

Donald Trump and the Banality of Evil

With apologies to Hannah Arendt, I think we can agree that Donald Trump has come to represent the most concentrated form of toxic waste produced by a part of our culture that no longer finds any value in the written word. Even after receiving the most advanced medical treatment for a virus that has killed more than 200,000 of our citizens, Trump openly discounted the "[let's-read-a-book school](#)" that made his special course of treatment possible in favor of what he could learn by "doing."



On the surface, it looks like simple egotism and open contempt for his intellectual superiors. The special sort of hostility reserved for those who actually earned their place in this world through hard work and reference to the collected wisdom captured on the page. Trump does not read, and certainly doesn't write in any form longer than a standard tweet, and even those do not form anything more coherent than a smoke signal sent in the midst of a raging forest fire.

Famously, Trump will not read any of his intelligence briefings. Not even the PowerPoint versions that his beleaguered staff tried to deliver before they lost all hope and retreated to the confines of their posh cubicles, if they were allowed to return. It's not a preference, and it's not a learning disability: he *can* read, sort of, when he works up the gumption and allows himself to put on the reading glasses. He was never obligated to study anything at depth: his father purchased his diplomas, such as they are, and his inherited wealth has protected him from the consequences of his ignorance. That won't help us, of course, and his sociopathic tendencies won't lead us out of our current mess. We're on our own, and the sooner we stop expecting Trump to accomplish anything on our behalf, the sooner we can start the long haul back to freedom and a better world for the generations that will follow.

How did we get here?

Donald Trump owes his notoriety, and his current status, to the television set. For a medium that is less than a hundred years old, it has certainly taken over a significant chunk of the human attention span. Far fewer people were interested in the Internet until it started transmitting video content, and became a less efficient form of the older technic that still rules our collective roost. He may have started in the pages of the gossip rags, but Trump moved on to Robin Leach and *The Apprentice* as fast as he could. Other people wrote all of the content, and the cue cards were plenty big. He quickly proved that it's not really acting if all you have to do is mug for the camera and play a more successful version of yourself.

Note: The character we saw on *The Apprentice* did not have to concern himself with serial bankruptcies and charges of tax fraud; his current lawyers, however, probably should start worrying about their *next* source of billable hours.

Why is television important in this discussion? Because it, along with bits and pieces of content posted on the Internet, has become the sole source of information for an increasing share of our population. In a statistical pairing, it's probably somewhere around 40% of our voting population – about the same size as **Trump's current base**. Again, it's not that they *can't* read – they just don't *need* to read anything in order to do their job or get through their day.

Trump, by his example, gives everyone in his party permission to skip the homework and just *fake it*. Barack Obama, in sharp contrast, challenged everyone to climb up to an intellectual level that few are comfortable in. Hyper-literate, the former editor of the *Harvard Law Review* attained his position through a lot of hard work and a bit of luck. To an outsider, it appears that we were reacting to the hard lesson of putting GW Bush in office for two very long terms, and almost losing the entire world economy and our honor by waging a couple of unnecessary wars. We could trust Obama to find and champion the best answers to our problems, which is the core mission of the Executive branch of our government. Trump, elevated to the office against all odds, likes to “trust his gut” and follow his instincts, good *and* bad, while trying to sort out what the job entails and executing the office without recourse to anything captured in the written code. *This cannot end well.*

Nearly half of our voting public cast their lot with the Trump candidacy. We know where we are, and how the *zeitgeist* took control of the steering wheel. The specific details, the signal *and* the noise, all tend to obscure the bigger picture. At least half of the voting public, like Trump, do not read or rely on the written word in any significant way. We now live in an age defined by the rise of “*secondary orality*” as the default state for more and more people in our culture. This term, coined by Walter Ong, describes how people who do not actively use the written word can rely on the technical foundation it creates to broadcast, communicate, and collect whatever information they need to get along.

