American Political Science Review (2023) 117, 1, 153–167
doi:10.1017/S0003055422000508

"This Hearing Should Be Flipped": Democratic Spectatorship, Social Media, and the Problem of Demagogic Candor

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How concerning should it be that most citizens encounter political life chiefly as audiences? Facing this fact, democratic theorists increasingly respond by reconceptualizing "the spectator" as an empowered agent. Yet this response risks overlooking how evolving forms of media reconstitute audiences in ways that undermine efforts to ascribe agency to any given spectating activity. To illustrate this problem, I consider Jeffrey Green's idealization of candor*, which holds spectators to be empowered when leaders are denied scripted appearances. In contrast, I show that social media occasion a case of* irreverent *candor wherein spectators claim authenticity by derailing online conversations, thereby valorizing a kind of unscriptedness that perpetuates outgroup marginalization and facilitates demagogy. Paradoxically, such candor disempowers spectators while rendering them more "active" agents. I thus argue that empowerment requires audiences to interrogate their own spectating practices—a possibility I locate in Hannah Arendt's thought and interactions surrounding Black Lives Matter protests.*

In a 2019 appearance before the House Judiciary Committee, former *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart delivers an impassioned plea for Congressional renewal of the September 11 Victim Compensation Fund. Although Stewart's speech seeks to lend support for specific legislative action, the bulk of it raises a broader criticism of the conditions of his testimony. "Behind me," Stewart begins, "a filled room of 9/11 first responders. And in front of me: a nearly empty Congress." From the perspective of citizens seeking change, Stewart suggests, Congress appears as a particularly fickle sort of agent: at once able to draw media attention yet often absent when it comes to public demands to rectify injustice, Members of Congress engage in legislative action in ways that are largely untethered from the interactions by means of which constituents seek to hold them accountable. Or, as Stewart puts it, "there is not an empty chair on that stage that didn't Tweet out, 'Never forget' the heroes of 9/11…. Well here they are! And where are they?" Thus, Stewart's call for action sets the stage for his articulation of a critical inversion in the relationship between the vocal public and the inattentive Congress: "*This hearing should be flipped*: These men and women should be up on that stage and Congress should be down here answering their questions as to why this is so damn hard and takes so damn long; and why, no matter what they get, something's always pulled back" (Stewart 2019).[1]

Stewart's plea exemplifies a sense of anxiety over a distinction that seems increasingly cemented in political life: between those who appear as individuated, visible, and institutionally situated *actors* and all others, whose participation in politics is restricted chiefly to *spectatorship*. Despite its deliberative façade, the hearing offers a stark reminder of this distinction. When those who are normally marginalized from the legislative process appear in Congress and advance demands, their ability to engage those in power nonetheless feels invariably canned: the empty chairs suggest that state officials alone determine which speech does and does not matter, save for the exceptional celebrity appearance. If members of Congress can adopt a listening posture only to predetermine what is genuinely seen and heard, aggrieved citizens remain nothing but spectators speaking out of turn. In short, the extent to which empowered agents can wield the spectator/actor distinction to their advantage suggests a foundational challenge for meaningful interactions between citizens and the state—one that should be of concern especially to democratic theorists who are devoted to conceptualizing popular agency.

Yet Stewart's testimony portends a deeper concern than Congress's inattention. His allusion to politicians' hollow tweets forewarns that new forms of communication also obscure how the above distinction is reified, with social media's seeming immediacy granting empowered agents new ways to marginalize spectators. Stewart, of course, is not alone in this worry. The last decade has seen growing alarm over the *transformation* of spectating by social media. As Zadie Smith (2010) puts it, "[Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg] uses the word 'connect' as believers use the word 'Jesus,' as if it were sacred in and of itself…. The quality of that connection, the quality of the information that passes through it, the quality of the relationship that connection permits—none of this is important." Cass Sunstein (2017, 59) likewise fears that social media "dramatically [increase] people's ability to hear echoes of their own voices and wall themselves off from others" by edging out deliberative fora in favor of spaces designed for consumers. These concerns point to a sense of disempowerment linked to the refashioning of "passive" spectators into ostensibly active content creators. Indeed, just as Stewart notes that a vocalization of demands alone may not

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Received: June 07, 2021; revised: December 15, 2021; accepted: April 11, 2022. First published online: May 17, 2022.

