The Politics of Media Coverage

"Trumped by Democracy"

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For starters: in Donald Trump's victory speech following the Nevada caucuses in February, the Republican presidential candidate listed off the demographic groups he believed to have won in the caucus results, including evangelicals, Hispanics, young, "old," and "highly educated" voters. He then disclosed that his campaign won "poorly educated" voters, exclaiming, "I love the poorly educated. We're the smartest people, we're the most loyal people." Such a statement was widely mocked by the press – noting, for starters, the incommensurability between the quality of one's education and the amount of it completed – before the discourse shifted to the perceived anti-intellectualism behind Trumpism as a political movement. The rise of Trump, pundits frequently declare, comes from his raw, affective energy; in railing against political correctness, for example, he vocalizes what a not insignificant group of (predominantly white, older, male) voters feel but cannot say in public. Much of the upcoming election has thus been framed (as American elections often are) between political rationality and political emotionality, even if, as Lauren Berlant has passionately argued, *all* politics is emotional.

While journalists and members of the 24-hour news cycle have been rather circumspect about their participation in the Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 Republican presidential primary, I answer the question "Is the media responsible for Donald Trump?" through omitting the definite article, asking how "media" more broadly contributed to his anti-intellectual hostile takeover of the Republican party. Two media forms emblematic of the neoliberal mediaspace come to mind: reality television and social media (namely Twitter). Both of these forms have been blamed for creating the conditions for Trump: their bandwidth as "free" media that engages the "ordinary" subject, their circulation within existing journalistic coverage (tweets and reality TV events becoming news stories), and their cultures of humiliation and competition. Yet both were also conceived with democratic aspirations: in the widespread mobilization of voting on competitive reality talent programs, for instance, or in the ways in which social media has been credited with inspiring regime change in non-democratic societies. (This is especially true when taken outside of a Western context; for many female viewers of *Afghan Star*, to name one example, casting a vote for a vocalist was her first time voting at all on a national level.)

I would argue that the anti-intellectual and emotional populism of Trump and the perceived influence of these two media forms on his candidacy are related. Moreover, I would argue that while Trump has mobilized both platforms to disseminate his anti-intellectual provocations, his rise to power has more to do with the imperfections of democracy rather

than with the individualistic ideology of *The Apprentice* or with his offensive tweets. Rather, the Nevada victory speech with which I opened this response exemplifies what Jacques Rancière calls "politics as dissensus," revealing a foundational paradox of democracy: if everyone and anyone regardless of qualification can rule, then no such qualifications for ruling actually exist. Democratic power is messy and disruptive, emphasizing participation as qualification. Thus, the "poorly educated," however poorly defined, have the right to seize power through voting like any other demographic group, as do those that vote "with their hearts" as opposed to "with their heads" (see: Clinton vs. Sanders).

For Rancière, the messy potentiality of democracy means that it simultaneously exceeds political institutions – including media – as it legitimates them. Yet consider how reality TV and social media are always already excessive forms of media, structured around melodramatic conflict and utilizing confessional modes of address. To me, Trump's political skills can be found in his ability to manipulate the democratic potential within reality television and Twitter in order to exacerbate these excessive elements. If snark is truly the primary style of the neoliberal West, affectively penetrating all levels of cultural communication beyond satire or irony, Trumpism may be the effective convergence of politics and media. But I turn to Rancière in this short incitement because, at the end of his meditation on the democratic paradox, he posits democracy as an empty space, one dependent on the energies and affects of those who inhabit it. Yes, this means that democracy can be privatized (such as in *Citizens United*, or through Trump's own commitment to his brand), but it means that can be occupied as well. I look forward to discussing how we as ethical media scholars can occupy this paradoxical space in order to foster and engage new political emotions, such that the popular media technologies and forms of the current moment can assert their democratic potential in ways that challenge, occasionally, politics as usual.