

Media Spectacle as Political Epistemology: The Real-Time Construction of Presidential Impeachment

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Media Spectacle as Political Epistemology:

The Real-Time Construction of Presidential Impeachment

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Abstract:

Murray Edelman argued that political news on television creates spectacles, which render viewers influenced by the emotional production process of publicized events coverage. Yet, the digital age renders spectacle functioning more intimately with audience than during Edelman's original treatment in 1989. Drawing upon psychoanalytic and epistemological theory, I contextualize Edelman's theory regarding the real-time opportunity of spectacle coverage, or not. Considering that media spectacle efficacy has to do with experiencing the spectacle as live events, I make the case that real-time coverage plays a role in the media construction of audience perception. The case analysis considers the history of presidential impeachments, with differentiation drawn between fresh news driven impeachments versus post-events attempts at charging national leaders. This is explored more particularly in the impeachment efforts against Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The media empowerment of spectacle is explored further in relation to digital and social media, the opining polarization of participatory politics, and the growth of impeachments, particularly in the age of Donald Trump social media organizing and news development, and in the shadow of his being the first president to be impeached twice while in office.

Introduction

In March 2023 renowned law scholar Marjorie Cohn made the case that the George W. Bush administration has long escaped war crimes, describing their lack of accountability as a haunting national American topic due to the absence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) that the Bush administration said were in Iraq. The assumption led to the death of over 800,000 Iraqis and left Iraq in a state of civil war.ⁱ The year 2008 was crucial as the Bush presidency was nearing its end, and public commentary was, although present,^{ii,iii} growing indifferent as to whether Bush's assumptions and war warranted removal from office. As the war in Iraq began in 2003, the five-year delay of attempted efforts to draw accountability led to a lack of momentum in lawmaker Dennis Kucinich's attempt to impeach Bush.^{iv}

With both public coverage and congressional leverage absent, the effort to hold the Bush administration accountable was "kicked into limbo,"^v and never emerged again. America had moved on, and the more hopeful, engaging media display was at work—the *Slobbering Love Affair*^{vi} of media adoration for the forthcoming Obama administration, demonstrating how we are prone to media distributed 'political emotions.'^{vii} Passion for an Obama leadership outweighed a need to hold an exiting president accountable in the realm of media storytelling. These variables left Kucinich's effort without opportunity for a mediated spectacle to gain momentum.

A Bush impeachment was thereby a missed media opportunity, a story that was not told with craft to generate interest and action on the part of audience. As politics is perpetually covered by media outlets, the reliance on media framing of events as an expression of truth is a psyche issue, identified by Peter Dunlap as the Jungian consideration of the "Transformative Political Psychology."^{viii} This perspective mirrors and demonstrates Robert Scott's description of rhetorical behavior being epistemic rather than persuasive in nature.^{ix} Taking Scott's

conception further, the Jungian link to news processing is described as the “epistemic media”^x function, where “media forms and practices... not only communicate knowledge, but also create knowledge.” Media coverage is regarded, in and of itself, as the presentation of knowledge, and works didactically—described as “Journalists as Media Educators.”^{xi}

With the epistemic function of media, an audience mind works is a stage for constructing truth. In contrast to our state of being audience to media storytelling, Jung himself expressed hope for us to be freed from external framing of the mind, suggesting a state where we can be more thoroughly informed and free of influence and “be sufficiently informed only when he has large measure freed himself from the leveling influence of collective opinions and thereby arrived at a clear conception of his own individuality.”^{xii}

Similarly, political theorist Murray Edelman^{xiii} argues that we make sense of the world through spectacle moments of time that define culture and give us purpose. By “spectacle,” Edelman refers to how news media creates a “hyperreal” viewer experience through “pseudoevents,”^{xiv} where particular events play landmark roles in making rapid and contrasting decisions of right and wrong. Edelman makes the case that media coverage of spectacles prescribe ethics to adopt, and which are implied in their real-time presentation. Considering the nature of news media, its place in the human mind and as defined by time, we can understand political spectacles as Jungian manifestations of desire—both of the collective audience and of purpose-driven media producers.