[1] Italics mine.

amount to meaningful agency, recent criticisms of social media suggest this problem extends beyond formal political institutions. Aside from the usual concern that spectators merely watch actors, the above worries illuminate a host of emergent activities granted to spectators—"liking" content, sharing it, or modifying it—that seem to leave the latter ensnared in illusions of active participation only to be further distanced from the possibility of collective action.

This essay investigates the counterintuitive notion that popular audiences can come to be increasingly disempowered in spite of their increasing possibilities for action and argues for a revised conception of democratic agency in light of this problem. Recent political theory has seen growing interest in the place of spectatorship in democratic life (see Chambers 2009; Dobson 2014; Rosanvallon 2008; Saward 2010), a trend best exemplified by Jeffrey Green's (2010, 4) observation that the people's condition as "a semipermanent spectating class" defines "democratic life at the dawn of the twenty-first century." In turn, Green proposes that the people be seen as empowered to the extent that the "leaders" they encounter are *not* in control of "the conditions of their publicity" (13–14). That is, the people's general confinement to spectating yields an "ocular" ideal of legitimacy: *candor*, or the demand that leaders be denied scripts and stage management. The need to derive a conception of empowerment *unique* to mass spectatorship corresponds to this essay's prefatory concern that the people find themselves marginalized even when given the chance to voice demands. However, this effort must contend with Michael Saward's (2010, 27) observation that "audiences are just as often invoked and brought into self-conscious being as *part of the process* of representative politics." The broader "constructivist turn" in political representation rejects what Lisa Disch calls the "foundationalist fantasy" that leaders simply "respond" to preexisting preferences and identities held by fixed constituencies (2021, 35). Saward's observation should thus raise the concern that a pregiven standard of candor posited as spectator "control" may likewise reflect such a "fantasy" insofar as makers of representative claims invariably position agents to see themselves *as* particular audiences to begin with.

What, then, should democratic theorists make of the intuitive appeal of candor? Is it not the case that canned interactions leave audiences less in control of what they see? And if so, is it not the case that the demand for candid leadership ought to be seen as a "norm" (Green 2010, 25) by all spectators? This essay places the ideal of candor into conversation with the constructivist turn and the recent "rhetoric revival" in political theory (see Garsten 2011) to argue against these intuitions and, in turn, to conceptualize the normalization of candor as a unique problem for popular empowerment. The next two sections revisit Green's case. His model has faced criticism for its singular focus on the people's *eyes*, which Andrew Dobson (2014) aptly worries makes for an inordinately passive account of spectatorship. Yet this criticism overlooks a deeper problem with the logic of candor itself, irrespective of its sensory locus—namely, its ability to obscure *how* spectating comes to be conjoined with action. On my account, candor's appeal rests on a vital albeit neglected assumption that spectators *identify* with interlocutors who speak back against canned interactions. Therefore, repudiations of scriptedness can themselves become a means by which leaders attempt to position audiences to recognize particular interactions as candid. Absent an interrogation of the social contexts shaping such identification, I hold that candor remains ensnared in the rhetorical dynamics of *sincerity*, or the means by which speakers instrumentalize communicative norms to appear authentic. What is more, tracing these dynamics is crucial for understanding demagogic leadership: unlike other actors, demagogues stake their claims to speak *for* the people on their continual rejections of existing scripts, thereby conflating their audience's ocular "control" with their own performances of candor.

This danger is especially evident in emergent social media practices. Surveying this context, this essay's subsequent section argues that its interactions situate users to interpret manifestations of *irreverent* candor as outsized markers of legitimacy. Specifically, I trace how meme-driven repudiations of scripts tether spectating practices to memetic responses that are increasingly defined by exclusionary communicative norms. This development proves rife for exploitation because it positions users to recognize their own practices reflected in the demagogue's performance of unscriptedness, thereby naturalizing demagogic claims to speak for the people. Therefore, this case finds candor to be less a normative ideal than a mechanism of spectator identification. Candor alone cannot empower spectators; rather, its appearance must be interrogated *in order to* theorize their empowerment in a given context.

