the first of his two books about that most mythic woman of the mediasphere – Marilyn Monroe. Published in 1980, the second and better of the two *Of Women and Their Elegance* consciously created an imaginary (whose root is image) world to try to capture the mystery that was *Marilyn*. “Factoid” was first used in 1973’s *Marilyn: A Biography*. Using “oid” as a suffix, “which traces back to the ancient Greek word *eidōs*, meaning “appearance” or “form,” a “factoid appears to be factual but is not.” [4] A “factoid,” then, is something that looks like a fact (and using the word “fact” as its root, sounds like a fact), but is in *fact* a fiction. It’s a made-up word meant to convey a sense of reality while describing an unreality.

If we don’t live in the “reality-based community,” then where do we live?

We live in the *mediasphere*.

Dot #2: What is the mediasphere? Literally, it means “the collective ecology of the world’s media, including newspapers, journals, television, radio, books, novels, advertising, press releases, publicity, and the blogosphere; any and all media both broadcast and published.” [4] Still literal, but more comprehensive,



Merriam-Webster defines it as “the various forms of mass media within an area considered as a whole; the various images, sounds, and programs presented by the mass media.” [5]

I take it a step further and define the “mediasphere” as an alternative reality created by the totality of all forms of media-generated images, sounds, and programs.

What does “media” mean?

Media is the plural of medium, and a medium is a channel. In communications theory, a channel is the means by which a sender and receiver of a message are connected. If we take the sender of the message to be the world around you, then you are the receiver of the world’s messages. An awkward phrase, the “world’s messages,” more accurately, your experience of the world is *mediated*.

How do people experience the world?

In one of two ways: either through direct sensory experiences (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell) or indirectly through “mediated” experiences (reading or listening to someone else tell, sing, or act out a story allegedly representing a version of reality). Because they are more vivid, more exciting, in a certain sense more “immediate” and more compelling, external media-generated stories and images replace an individual’s direct experience of the world and society with a “mediated” experience.

And, most importantly, in a mediated experience, image is more powerful than reality.

Dot #2: When did “image” triumph over “reality”? A long time ago, when the first individual tried to explain to members of her group what happened by telling a story about it; next, when someone wrote it down, defeating both time and space because they could now “talk” to people not in their presence (space) and “talk” to the future and the future could go back and “listen” to them (time). This went on for millennia, but it was limited only to those who could read; books were the hand-copied, rare, and extremely valuable property of a priesthood that told the masses what the books said and meant. Then, a scant half millennium ago, Gutenberg invented the printing press, the Bible became a best-seller, and books became affordable to all, setting off reformations and revolutions reverberating down to the present.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, electronic media – movies, radio, and TV – and in the 21st century, the internet, conveyed by a powerful minicomputer that fits in your pocket, overwhelmed the simple, direct, physical experience of the

world with images more vivid, more compelling, and more “immediate” than ordinary experience. This is all so new – fewer than 150 years for a species that marks its experience in the thousands if not tens or hundreds of thousands of years – that most people, even those who attempt to study it, barely understand the dynamics and social impact of the *reality-based community*’s replacement by a *media-based community* of contending images. [6]

Dot #3: What’s the relationship between those two questions and the future of American freedom? Everything! Although there is a debate about whether Thomas Jefferson actually said it, it captures the spirit of his thought: “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people,” [7] because, as the quote at the beginning of this **Book Note** suggests: If you expect to be ignorant and free, then you are daydreaming.

For almost 250 years, Americans have operated under the belief that their survival as a free people depended upon the survival of the American democratic republic. And democracy – *government of, by, and for the people* – is the people thinking about and trying to understand their world to make intelligent choices about public policy and the people they choose to lead them.