The consumer of media entertainment and political news becomes a patron of the spectacle. In the end, such truth-creating power that presides over viewers renders them as having experienced an epistemological presentation by the “News Institution”^{xv} when engaging political controversy. There is a power relationship between media distributor of political news and viewer. The link is the spectacle, which is engrained into our ongoing human experience as consumers of media—what Tamara Vukov calls the “amplification of political affect” that is

driven by “the long tradition of media spectacles.”^{xvi} To create such an “amplification,” the use of spectacle must simultaneously construct and limit viewers’ perceptions. Guy Debord calls this state we are experiencing the Society of the Spectacle.^{xvii}

Edelman takes an encompassing approach to the sites where spectacle can be employed as he intertwines media and politics with audiences’ similar passion for arts. Together, these numerous sites of mass storytelling define the parameters for what can be understood as real, therefore guiding consumers of both news and art to certain conclusions and perspectives:

[N]ot all who share the sentiment are acquainted with, or even aware of, the art that played a part in crystallizing their political opinions. Like all communication, these conceptions spread through discourse, paraphrases, imitations, and emulation, and through attacks on them as well. Their key political consequence is to focus attention, fundamental assumptions, and ideology.^{xviii}

Important for this study, Edelman’s focus on the power of spectacle’s effect assists the Jungian effort to address the psyche with its diverse surroundings, “We have to admit this limitation in Jung: he did not find a sufficient language for the processes of political transformation.”^{xix} The theoretical gap between Jung and Edelman provides space to make sense of the spectacle, its mind-constructing power, and the question as to how the mind processes media and its fixation on spectacle-framing because, while “C. G. Jung focused intently on these problems; however, his vision and work, for all its charisma, did not provide us with a robust direction for research and intervention into political culture.”^{xx} Nonetheless, the attraction of the spectacle

keeps viewers preoccupied with news coverage. The spectacle leads to reliance on news outlets.

This study explores that confining, emotive, entertaining capacity for media where, for better or worse, the perception is constructed via the lived—and thereby epistemic—capacity of media spectacle. I examine how these mediated processes work as spectacles with the use of media affect by differentiating their efficacy according to the successful or failed use of timeliness. Comparison explores the successful Clinton impeachment compared to Dennis Kucinich's failed 2008 impeachment of George w. Bush,^{xxi} which was presented without spectacle, and therefore unsuccessful. Implications include discussion of the trajectory of impeachment as political weaponization, social media influence on political polarization, and the permanence of real-time spectacle coverage as part of digital and social media opining.

Epistemology, the Mind, and Rhetoric

Edelman's observation of the inciting capacity of spectacle comes with the use of narrative stimuli in media coverage. Michael Billig describes this as producer choices, where public presentation skillfully crafts what “can be understood... and also what we avoid thinking about,” and in doing so is crucial because “one can change topics of conversation or even remove certain matters from the dialogic agenda.”^{xxii} Scott described this as the epistemic function of rhetoric, his case being that we must consider all notions of what humanity has “considered truth not as something fixed and final, but as something to be created moment by moment in the circumstances in which he finds himself and with which he must cope.”^{xxiii} The definition of truth is, as a rhetorical outcome, the process of availability to succeed, to incite, to win audience support.

Focusing more on that establishment of ethics, the spectacle has a range of authority, largely because the presentation of events—whatever the angle of production decisions—are

initial integrations of audiences into events and topics. As media spectacles often address issues of disaster—thereby centered on the threats of death and typically in large numbers, such as natural disasters and war coverage—the perspective is also developed as it is “usually influenced by and modified in its decisions by the natural instincts of humans for ‘survival’ and ‘perpetuation.’”^{xxiv} This is evident in the value of life being dictated by media storytelling of violence against women.^{xxv}

The real-time, lived nature of streaming spectacles gives a raw, emotional, objective feeling where spectacle comes with “the affective capacity of images” and will “garner support and paralyze audiences who simultaneously participate in and consume the event.”^{xxvi} As a result, the perspective is vulnerable and in flux as news is engaged, even if those adjustments are subtle while spectacles play out. This quick decision processing happens as media “manage and experience ‘the now’ through various social, cultural and technical relations.”^{xxvii} Ideology is managed with technical production craft.