In concretizing a link between memetic candor and demagogy, this essay raises a broader challenge for political theoretic approaches to spectatorship. That is, the case of social media shows that audiences play a role that cannot be reduced to their engagement with discrete, already-constituted "claim makers" as even Saward's constructivist perspective has it (2010, 48–56). Rather, my discussion reveals a host of interactions *between spectators* that position the latter to identify with "unscripted" demagogic performances. In short, candor is a product not only of external "claims" but also of spectating practices that change across different communicative contexts—a subject of inquiry that has not received adequate attention in political theory and stands to benefit from insights in media studies. Moving beyond the existing terms of the constructivist turn, my investigation of social media thus serves to demonstrate a more expansive account of what audiences *do* aside from their encounter with content advanced by exogenous agents.

As Jacques Rancière (2009, 13) argues, "emancipation begins … when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing, and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection." Framing candor as a relational concept, I hold, more broadly, that popular agency must interrogate *how* "saying, seeing, and doing" are

joined in making audiences. Indeed, Stewart's call to "flip" his hearing addresses this effort to resist the *self-evidence* of spectating despite its *ubiquity*. Stewart's demand thus serves as a starting point for a different approach to candor attuned specifically to the conditions under which the people come to recognize themselves as mass audiences. Drawing on Hannah Arendt (1958) and the dynamics of spectating in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, this essay's final section argues that spectators themselves must attend to how they come together. That is, I hold that democratic spectating must be set apart not only from individuated action but also from surveillance practices premised on erasing a sense of interactivity behind "the spectator." Thus, I posit that spectating becomes *collectively* empowering only when it contests the givenness of the actor-spectator distinction advanced in recent literature.

OCULAR DEMOCRACY AND ITS CHALLENGES

As noted above, democratic theory has witnessed growing attention to the place of spectating in democratic life, with collective *observation* taking center stage in a field normally devoted to collective *action.*[2] Green's (2010) claim that spectatorship constitutes the chief political experience of most citizens marks a turning point in this trend insofar as the ubiquity of spectatorship now serves to ground a comprehensive theory of popular empowerment. In turn, Green offers a criticism of contemporary democratic theories, arguing that they presume "vocal" models of politics that fail to capture this experience. Whether pluralistic, deliberative, or participatory, these theories all advance the people's autonomous self-rule as an ideal. Yet they ground this ideal in the people's active participation in law making and decision making—interactions from which ordinary citizens are in fact largely excluded. What's more, this idealization obscures an everyday practice in which citizens do engage: the "nonvocal" activity of spectatorship. Given this criticism, the ocular approach instead seeks to conceptualize the people as, primarily, a spectating body.

To be sure, the argument that most citizens experience political life as nonactors has found support especially since the rise of mass media in the early twentieth century. As Walter Lippmann (1993, 3) famously remarked, "The private citizen today has come to feel rather like a deaf spectator in the back row." Yet Lippmann's claim also exemplifies the typical thrust of such observations: as "mere spectators," the people appear powerless if not chimerical precisely because their activity is taken to be the inverse of individuated, vocal action. The same indeed holds across most democratic theory: although democrats tend not to embrace Lippmann's fatalism, they nonetheless often reify his underlying assertion that empowerment requires voice. That is, they find no other means of empowering spectators than by theorizing their capacities to become actors, again seeking to distinguish them from the very condition that defines their collective experience.

How does one theorize power without voice? Here the ocular model offers a correction to the above approaches by locating a *distinct relationship to power* available only to spectators. Green (2010) draws this notion of power from accounts of the *gaze* articulated across different scholarly disciplines. On these accounts, "empowered" spectatorship involves a "hierarchical form of visualization that inspects, observes, and achieves surveillance" (9)—capacities that Green argues are available to the people insofar as their spectating activities are taken as a necessary condition for political action. That is, political action cannot be noteworthy without an audience. Significant about this observation is that it isolates spectatorship as phenomenologically distinct from action. Unlike the contemporary inaccessibility of action, Green's claim about the power of spectatorship thus enables him to argue that "spectatorial processes are more truly communal than vocal ones and thus serve a more appropriate foundation for the collective notion of the People" (6).

