

Freshman English  
Mr. Rigler

A Tale of Two Cities  
Opening thoughts - “The Period”

These days the question of what it means to be a “true” American resists rational analysis. Whatever one can say about Americans that is true, the opposite is equally true. We are the most godless and most religious, the most puritanical and most libertine, the most charitable and most heartless of societies. We espouse the maxim “that government is best which governs least,” yet look to government to address our every problem. Our environmental conscientiousness is outmatched only by our environmental recklessness. We are outlaws obsessed by the rule of law, individualists devoted to communitarian values, a nation of fat people with anorexic standards of beauty. The only things we love more than nature’s wilderness are our cars, malls, and digital technology. The paradoxes of the American psyche go back at least as far as our Declaration of Independence, in which slave owners proclaimed that all men are endowed by their creator with an unalienable right to liberty. (Harrison, NYRB 8-17-2017)

Paradox #1: More information, less credibility

The volume of data is exploding, and yet credible information is harder to find. The scale of this information universe is staggering. In 2010, Eric Schmidt, the chairman of Google’s parent company Alphabet, noted that every two days, we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up to 2003. Information is everywhere, but good information is not. ... anyone—from foreign adversaries to any crackpot with a conspiracy theory—can post original “research” online. And they do. Telling the difference between fact and fiction isn’t so easy.

Paradox #2 - More connectivity, less civility

Today more than half of the world is online [with much higher percentages in most developed countries]. Connectivity has created tremendous positive changes, including new markets in developing nations and new bonds among kindred spirits across vast distances. But connectivity has also made nasty discourse more convenient and socially acceptable.

Paradox #3: The wisdom of crowds, the duplicity of crowds

Technology has unleashed the wisdom of crowds. Now you can find an app harnessing the experiences and ratings of like-minded users for just about anything. But ... not all crowds are wise, or even real. The wisdom of crowds can be transformed into the duplicity of crowds. Deception is going viral. On social media, one person can masquerade as hundreds, even thousands, with fake personas. Thanks to advances in artificial intelligence, it’s also possible to create armies of automated social media bots to develop, manipulate, and spread deceptive information at speeds and scales unimaginable before now. (Zegart, *The Atlantic* 8-5-2017)