That requires that voters operate in the *reality-based community* that is now being replaced by a *media-based community* of contending images. Which immediately raises the question, “Can the images be trusted?” That leads to myriad other questions, all of which are variations of the question “Can the storyteller, can the mediated narrator be trusted?” Which is not an idle question when Americans on average spend six hours and 48 minutes consuming traditional TV and digital video and another three hours and 15 minutes per day on their phone, which is not really, or not only, a phone but a powerful microcomputer linking them (media as channel) to the world. [8]

Regarding “can the mediated narrator be trusted,” what happens in a world where the narrator knowingly lies to you? You can’t function, it’s really that simple. Whether it’s Fox News knowingly lying about stolen elections, [9] or cable news blowhards shouting out their own half-truths, or Russian bots exploiting social media algorithms to push false narratives, political technology now distorts American politics. Political technology is the use of modern communications technology, essentially internet-based, to manipulate election outcomes by posting fallacious information to create false narratives and images purporting to describe the *reality-based community*. [10]

Political technology creates distortion fields to manipulate people. Political technology’s distortion fields vaguely resemble reality but in key essentials present false information as facts; in short, it creates a false world. It creates “factoids” replacing facts in public discourse. And when large portions of the

public believe the false images, democracy is short-circuited as people swallow whole the blatantly false, like the factoid about Haitian immigrants eating their neighbor's pets in Springfield, Ohio.

People also fall prey to more subtle uses of visual images to create the illusion of an electoral landslide, when the election, while admittedly decisive, was far closer than the simple red and blue map at the beginning of this **Book Note** suggests. Elections are about people, not space. Yes, large swaths of the American landscape went red and voted for Donald Trump, but that optical illusion is an artifact of our 18th century system in need of tweaking. When the votes of actual people are counted, however, neither the right nor the left can claim a mandate. As of 11:51 a.m. on Nov. 18, President-elect Trump's share of the popular vote has fallen below 50% (it now resides a sliver below at 49.96%) and Kamala Harris still trails at 48.24%. [11]

So, yes, he won; no argument.

But the image of a red tide is an illusion – an *imagistic factoid*, if you will. While all three branches of government currently tilt right, the United States remains a deeply divided nation whose people, if not its geography, are split between two competing national narratives.

Dot #4: Regarding those competing national narratives and “the future of American freedom,” what insight does **The American Tapestry Project** provide? We'll explore that question in a series of **Book Notes** beginning in January, but for now, the question of how to function in a mediated world based on distorted images, factoids, and false narratives commands our attention. Watch for a JES program in the spring or perhaps at next year's Global Summit XVII on the existential challenge a culture of false information portends for the future of the American experiment.

It is the crisis of the moment.



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“Norman Rockwell Four Freedoms Collage” at **Washington Post** available at [How relevant are four Norman Rockwell paintings from 1943? You'd be surprised. - The Washington Post](#) accessed Nov. 10, 2024.

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End Notes

1. “Extract from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey” in **Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters** at **ThJefferson Monticello** available at [Extract from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Yancey, 6 Jan. 1816 \[Quote\] | Jefferson Quotes & Family Letters](#) accessed Nov. 17, 2024.
2. Suskind, Ron, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush” in **The New York Times Magazine** (October 17, 2004) available at [Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush - The New York Times](#) accessed Nov. 17, 2024.
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5. “Mediasphere” at **Wiktionary, the free dictionary**, available at [mediasphere - Wiktionary, the free dictionary](#) accessed Nov. 18, 2024.
6. “Mediasphere” at **Merriam-Webster Dictionary** available at [Mediascape Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster](#) accessed Nov. 18, 2024.
7. If you’re interested in trying to grasp that dynamic, some places to start are: Marshall McLuhan’s **Understanding Media**; Daniel Boorstin’s **The Image**; Neil Postman’s **Amusing Ourselves to Death**; Nick Carr’s **The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains**; and Jonathan Haidt’s **The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness**.
8. “An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people (spurious quotation)” at **ThJefferson Monticello** available at [An educated citizenry is a vital requisite for our survival as a free people \(Spurious Quotation\) | Monticello](#) accessed Nov. 18, 2024.
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11. For an informative review of the entire issue, cf. Steven Feldstein, “*Issues on the Frontlines of Technology and Politics*” at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace available at [Issues on the Frontlines of Technology and Politics | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) accessed Nov. 18, 2024.
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