The "fact" of spectatorship thus yields an all but self-evident criterion for democratic life: if leaders are not able to control how they appear by, say, managing their public interactions, the people can be said to be empowered. Green (2010) calls this criterion *candor.* The attractiveness of candor echoes the above criticism of democratic theory: if the ideal of popular autonomy proves illusory, scholars should instead focus on popular checks on the vocal actors who do in fact occupy positions of leadership. Thus, the ideal of candor seeks to organize political life in such a way that leaders cannot extricate themselves from the popular gaze—that their appearances are not, simply put, canned. Developing this insight, Green champions eye-catching liberal-democratic institutions like presidential debates and congressional hearings, arguing that here candor is effectively "regularized" because actors appear without scripts. Such institutions are less appreciated by democratic theorists because they facilitate neither deliberation nor participation. Yet Green finds their interactions empowering because they are organized explicitly to offer popular spectators something *eventful.* That is, they make political life "worthy of being watched" by subjecting actors to candid conversations (15). What's more, in contrast to the illusory ideal of popular autonomy, Green holds that such institutions provide political theorists a standard that is "relatively easy to gauge and measure" (25): when leaders are not engaging in canned interactions, the people can be said to benefit.

I do not wish to deny either Green's (2010) realism in establishing the ubiquity of spectatorship nor the intuitive appeal of candor. However, this intuition manages to translate candor into a standard of empowerment only by tethering it to a static vision of leadership. Notice that the above claim about the distinctiveness

[2] While the ocular turn is a recent development in democratic theory, it is not without important predecessors (see Bickford 1996; Manin 1997, 218–35).

of spectating does not indicate *what* is observed per se but only that watching is a collective activity over which the people should have control. But Green's subsequent affirmation of hearings and debates relies on the assumption that spectators naturally direct their gaze to that which he posits as inaccessible to them—namely, individuated vocal action. Candor, of course, seeks to deny actors control over the content of their appearances. Yet such empowerment also renders spectators curiously unable to look away from the agents whose content has been, ostensibly, denied. If, in short, spectatorship offers a springboard for a democratic theory more realist in its attention to the people's everyday practices, why must the object of their gaze also be taken for granted? As Disch argues, realists "ask what *motivates* us to act the way we do now, taking motivation to be an effect of institutional design, not a matter of will" (2021, 52). Instead, here a lack of voice is translated seamlessly into a claim to power because both are subsumed into a *plebiscitarian* vision that takes one sort of relationship to be self-evident: the people who watch and the leader who acts. But neither watching nor acting is a mere "matter of will." Indeed, candor proves "easy to gauge" only because it reifies the constitutive function of "the leader" whose apparent discombobulation serves as a proxy for spectator empowerment.

What does this reification of plebiscite obscure? Here, a juxtaposition of the ocular model with this essay's opening vignette can prove instructive. On the one hand, Stewart's (2019) disaffection that his testimony falls on deaf ears exemplifies the "pathology" identified by Green (2010)—that is, that citizens' empowerment corresponds chiefly to a capacity to vocalize demands. But this conclusion only tells half the story. Stewart also asserts that the conditions of his hearing "should be flipped"—that these specific members of the public are in a *unique* position to render the hearing less canned and more meaningful. Put differently, Stewart not only seeks to deny congressional actors their means of publicity but also identifies a specific collective agent whose experience having sacrificed and fought for state accountability equip it to probe this legislative process, pose the right questions, and do so in good faith. To be sure, Stewart, like Green, demands candor. But his claim differs insofar as it derives this demand from a normative account about a *particular* spectating agent capable of resisting the given terms of the spectator/actor distinction: where the Committee has wasted its chance to listen, these first responders would not. Indeed, it is their distinct claim *to candor* that frames their desire to make a heretofore absentee audience the object of their gaze—to place the Committee "down here" and to force it to answer questions. Curiously, Stewart's claim to candor gestures to that which Green's account papers over: the question of how those marginalized from "action" *become* a spectating body able to direct its gaze and bear witness to what it encounters.