As the mind engages the perpetual display of events that are mediated and accompanied with opining narration, emotional responses serve as gateway toward establishing perspective while “affect attention is drawn to the many interacting conditions and forces that coalesce and gather as attachments, ideas, or assumptions and how these might influence perceptions of the event and actions in the aftermath” of a spectacle. The mass media display of spectacle—national news coverage—is spread in unison as the shared story comes “across massive audiences and from small numbers of sources.”^{xxviii} The promotion of perspective becomes that which is the best opportunity for spectacle, in some instances through political journalism.^{xxix}

Considering impeachment as spectacle, influential institutions have long been enabled to guard which material is and is not shared.^{xxx} Whereas social media allows for all material to

easily leak and be covered, news commentary—weighted by influencer opining—allows for both the dramatic display of impeachment as spectacle, and also to function as the “means for closing down discussion,”^{xxxix} or the “processes of repression” of alternative interpretations. The media affect experience is understood as taking place without distinction between non-mediated communication, or being in the actual presence of another, and the mediated. As a result, the mind readily interprets the events of that which is presented as objective reality. For the viewer, the spectacle is processed as knowledge.

Presidential Impeachment as Spectacle

Perception toward presidential transgressions is built by spectacle through two processes that are intertwined: they are placed as real-time event coverage and are constructed as an epistemological offering as conclusive. Spectacles are typically presented in sequences and with shock value in a given moment, yet are then intertwined with other spectacles in the progression of time, keeping us ever preoccupied with stories and a feeling of needing immediate response and solution, “At any time, then, the number of issues comprising the range of extant spectacles is not likely to be large . . . The spectacle, in short, is a partly illusory parade of threats and reassurances.”^{xxxix} This ongoing treatment of spectacle display creates what James Compton calls the “fearful terrain of the global affect” that is “secured through the spectacle of fear and terror.”^{xxxix} In essence, the media-consuming mind is guided by the interlinking of one mediated presentation of spectacle to the next.

Impeachment proceedings and the rhetorical display of events leading up to them take on a real-time impact that drives the public and influential lawmakers toward commitment to ensuring impeachment. President Andrew Johnson’s impeachment trial took place only months after his political enemies charged him.^{xxxix} Similarly, the Nixon,^{xxxv} Clinton,^{xxxvi} and Trump^{xxxvii} impeachments took place via constant mediated coverage, with formal

congressional charges taking place within months following the moments when initial concerns were raised—similar to Johnson’s case. In contrast, Kucinich’s charges against Bush came postmortem of the emotiveness of spectacle events and near the end of Bush’s final presidential term. Kucinich’s efforts, despite reasonable and important charges, were poorly timed and without the opportune power of real-time coverage that would have invited audience speculation, distrust, and demand for justice.

Media framing of the Clinton scandal caused “significant attitudinal consequences”^{xxxviii} regarding whether the impeachment of Clinton was warranted. The Clinton events were a successful outcome of impeachment as mass media employed “firm definitions of real time, liveness, instantaneous, and always-on”^{xxxix} media coverage. Clinton’s impeachment was regarded as a personal transgression rather than a failed performance as commander-in-chief, although the scandal happened in the White House between Clinton performing presidential duties.^{xl} The more recent impeachments of Trump suggest that impeachment efforts face more support when charges are intimately interlinked with failed job performance.^{xli} This coincides with congressional oversight of the impeachment of Andrew Johnson for his described failure in presidential duties.^{xlii} Despite a century long gap after Johnson until the Nixon probe, impeachments are becoming an increasingly common staple in the menu of American political spectacles, including the ongoing efforts to impeach Joe Biden.^{xliiixliv}

So, being audience of spectacles is a part of the current human experience, and these media events include impeachments and the coverage of their ongoing probes. As political media spectacles construct perception through real-time experience, their perception-creating capacity includes dramatization of events that have not reached conclusion, thereby making audience ongoing participants.^{xlvi}^{xlvix}^{lviii}^{lix} The relationship between images, words, and troubling events allows the dramatic media affect where “the use of apocalyptic words

alongside the repetitive pairing of affective images”^l generates emotional responses. Without these variables at play, an attempted impeachment—no matter how accurate the claims—will be fruitless without a living, provocative, emotion-constructing spectacle.