In *Literacy and Orality*, Ong describes a distant human past undisturbed by the invention of a written language, when people existed in a state of “*primary orality*.” Human language, naturally, first emerged in the oral or verbal form, and had a long and rich history before the ancient scribes ruined everything with their alphabetic codes and their ink wells. Literary forms capture (and sometimes kill) ideas for all to consider, at any time. This has shaped how we use language and how we think in ways large and small. Ong’s work defines a continuum, and we can use it to place ourselves on a scale of “*residual orality*” defined by how much we let the written language structure and shape our lives.

There are traits common to oral and literate modes, and for those who dwell not in a culture of pure orality, but in the *secondary orality* we are creating with each new technical advance. It’s early in the game, but we often find the structure created by secondary orality resembles, but is not identical, to the strong bones created in the era of primary orality. Recent news suggests that we may be closer to the ancient Romans than any of us would like to admit.

Key differences between orality and literacy defined by Ong include the topics listed below. All examples are from a transcript of a Rally conducted in [Carson City, Nevada on October 18, 2020](#). Any address from Trump offers a wealth of examples to choose from.

Additive rather than subordinative

It’s a lot easier to compile thoughts in a stacked manner than it is to nest ideas using different orders of abstraction. When addressing crowds, and the camera, Trump strings together slogans that present a set of ideas, or labels for ideas, in flash card format. The slogans form a catechism of sorts, in his cult of personality. There is no scaffold, and no architecture, just a pile of thoughts presented in sequence.

In a recent rally in Carson City, Nevada, Trump offered the following:

“They lecture you on the need for open borders while they live behind gated communities like Nancy Pelosi. She doesn't want a wall, but she lives in this very beautiful house with lots of good ice cream. They support crippling lockdowns while their jobs remain totally exempt. They keep your kids out of school while their kids and their families have private tutors, right? They want to take away your guns. They want to destroy the Second Amendment while they employ armed guards, and it's time that we sent them a very strong message because they're hypocrites in Washington, D.C. and in Silicon Valley -- and Silicon Valley, Section 230. On Election Day, not everybody understands that, but we have some great politicians here today that understand it.”

One could invest a lot of time and energy attempting to identify a coherent argument in this “word-salad,” but you’re not supposed to. Just accept that all of this fits together somehow (it doesn’t).

Aggregative rather than analytic

Oral cultures favors combining ideas in related or opposing forms to aid in memorization; the written form leads people to dismantle and investigate ideas at much deeper levels. Ong uses the political denunciations we all know (enemy of the people, capitalist war monger) as an example of the residual orality that left us the legacy of the rosy-fingered dawn and the brave soldier.

Again, from Carson City, Nevada, an example of Trump’s gilded speech:

“While I am President, no one will touch your Medicare or your Social Security, including me, no one. Under my leadership, we are delivering a safe vaccine and very rapid recovery and we're all set to deliver it. We have the military ready to deliver it. It's going to be incredible. We have a General, that's what he does. He delivers soldiers and delivers everything. This is easy for them. It'll be delivered very, very rapidly. Joe Biden would terminate our recovery, delay the vaccine, and annihilate Nevada's economy with a draconian, unscientific lockdown because, you know, they're finding out these lockdowns aren't working.”

It’s either a great job or a total disaster. The promise of a swift military solution, or a slow fall into the hellfire of socialism. None of the underlying issues are identified, let alone examined in any meaningful way. Lots of band-aids promised for a lot of broken legs.

Redundant or ‘copious’

Tell them what you’re going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you’ve told them. Oral thought has to work a lot harder to plant an idea in an audience, all at once, than a book has to because we can re-read, pause, and resume our interaction with a text at any time, and at any speed. Complex ideas are best examined with the aid of the written form, and sometimes better sold in the oral format. When a political party refuses to release anything in the written form of a platform or set of policy statements, we may infer they don’t want anyone to examine their intentions very closely.