Stewart, of course, does not advance a theory of spectatorship. But his criticism illuminates a significant oversight in the ideal of candor: it occludes how its "objects" capture—or are brought into—spectator attention. Developing this criticism, the following section argues that actors are denied control over their means of publicity only insofar as ongoing vocal interactions "evoke" audiences to "receive" particular claims (Saward 2010, 53)—in this case, constitutive performances of candor. In turn, this relationship enables certain types of actors to exploit the very "eventfulness" that ocular democracy champions as a marker of spectator empowerment.

CONSTRUCTING CANDOR: THE SINCERITY PROBLEM

To make sense of the gap in spectator agency identified above, it is first necessary to reassess communicative interactions at the heart of the above account of candor. In defining this concept as a lack of control over one's means of publicity, Green seeks explicitly to distinguish candor as an "institutional requirement" from the "individual norm" of sincerity (Green 2010, 25). That is, at issue are not individual actors' internal dispositions (personality traits that are, evidently, not "easy to gauge") but rather the dynamics of their appearances. Yet such a clear-cut distinction between sincerity and candor overlooks a defining characteristic of sincerity—and its associated literature—that renders it more difficult to disentangle from candor. Although sincerity surely refers to an internal disposition of an individual actor as Green has it, it is likewise a *performance* of that disposition and, thus, a norm that is enacted and reified by means of an interaction between an actor and an audience. As Daniel Kapust and Michelle Schwarze (2016) argue, efforts to reshape the dynamics of such performances occupy canonical arguments across the history of political thought in ways that point to contending "regulative standards" of sincerity: for example, Cicero's case for decorum and Adam Smith's case for propriety. This performative dimension of sincerity suggests that an actor's use of rhetoric—that is, their capacity to successfully "win over" an audience—rests in part on their ability to navigate an existing communicative context such that their performances *are recognized* as sincere. In turn, the articulation of contending standards suggest that performances of sincerity are "regularized" and "controlled" just like candor's means of publicity.

The observation that sincerity involves performance has indeed been a source of consternation in democratic theory, especially because a demand for sincerity (i.e., "truthfulness") is taken as a necessary feature of discourse ethics by deliberative democrats.[3] As Elizabeth Markovits (2006, 264) argues, the practical application of this demand holds that "people who speak 'plainly' are seen as more natural and real, and

[3] The criticism that deliberative democrats either neglect rhetoric or simply presume its motivational effects is a recurring theme in the "rhetoric revival" literature (see Abizadeh 2007; Garsten 2009; Goodman 2018).

therefore more trustworthy." Yet "plain speech" is likewise "something that is cultivated and practiced," indeed, much like the modes of expression that are taken to be manifestly "rhetorical" such as those that betray excessive levity, intellectualism, anger, skepticism, or irony. Thus, a sincerity *norm* naturalizes one rhetorical performance *against* all others in a given context, effectively legitimating those styles that conform to it. In turn, Markovits maintains that such naturalizations often serve to exclude historically marginalized voices, casting them as inherently insincere and thus, illegitimate.

To speak differently, in other words, is to not speak plainly, and to not speak plainly is to fail to conform to the dominant means of repudiating "rhetorical" modes of expression. Thus, Markovits (2006, 267) holds that the sincerity norm risks advancing a form of communication more adequately seen as "hypersincere"—that is, speech cultivated to stage a repudiation of rhetoric for an audience that takes such a repudiation as a marker of legitimacy. In repudiating modes of expression seen as more manifestly rhetorical, hypersincerity serves as "an aggressive and intimidating way to shut out other voices."

I maintain that the above criticism of sincerity illuminates a challenge for the ideal of candor. Insofar as sincerity entails a performative repudiation of those modes of communication that appear rhetorical, this performance navigates the very means of publicity that Green (2010) identifies with candor. To orient oneself to the standard of candor is to engage in a communicative context that is, essentially, unscripted. Yet hypersincerity establishes itself precisely in asserting one sort of script *as* unscripted. Candor, in this sense, champions the very communicative dynamic that hypersincerity seeks to capture: candor attempts to catch its actors off guard, whereas the sincerity norm naturalizes a particular performance of being off guard, as it were. To live up to such a standard in a context shaped by hypersincerity is thus to succeed in maintaining the illusion that one's plain speech is entirely divorced from the means of its publicity, as ocular democracy has it.