Dennis Kucinich’s Articles of Impeachment for George W. Bush

Considering the still ongoing concerns about Bush’s WMD rhetoric that justified war,^{li} Dennis Kucinich’s failed attempt to impeach Bush in 2008 is a case for how lack of real time drama shows the necessity for spectacle construction. Kucinich’s arguments were that Bush misled the Congress and citizens of the United States about pending attacks by Iraq, lied about Iraq’s nuclear threats, declared war on Iraq without following the required steps, and ignored high intelligence of the impending September 11, 2001 attacks.^{lii} Yet, at the time, the call for impeachment was not taken seriously.^{liii}^{liv} Edelman describes a failed spectacle as an attempt to overthrow other, ongoing spectacles that have already successfully established a dominant narrative, “[I]f news stories challenge deeply held assumptions, they can be ignored.”^{lv} The emotions accompanying 9/11 and the expectations for WMDs left no room for a new, contradictory narrative in 2003 and the following years. Kucinich’s arguments for impeachment five years later were “ignored” because the justifications for the war that were supported by the news media at the time provided a pervasive mindset that kept storytellers from altering the Bush-as-protagonist narrative.^{lvi}

In 2008 when the Bush administration was finishing its final term, nothing groundbreaking had been presented in the call for impeachment. All of Kucinich’s resolutions were based on past events that, via the integration of news coverage, left an audience unable to act in the wake of the events that had transpired years before. These events were not like hearing that a President had been involved in scandals that the audience had no awareness of before the story broke. The lack of Iraqi WMDs, in particular, had already been discussed at

length in news coverage.^{lvii} Nothing about Bush's war was spectacled, despite the validity of concerns for the war which Bush himself later acknowledged.^{lviii} The years of dormant action by lawmakers and media acknowledgement left an empty—if not impossible—opportunity at impeachment. War coverage was a staple for the audience that had been integrated into supporting years before.

There was no shock on the part of viewers in relation to Bush's role in creating American conflict in the Middle East, particularly as the 9/11 attacks were successfully linked to the necessity of the Iraqi war.^{lix} Regardless of the degree of Bush's guilt, media presentation of the impending war softened the American conscience toward it, rendering audience, albeit reluctant, okay with such movements to war because "In the months leading up to the war, sizable majorities of Americans believed that Iraq either possessed WMD or was close to obtaining them, that Iraq was closely tied to terrorism, and that Hussein had a role in the 9/11 attacks."^{lx} Yet even within the regret and resistance to the war that has taken place in recent years, such resistance is now moot because of the news media's preparation of audiences to see justification with American military occupation in Iraq.

The Lived Spectacle of the Clinton Impeachment

A presidential impeachment looks different when audience is shocked with previously unknown news. The success of the spectacle swivels on the effective placement of fear—or another heightening emotion—into the mind of audience, where the "post-representative"^{lxi} discourse after the spectacle takes place and is allowed to flourish and to continue to play a didactic role for audience. Considering Bill Clinton's Monica Lewinski scandal, this was new news to the audience. Unlike the Bush war rhetoric, viewers were not slowly integrated into the unfolding events of Clinton's affair. It was not on the verge of happening over a period of time,

like the Iraq war. Instead, the audience was given a shock of what *did* happen. Due to being presently informed as the spectacle happens in real-time for the viewer, the audience was integrated into sharing Bush's distaste for Saddam Hussein, his probable WMDs, and his connections to Al Qaeda. The shock of what was happening in the Clinton scandal came as Clinton's mistakes were both recent and had already happened. The two can be differentiated by Douglas Kellner's observation of the "Triumph of the Spectacle"^{lxii} as part of storytelling. Kellner makes the case that shocking an audience is part of successful narratological structures, observable in the productions of the ancient world's plays and poetry.