Trump, while basking in the Carson City sun, feels it in this extra verbose passage:

“They want to attack religious liberty, drive God from the public square, and destroy your suburbs. I say that to the women because I keep hearing, they said the women from the suburbs. No, I think the women from the suburbs are looking for a couple of things. One of them is safety, one of them is good, strong security, and one of them is they don't want to have low-income housing built next to their house. And you know who makes up 30% of your suburbs? Minorities, African Americans, right? Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, minorities, OK. People think you're -- is it racist? It's not racist, it's the opposite. I've had them come to me, I had people come to me, and say thank you so much, but they keep talking about the women from the suburbs. I say I think we're going to have a big resounding. What the hell happened with women to the suburbs? They really like Trump a lot you know. Only vote for me if you're a woman from the suburbs. And you know, I shouldn't say this because they'll bring it up, but one time early on, you know I haven't been doing this long, right? You know, I haven't been doing -- I have guys that have been running. Sir, I've been running for 40 years. I said, well, I've only run for two years, but I became President, you didn't. But you know, but you know it's sort of interesting because I really think that women from the suburbs are going to like Trump because I think it's going to be one of the big -- because it is, it is about safety, it is about safety. And when you see what happens in our cities where they run and ransack and they -- they're anarchists. And you know what, they say the suburbs and the -- they actually say, the suburbs are next. And just so you know, just so you know, so important, these are Democrat-run states and cities. Republicans are doing great and we're not going to let this happen and we'll stop it.”

He's working very hard in that extra large bowl of word salad to plant an idea that does not map to any specific territory, much less to a set of policies or a platform. The dear leader will keep the anarchists and those low income threats at bay – just trust him. Apparently, gentrification does not come for thee, so long as the good Lord remains in the public square.

Conservative or traditionalist

Without a fossil record, it's a lot harder to retain what we have learned. Oral cultures invest a lot more effort to avoid losing what has been learned, and cannot afford to explore a lot of new ideas all at once. They have to be a lot more selective about any new weight they will agree to carry in their heads. The written code allows for more exploration at a lesser cost: it's a lot easier to stop printing a book than it is to get a community to forget something they have taken the trouble to commit to memory.

Trump, still basking in the Carson City sun, borrows from the traveling preacher:

“Under the Biden lockdown, the lights of Reno and Las Vegas were extinguished, Carson City will become a ghost town. If he comes in, Carson City will become a ghost town and the Christmas season will be canceled. Look, remember, I said we're going to bring back Christmas? The name, remember, we brought it back, remember? I used to go around saying we will bring because I saw these big department stores. You know they thought it was politically correct, so they say have a great season. I said I don't want to have a great season. I want to say Merry Christmas, say Merry Christmas. Now they're all saying Merry Christmas again.”

Tense issues aside, he may yet find a purpose for those [red trees](#) Melania pitched for the holiday.

Close to the human lifeworld

Objective reality does not organize itself around the human creature, no matter how much we might want it to. To make sense of it all, and continue to function when confronted by all that we encounter, those who live and work in an oral culture find ways to relate any new information to *their* interactions with the world. In contrast, literate cultures may describe things on their own terms, and do not have to find a way to integrate every idea with the ongoing story of a human life. Ong offers the example of a do-it-yourself manual: literate cultures create and refer to them, while those in an oral culture must apprentice with a master in order to learn by example.

Trump, thought he might roll the dice with that sketchy story from the ~~Russians~~ NY Post:

“But the biggest of them all is Joe. He's corrupt and they found the laptop. Do you know what they call that? The laptop from hell. That is a laptop -- that's a laptop from hell. Let's see what happens with it, let's see what happens with it. So a giant trove of emails show Hunter Biden making deals, setting up meetings with his father, Joe, and using the office of the Vice President for a for-profit cash machine. That's what it is. This guy's a vacuum cleaner. He follows his father around and takes millions, hundreds of millions, and billions of dollars out of these countries. I mean that is so dishonest, that's so crooked. He is, no, I call him the human vacuum cleaner, right? Do you know those things on television? He's better than anyone of them. Joe Biden said he knew nothing, but he lied because they have -- this, I'm telling you this laptop is a disaster. The fake news and big tech don't want to write about it, though. They don't want anything to do with it and they punish and thank you to the New York Post.”

