

## Building a Heuristic for a Demagogic Analysis of Campaign Materials

A list.

- Identity [the identity they are trying to craft, the identity to which they are trying to adhere]
  - In-Group vs. Out-Group.
    - Respect for other positions, opinions vs. Scapegoating
  - Looking at visuals. What kind of *ethos* is the person looking to build?
  - Does a candidate acknowledge when they were wrong and why they changed their mind?
  - Is their presentation of identity credible? Is it truthful? How fictitious does their persona feel?
    - Can we know who they are? Can we identify why we feel skeptical?
    - Can we identify why this person is a politician?
- Logic, Evidence, Argument
  - What evidence do they supply for their claims? Policies? Arguments?
  - Can you identify enthymemes (enthymematic arguments)?
- Policy:
  - What specific policies do they propose? What are they going to do?
  - How do they justify the existence of a problem? (Evidence for a problem, what Miller calls causality)?
    - Is the problem simply the existence of an out-group (they believe, so we need to...)
  - How does the candidate frame/discuss democratic process? (People's voices, input, compromise?)
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- Problems:
  - Simplicity vs. Complexity? Simple binary opposition? Are they doing a problem justice?
- Violence? How does violence get framed? Who does violence? Do they frame other politicians as violent?
- Accountability
  - How do they engage with critique of their positions?
  - How do they react to challenges to their positions?
  - How do they justify, or supply evidence to their positions?
  - How do they apologize for missteps or mistakes? Transgressions?
- **How, in the crafting of this analysis, can you/we practice self-skepticism?**
  - **How can you weave in your own preconceptions and put them under scrutiny?**

[What we are doing is different than a typical rhetorical analysis.](#) But some of those typical prompts/topoi might be useful.

Need

- III (What is the problem?)

- Narrative of Causality (What is causing the problem?)
- Inherency (How the cause is ongoing, why it is not going to solve itself)

*Plan*

- Solvency (How to solve the problem?)
- Feasibility (How easy/hard is it to implement the solution?)
- Unintended Consequences (What do we know we don't know? What might happen?) [this is an expansion of the stases that Miller lays out on pages 18 and 19 of *D&D*]

## Miller Demagoguery

### We Must Be Response-able

Luna writes:

She is intent on noting that an easy definition - such as that of rhetoric that appeals heavily to emotion and seeks to secure only personal gain - is incredibly dangerous, as it lulls even a normally critical populace into complacency in the presence of any more complex demagogic practice.

I respond:

Yes, absolutely. I think too that she is skeptical of the idea that the origins of demagoguery lie in a master-speaker. Rather, we have to recognize that responsibility for demagoguery lies in **us** (not other stupid people, not nefarious leaders).

Ellie writes:

I was thinking about how *I* would not fall victim to this – how can people blindly follow someone constantly spewing hate – but demagoguery exists even in smaller portions (I am not immune to propaganda).

I respond:

I think an important first step is realizing, like you say, that none of us are immune to propaganda. We have to interrogate our own sources of information, and ask if we are entering into discussions with an open mind.

Emphasis: demagoguery is a way *we respond* to arguments and others.

Good paragraph. I would stress that--especially for Burke and Miller--demagoguery starts in *\*us,\** not necessarily in a dangerous speaker. Certainly evil speakers can use manipulative rhetoric to prey on our worst fears and rational shortcomings. But we have to learn to be what Miller calls "self-skeptical," to be more attentive to our own thinking.

## Hitler

I don't think Burke characterizes Hitler "as a smart man who made excellent decisions." Rather, I think he wants to show the inconsistency and idiocy of Hitler's ideas. He gives Hitler credit for developing a rhetorical approach that tricked the German people into endorsing those ideas. Burke identifies strategies, particularly the idea of the "scapegoat" that highlights the dangers of malicious rhetoric. In doing so, he tells us what we need to know to avoid falling for those same traps. That Hitler was an idiot tells us you don't have to be some mad, rhetorical genius to "dupe" the people into endorsing evil...

As you point out in your conclusion, we currently live in a very divided country. We need, more than ever, to be aware of how bad actors can use the promise of "ending difference" to prey on our worst instincts.

## **Social Media**

Lauren writes:

Now, powerful people can use harmful rhetoric and persuasion and reach an even larger audience through social media. The news can be manipulated as she stated above by bombarding the news cycle to prevent news from happening by distracting people.

Ezra writes:

I think social media has only expanded this rift between the us and them concept. The algorithm gives you a feed of the things that you enjoy and believe in, and will cut out things that challenge that or show a different perspective. If you see something you don't like, instead of trying to understand why a person might see things that way, ignoring it, or scrolling past, various social media platforms have provided an "I Don't Like This" button that allows a reader to remove that content completely from their feed and let the algorithm know not to show more posts like that. This has allowed people to become more and more extreme without being challenged by others and instead allows them to indoctrinate or demonize people on the internet.

Worth a look: [Red Feed. Blue Feed.](#)

I'll talk about this more tomorrow. My dissertation (written 2006-2008) argued that, because the Internet would force us to encounter more difference--different races, religions, sexual orientations, political ideologies, etc--we would need to provide people with a deeper ethical orientation toward others. My hypothesis was that we would have to learn to share the world and work together (and I looked at Wikipedia as a representative site for this). That isn't what happened, because we have learned to use digital tools to feed us more of the same. Even more of the same than we had in the era of 3 television channels all telling us the same thing. We have a notion of reality that never causes us to question or doubt ourselves, only others.