The significance of viewers' standpoint of shock provides the eventual resoluteness of audience being able to be disjointed from a President's sexual transgressions versus being integrated into the rightness of a war. The intervening, convincing in real-time conscious experiences of spectacles that unfold in sequences, after an initial shock, provides a sense of rightfulness to speak out against a leader's transgressions because of the present-ness of the issue. Rebecca Coleman calls this the influence of "the now"^{lxiii} of live media coverage. In his *Cultural Attitudes*, Joseph Henderson describes this as the effect that comes through "consciousness-expanding properties"^{lxiv} of experiences with stimuli. That which is perceived as virtuous, true, the right course of action, becomes that which is the consciousness of the audience in the arena of political news coverage.

As these two impeachment stories progressed differently and, importantly, were presented in different time sequences for viewers, the position of media coverage in relation to when transgressions are revealed, as well as the frequency of coverage, is what kept Clinton guilty of sex and Bush innocent of fabricating conditions for war. The Clinton scandal was a living, unfolding audience experience where Clinton played the role of antagonist. Constructing a spectacle limits the parameters of other interpretations of the spectacle's events, which is Dunlap's description of "the emergence of the psychological attitude creat[ing] a new...

psychological environment.”^{lxv} Bush’s impeachable crimes were presented in a slow, gradual progression that out-aged the first declaration of war by several years, thereby keeping the Bush justifications for war, in relation to Kucinich’s impeachment attempt, as non-provocative. So, time can be the enemy of the spectacle.^{lxvi}

Watching spectacle feels like a material, lived experience where “the spectator is draw[n] into the fragmented materiality” of real-time coverage.^{lxvii} The human mind is perpetually vulnerable to images, stories, and opining for the shock of quick transference of perspective, “Within our private lives, we have learned how the past impacts the present and how the present is governed by psychological dynamics that can be influenced by the effective use of imagination, emotions, thoughts, sensori-somatic experience, attention, desire, and will (that is, human consciousness).”^{lxviii} The coverage of Clinton grimacing and assertively denying the affair as he spoke seriously while pointing his finger repeatedly brought a tantalizing juxtaposition because coverage also included footage of Lewinski fawning over Clinton at a rally as she hugged him with a look of adoration while staring at him.^{lxix} The issue became a mystery that demanded resolution for the public.

This image-utilizing force that empowers the spectacle is subject to storytelling and rapid meaning assigning of journalist commentary, where “Epistemology in journalism”^{lxx} is the influence “that enables journalists to distinguish the false from the truth, the probable from the actual, as well as to legitimize the knowledge claimed expressed” in the differentiation of good versus bad presidential behavior. Spectacle-driven affect allows for a sense of identity that drives decision making and association, politically and even tribally going forward, all contributing to a constructed perspective: “a multidimensional, material, sensuous trigger of affective forces of identification and attachment.”^{lxxi} A public is helpless regarding Kucinich’s pursuit to impeach President Bush because, as viewers of news media, the enticement to

accept the Bush wars took place long before Kucinich's impeachment attempt.

The Future of Spectacle and Impeachment

Political news, as constructor of reality, renders us living the events. Considering the trajectory of where we are, and where recent presidencies have fallen in the conversation about impeachment, only Barack Obama has escaped serious conversation of being impeached. Clinton, Bush per the Kucinich attempted charges, Trump, and the ongoing Republican efforts to file against Biden have all been thrown into the arena of self-defense against impeachment. Looking ahead, this is worthy of consideration and concern because of the “temporality”^{lxxii} of lived media experiences, which are subject to change, but which leave audiences “sustained” in their “public attention for protest through mainstream news media.”