To be sure, I am not insisting on a *necessary* equivalence between hypersincerity, which naturalizes one particular script as if it were unscripted, and candor, which seeks merely to repudiate all scripts. For example, in a context where most leaders employ plain speech in canned political circumstances (e.g., stump speeches), the normative intuitions behind candor may well equip their interlocutors to expose such speech for what it is. A political actor who has "mastered" only plain speech may find such mastery disarmed in unrehearsed circumstances involving postures such as anger, incredulity, irony, etc. It is in this sense that a commitment to candor can promise to *dis*empower actors who benefit from hypersincerity's tendency to shut out voices that do not adhere to plain speech. Indeed, it is thus that Green (2010, 187) champions the democratic value of the presidential debate as an exemplar of "institutionalized" candor.

Yet this defense of candor points to its limitation and ultimate danger as a standard for empowerment. Consider, for example, the rhetorical dynamics of candor as they unfold in the 2016 GOP presidential primary debates—a case that should align with ocular democracy's checks on vocal actors yet proves fateful in paving the way for an emergent communicative strategy—namely, that of Trump. The New Hampshire debate features a revealing blunder by then-candidate Marco Rubio, who seems unable to keep from repeating the same stately sounding quip about President Obama. "Let us dispel with this fiction that Barack Obama doesn't know what he's doing," Rubio starts—and then finds himself using the same turn of phrase in several answers, prompting remarks from his interlocutors that he has merely "memorized a 30-second speech," which they contrast to their more genuine dialogue (The Washington Post 2016). At first glance, this exchange seems to echo the dynamics of candor championed by ocular democracy: the rhetoricity of Rubio's plain speech is exposed because the debate, unlike canned appearances, denies him control over his publicity. Yet this conclusion only tells half the story. Equally significant is the fact that Rubio is exposed *by the debate's other participants.* That is, his interlocutors only expose the scriptedness of his speech in their own efforts to present themselves as more spontaneous, multidimensional, and discerning. In turn, the proclivity to repudiate all interactions that can be likened to a script comes to serve as its own strategy to convey "authenticity"—the very posture that Rubio's speech sought to convey, had it not been exposed. Then-candidate Trump's attack on "little Marco" (among many such "eventful" insults) when responding to questions in a subsequent debate employs this very approach: to deny the debate's normal flow of questions and answers is, after all, to derail a sort of script.

The above example suggests that the denial of a given speaker's means of publicity may well subvert their dependence on plain speech—and, for that matter, any particular manifestation of the sincerity norm. Yet this case also illuminates that such denials are *performed* by interlocutors in ways that can continue to reify the communicative dynamics underlying hypersincerity. That is, in exposing the rhetoricity of their interlocutors' self-presentations, the debate's participants present the postures that frame their repudiations of existing communicative norms—in candidate Trump's case, boorishness, a rejection of "political correctness," scapegoating immigrants, etc.—as contending markers of authenticity. Just as above the appeal of plain speech as ostensibly "free" from rhetoric was weaponized into hypersincerity, here the demand for candor is instrumentalized by speakers to confer an air of authenticity upon their appearances. Yet more worryingly, this instrumentalization now explicitly casts competing political claims and actors as illegitimate precisely because they fail to conform to an "authentic" style, in effect celebrating hypersincerity's aggressive proclivity to marginalize other voices. So, here the speaker's demand for candor serves to *reassert* control over their means of publicity precisely in performing a repudiation of such control.

Such a paradoxical conflation indeed marks a demagogic strategy. Consider, for example, Thucydides's (1963) account of the Mytilenean debate, wherein Cleon seeks both to castigate his audience's seemingly insatiable desire for competitive speech making and to present *his* speech rejecting deliberation over justice as worthy of winning the competition. Thucydides's account, of course, illuminates the basic difficulty of such a position: Diodotus is easily able to point to Cleon's rhetorical "foolishness" in attempting to persuade his audience of the pointlessness of persuasion—a repudiation that suggests his speech is premised on its audience's acquiescence to its own "deception" (3.37–3.43). Yet this narrative also evokes an inverse possibility: insofar as demagogic speech *becomes* successful, it suggests an already-existing orientation toward self-deception among its audience. That is, the foundational deception of spectators who fail to *recognize* themselves as an audience being charmed by an orator. In effect, such deception requires its audience to accept the orator's assertion that the people are *both* a deliberative body "discussing matters of state" *and* a univocal agent who must reject deliberation over its own self-interest as nothing but bad-faith rhetoric. In short, Cleon's failure to persuade the Athenian Assembly reveals the demagogue's challenge to consist in his effort to *displace* the foundational rift between orators and spectators with his performative rejection of scriptedness. Missing here is, simply, an audience willing to take the bait.