## **Interlocutors Shouldn't Be Enemies**

Marguerite writes:

*Aside: Miller also brings up identity politics, she says that one of the effects of the centralization of identity politics is that "losing a political argument now has much higher stakes... (it's about) whether you are a good person." (pg 12)*

I just wanted to circle back to this to emphasize how this changes negotiation to combat. You cannot compromise with evil the way you can with difference. Not all difference should be thought of as evil.

But this requires we use stasis theory—or something like it—to determine what kind of conversation we are having, and whether that conversation involves someone’s right to exist (to pursue life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness).

So, yes, our personal encounters are more heated because we are not a common identity arguing ideas. We are competing identities (recall Jim Corder: narratives) coming into conflict. And we are often the villains in each others' stories.

### **Good Demagogue?**

Ellie writes:

I am trying to think of what a “good” demagogue could be. Someone who can use rhetoric in a way that is not putting down the “other.” I believe this seems impossible to me due to the way that we are taught argumentative writing. While students are not specifically told to put down the “other” (the “other” being the opposite argument, a source, etc.), they are encouraged to dismiss the counterclaim. By this I mean that we tell students to address the other side but explain why that other side is wrong (or if they are right, why your argument is better). This way of thinking is negative. It teaches students that they should be looking for sources/people that defend their argument as opposed to researching or approaching something relatively objectively (as objectively as one can be when approaching a topic).

I’ve struggled a bit with this one too. I suppose that I would have to turn back to the reading, and I don’t have time to do that. I wonder if the idea is that a “good demagogue” plays into developing a fictitious collective identity, pitted against an opponent, in order to persuade us into making “good” decisions. This sounds A LOT like the Weak Defense of rhetoric—using manipulative rhetoric, but its okay because good people are doing it for a good cause (Luna—didn’t you also write something like this?).

[But also—critique has run out of steam](#). See Latour, bottom of 228-9. [See Uncrossing God](#).

### **Germany vs. Florida**

Fionna:

It’s important to understand how events such as Hitler’s rise and the holocaust happen because that information is what keeps us from making those same decisions. Germany is aware of this, too. Every child in Germany is required to go to at least one concentration camp during their school years, and they are extensively taught how those events happened as well as why they were wrong.

Abigail:

I noticed connections to Mercieca’s writing in the topics that have been discussed in my Digital Humanities course this week. Our readings have dealt with the way white supremacy and racism show up in the digital world, and one of the ways that happens is through the control of what information is given the most attention and power.

[The importance of acknowledging, teaching, our mistakes.](#)

I would say that the Internet did much to change this--minorities often excluded from mainstream media have found far more voice in our contemporary landscape. I don't think Black Lives Matter could have happened in 1985.

But it has also created a lot of push-back, certainly. There is desire to silence those voices.

### **A Thought about Trump**

A few of you wrote about Trump, January 6th, and/or Mercia's concept of accountability. Here's one response I wrote:

You offer a nice summary of Miller in that last paragraph. I, too, have long disagreed with conservative values. But for years and years, I got great comments and course evaluations from conservative students. They would often be the first to follow me on social media. I think this was because I was willing to engage and discuss policy with them. And I was pretty good at doing so in an open way (those of you who read Corder should understand what I mean by that).

I think that is happening less and less. First, our world is more politically divided. Second, I have a hard time "openly" arguing topics that surround someone else's right to exist. I can debate tax law. I can debate unemployment and social security. I can debate climate change and policy. I can debate 2nd amendment law. I can even debate abortion law, though this one gets really tricky.

I cannot debate whether LGBTQ+ people have a right to exist, a right to make their own choices, agency over their lives and bodies. I cannot debate over whether structural racism is a "real" problem.

And I have a real hard time extending grace to interlocutors that can support a president who just LIES. ALL. THE. TIME. And who refuses to hold himself accountable for anything. And who's followers refuse to hold him accountable for anything: tax evasion, racial discrimination, sexual assault, or treason. And who will, without missing a beat, deploy cunning projection to argue that democrats are more guilty of all of those crimes.

If I have an optimism, it is for a world after Trump, a world that might return to some semblance of normal--which I see as policy deliberation and compromise.

Olivia writes:

Sharing your own beliefs with someone directly opposed to them is unlikely to change anything, not even when shared in a calm and thoughtful manner. However, most of the time it seems like political parties are just arguing over each other so that the other can't be heard. In a lot of televised debates I've seen candidates interrupting each other and speaking over one another just so their ideals and beliefs are what is heard, so they are drowning out the words of someone who does not agree with them.

Imagine a world in which we share ideas in order to find common ground, a path forward, a way of making small changes, a way of at least understanding someone else's worries or needs. A world in which we aren't just shouting at each other, but are working to ... listen. Imagine how,

or if, authentic listening might itself create a *pathetic* appeal to another person. Showing interest and care itself, as an action, an “argument” for working together.

Of course, we would have to do so without any assurance (dare I say expectation?) that such behavior would not be reciprocated. That our facts would be dismissed and theirs would remain unquestioned. Such is the risk of ethical, non-rational, argument, such risks might be the only way of climbing out of our demagogic echo chambers.

### **Christianity and Leviticus**

I grew up Christian, though I no longer practice. There are a lot of times where Christianity is used as an excuse for homophobia, proving that this system is still a problem today.

Same. And, on the bible and homosexuality: [first, scholars are quite uncertain](#). The only place in the bible that clearly, explicitly rejects [homosexuality is Leviticus](#). And, um, it has its own problems.