The emergence of the digital turn and influencer culture brings opportunities for spectacles to be chronically covered and opined upon by a vast number of commentators. The contemporary digital world is more prone to spectacle, and the opportunity and ease has vastly increased the availability for spectacle to be covered, and even more so in real-time.^{lxxiii} The digital, YouTube world allows for a “vernacular spectacle” that gives a perception and experience of “participatory political culture.”^{lxxiv}

Notable in the construction of an effective spectacle is the presence of antagonism. The cultural need for events that are emotionally impactful, even to the point of angering, is concerning as it enables the bifurcating ability of radicalism. The rhetoric of Donald Trump on social media is particularly unique in the digital landscape, allowing for an audience spectacle experience that is inciting—both of Trump followers toward shared energy as well as of prudent concern for his aggressive and polarizing tactics.^{lxxv} Considering the plethora of an angered cultural state in politics,^{lxxvi} the reservation suggested by Edelman allows us to separate from spectacle emotive manipulation, but also better understand our contemporary

state of political polarization where discourse is continually heightened.^{lxxvii} This is why “Edelman's symbolic analysis has a skeptical vein regarding democratic politics that is still relevant nowadays.”^{lxxviii}

The possibility of escaping a presidential term without being charged with impeachment might be unique in the future. Recent research has shown the striking relationship with online political activity, event attendance organized to criticize contemporary leadership, and the influence of discussion over impeachment as a generator of impeachment interest, inquiry, and efforts.^{lxxix} Brian C. Kalt calls this the “Age of Futile Impeachments”^{lxxx} that is the result of partisan politics creating a “full blossom lust for impeachments.” Poell charges us to see the cruciality of “current changes in the temporality of protest communication” that are enabling the “transformation of the media landscape and a corresponding redistribution of media power.”^{lxxxi} That redistribution of media power is the move from traditional news media coverage to social media commentary where extremism is prevalent and growing.^{lxxxii}

The presence of social media opining, with its ability for permanent audience as humans do not live without devices—our age of permanent scrolling—constructs a future landscape where the minute elements of personal life and an emotionally compromised political opposition might mean a trigger-reaction from congressional powers. Nearing the end of a presidential term—in the case of both Trump and Biden—might mean the leveraging of articles of impeachment as a new party campaign strategy.^{lxxxiii} A 2020 study^{lxxxiv} on the impeachment procedures in South Korea paralleled the timing of the Trump impeachments, asking whether social media organizing, with its impact on audience emotions, plays a role in impeachment procedures. The conclusion was a resounding confirmation, where “the proliferation of digital networks has a meaningful political effect,”^{lxxxv} allowing those who are against sitting administrations to organize, plan, utilize new media communications, and have

measurable efficacy as they construct spectacles of resistance.

Will we find resolution as to whether Bush was a warmonger? It is unlikely, “Two decades later, debate continues about whether the administration was victim of flawed intelligence, or whether Bush and his senior advisers deliberately misled the public about [Iraq’s] WMD capabilities.”^{lxxxvi} Lack of assurance sterilizes the spectacle. Spectacles need the display of observable material and to take place in sequences, which Scott described as the epistemological display of truth being “created moment by moment,”^{lxxxvii} and with strong enough impact that we, as audience, “must cope” with what is before our eyes. That coping is the adoption of perspective and quick draw readiness to act in reaction to the spectacle’s shock value.

Impeachments are serious business. They take considerable planning, effort, energy, and are part of the media spectacle at play in the current political rhetoric landscape.^{lxxxviii} The history of human culture is a discussion of conscience: what is right, what should be done, what should be resisted, and who should be removed from leadership and influence—impeached. This study has considered the timeliness of spectacles to have an effective and lasting impact on political decisions, perceptions, and the trajectory of our thinking in relation to presidential impeachments. Spectacles are time-driven and are perception-constructing, and the witnessing power of visual footage is convincing and assumedly irrefutable. These, together, construct perspectives on current events.

Perception is the precursor to conscience and action, and perception is constructed through the epistemological feeling of the real-time spectacle. Jung’s charge that we escape being influenced by external sources is an optimistic view. His hope, combined with Edelman’s insights on the authority of the spectacle, along with our current state of social media opining on just about any topic, still rests on the pursuit of freedom from spectacle epistemology. Awareness of that constructing process can help us, in Jung’s own words, to “be sufficiently

informed” and “free [ourselves] from... collective opinions” by arriving at our “own individuality.”^{lxxxix} The point is to see spectacles, in their growing influence, for what they are: “pseudoevents,”^{xc} according to Edelman.

Notes

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⁶ Edelman, 90.

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^{xix} Dunlap, 56.

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