There is, of course, no evidence that the Biden family somehow managed to capitalize the Office of the Vice President to rake in millions, or billions of dollars. The New York Post, however, like Trump himself, has found a way to *lose* millions of dollars every year since 1976, when Murdoch bought it. It's one of those places where capital goes to die, in a shredder that has pretty dull blades. (Right, Mr. Bannon?)

Agonistically toned

Oral cultures simply cannot abstract as well as literate cultures. The written language offers a set of tools for investigating ideas that no verbal form of speech can hope to match. Text can handle a lot of shades of grey, while it is easier to remember ideas that are cast in opposition to each other if you rely on the spoken word. Marx liked to use Freedom and Slavery as a core antagonistic pair in his theories, which first took root in the written word, but easily crossed into the oral world to drive social change.

Trump, on occasion, also likes to construct an invidious hierarchy as if he's promoting a fight:

“You see that happening. This election is a choice between a Trump super recovery, which we're in right now, or a Biden depression. You will have a depression. First of all, your taxes are going to be quadrupled. You will have a depression, the likes of which we have not seen since 1929. That's what's going to happen and I'm very good at those things. You will have one of the great depressions of all time. Your taxes are going to go up. Your regulations are going to go up. Everybody's going to be leaving our

country. All those jobs and companies that I brought in, they're all going back to where they came from. All he wants to do is raise it. Even on the companies, who wants to raise it for the companies?"

The Trump "super recovery" or the secular version of end times. He doesn't identify which companies brought all of those jobs in to help build the greatest economy ever, and that's because they are pretty much a ghost army of his own invention, bringing their inflatable tanks to scare the recession away.

Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced

Every act of communication requires some form of translation, of sending and receiving signals and assembling the message (the content or *semantic*) in an oral or written medium (the channel or *syntax*). In general, the written form allows for a much cooler separation between the sender and receiver of the message in both space and time, while the verbal format necessarily involves a warmer bond between participants in the same place and time, and each partner must confront the non-verbal context as well. You cannot speak very effectively with a fist, and you cannot do it alone. People in oral cultures either learn to sympathize with, and reflect each partner's human experience, or they may find themselves silenced and alone.

Trump struggles with empathy, but he will allow a few of the right sort of people into the tent:

"Here it is, it's me, I'm all you have between your Second Amendment and chaos and all the problems. It's me, I'm all you have and the Republicans. I love the Republicans and we have some great group, but they have to learn to stick together better. You know we have some stupid people. Some of them are gone, Flake, Corker, they're gone, but now we have this guy Sasse. You know he wants to make a statement. Little Ben, little Ben Sasse. The Republicans have to stick together better. You don't see that. Well, one thing I respect about the Democrats, they stick together. You know what, they have lousy policy, they want open borders, they want sanctuary cities, they want a lot -- they want to raise your tax -- they want to quadruple your taxes, but the one thing is, they stick together. The Republicans have to learn. They've got to stick together. I don't know, and by the way, it's been that way for decades. I don't know what the hell is in the blood."

A sort of loose gang affiliation is the closest thing to a community that Trump seems to understand. Sticking together at any cost is, of course, a prime directive of any criminal enterprise. Given the strife in the left side of the aisle these days, it's hard to see what Trump admires about their alliance. Perhaps it's their ability to disagree with each other without exploding.

Homeostatic

People in oral cultures are not constrained by the historical record. Any word used in conversation is granted its meaning in the context of the present moment, and any inconvenient associations from the past drop away to meet the exigent need. This willingness to abandon or ignore the past in order to meet the present need offers a useful example of what Antonio Damasio refers to as the *homeostatic impulse*. In *The Strange Order of Things*, Damasio notes how the human animal, as with most other organic life, seeks to optimize its environment and will use every sense and capability to achieve that

state – including language. When the past becomes uncomfortable, or threatens to disrupt an emotional and physical state, we simply abolish it to improve the odds of survival. This orientation reaches its zenith in the form of political triumphalism. Those in oral cultures are far more likely to indulge a smug or boastful pride in the success or dominance of one's nation or ideology over others – it's a cheap and easy way to flood a crowd with a positive feedback that is usually not earned, or real.

Survival and balance are always right around the corner for Trump's true believers:

“When you vote for me, prosperity will surge, your taxes will be cut even further. You know gave you the biggest tax cut in the history of our country. The pandemic is rounding the turn. It's rounding and we have the vaccines coming and they go crazy the fake news, but I will tell you. It's rounding the turn with or without, it's rounding the turn, you'll see that. Normal life, that's all we want. We want normal life, right? Because we want to be where we were seven months ago, right? We'll fully resume the Nevada tourism and hospitality industry, which is fantastic. We'll come roaring back and it will, and next year will be the greatest economic year in the history of our country for everybody.”

For Trump, homeostasis or the “normal life” requires the full resumption of the tourism and hospitality industry. Nearly *all* of his intact businesses interests are based on it. Residual payments for the honor of placing his name on hotels and golf courses can dry up when people won't travel on airplanes and lie about that shot they made on the back nine.

Situational rather than abstract

Those in oral cultures prefer to work in specific, immediate or *situational* contexts when processing language. Literary societies are also operational, but far more likely to work in complex abstractions. Piaget's stage theory of development describes how individuals progress from the concrete to “formal” operations as they gain the ability to abstract in adolescence. Cultures mirror this progression, or lack thereof, when a people choose to avoid the written word. The practical frame also limits the ability to deduce, or exercise formal logic as a strategy for survival. Only the immediate case remains.

In a game of hide the weasel, Trump tries to illustrate the true cost of water conservation laws:

“So they do it. So they come up with its one regulation for all over the country. So you go into a hotel or you buy a house and they have what's called a restrictor. Look at them, they're all the same thing, by the way, same thing with your dishwasher. I freed that up, too. The dishwashers, they had a little problem, they didn't give enough water like so people would run them 10 times, so they end up using more water, and the thing is no damn good. We freed it up now you can buy a dishwasher and it comes out and beautiful, go buy a dishwasher, go buy it. Those companies -- I said what's wrong with this thing, it doesn't clean the dishes, right? The women come up to me. The women who they say don't like me, they actually do like me a lot, OK. Suburban women, please vote for me ... But anyway, getting back to my very boring story about faucets and dishwashers. So I said to the head, I called up, great dishwasher company from Ohio that we saved, by the way. I said, what's the problem with the dishwasher? Well, they don't give us any water. I mean you know, it'd be nice to be able to get enough water. What's the problem? We need more water, not that much, but you -- I said how much do you need? This - would you

like more? Will you give us, will you? I'd give you more. You have so much water, you don't know what to do with it, right? Right so we gave them what they need and now the dishwashers are incredible, they worked beautifully. And you get one time and you come back and your dishes are nice and beautiful and clean and dry. You don't have to go 10 times. The same thing with the restrictions in the faucet. So I hate to say the three things: it's the shower, it's the sink, and you know, the third element in the bathroom."

The difficult trade-offs, the shades of grey, the multiple points of view are passed over in favor of the utilitarian and the personal. Now, Freud would have had a field day with that unnamed "third element" he sometimes likes to reference, and we shouldn't be surprised that his line of reasoning led him there. Ever the con artist, he knows when to use that smell.

While it is easy to sit back and poke fun at the revival preacher, the used car salesman, and the other heirs to PT Barnum's throne, we can't allow the lowest common denominator of thought to make all the key decisions. Call it an inherent flaw in the democratic model, or an irredeemable weakness of the human creature, but our survival does depend on the written word. Mike Judge, with his film [Idiocracy](#), has given us at least one vision of what our future might look like if we rely on television and the other tools of secondary orality to drive our culture. While he does not think of himself as a prophet, the man who gave us *Beavis and Butthead* and *Office Space* knows how easily, and how far, we may fall. In our current wrestling match with the heir to President Camacho, we must recognize that we are all but pinned to the mat, and the written word may be the only lever we can use to rise above our basest instincts.

— Steven Peterson, 2020

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