Thucydides's (1963) narrative illuminates an intrinsic problem underlying the ideal of candor. Namely, candor's regularization sustains the conditions of possibility for a particular sort of actor: one who excels, above all, at performing eventful repudiations for their audiences. Trump's rise indeed illustrates the possibility of such repudiation as a strategy for *shaping* one's publicity. As Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Doron Taussig (2017) argue, the candidate-turned-president's "free-wheeling rhetoric" enabled him to repackage his unrivaled demonization of opponents, rejection of established institutions and sources of information, and refusal of accountability into a more pointed "rhetorical signature." That is, in framing his speech acts *as* continuous repudiations of scriptedness, Trump presented frequent falsehoods, incivility, and incoherence as evidence "that [he] *says what he really thinks*" (4) and was willing to "break from the convention of carefully scripted rhetoric" normally associated with the presidency (23). Thus, for example, Trump's frequent refrain that he was *both* "joking" and "telling it like it is" when facing criticism in effect sought to recast all challenges as examples of scripted humorlessness reflecting rival social visions that attempt to foreclose candid speech. Indeed, the power—and danger—of Trump's rhetorical signature rested in its specific pretense to pit his departures from rhetorical convention *against* "traditional" attachments to facticity, civility, and coherence, thereby venturing that a rhetoric of "authentic" audacity could supplant these standards of communicative legitimacy. Or, as Corey Robin (2017, 271–2) puts it, beneath the former president's apparent ability to sidestep evidence that he is "a liar, a narcissist, a sexual predator, a financial miscreant, an incompetent, and a naïf" was the "promise … that he won't bore you." And thus, "the one charge Trump [couldn't] afford is the claim that he's dull, reading from a script."

The above case should thus raise significant doubts that a repudiation of scripts *as such* serves as an adequate proxy for spectator empowerment. Noting the ubiquity of spectating in democratic life, the ideal of candor errs in conflating popular empowerment with a mode of *action* that becomes increasingly strategic in this communicative context. To affirm such a strategy is simply to grant newly empowered actors that which their speech acts seek to accomplish—namely, what Kenneth Burke (1955, 64) calls "identification" insofar as those who speak endeavor to establish "common sensations, concepts, images, ideas, attitudes" with those whom they address. What's more, the above rhetorical signature reverberates beyond any single actor: it rather reflects an ascendant communicative phenomenon characterized by a distinctly demagogic manifestation of populist rhetoric that endeavors to tie exclusionary social visions to actors' repudiations of "political correctness."[4] As Benjamin Moffitt (2016, 38) argues, the recent resurgence of populism is best understood to advance a distinct *style* involving "repertoires of embodied, symbolically mediated performance" by "leaders" who seek to "dramatize" the appearance of self-evident representative claims on behalf of "the people." In contrast to traditional accounts of populism focusing chiefly on the *content* of tropes comprising distinctions between the people and elites, Moffitt's focus on style points to the growing role of *mediatization* in shaping current-day communicative contexts. That is, because actors are increasingly less likely to engage audiences by the "direct" means like Cleon's in-person oratory, claims *about* the people require increasingly deft navigations of "the rhythms, demands and processes of media logic" by means of which actors identify their audiences *as* the people for whom they claim to act (76).

Indeed, this need for spectator identification explains the persistent appeal of "bad manners" in populist leadership on Moffitt's account (2016, 57–63). More than a personality trait, the recurring effort to derail "appropriate" scripts serves to assert the leader's claim to authenticity across increasingly mediated interactions. That is, insofar as popular audiences find themselves increasingly distanced from the scenes of political action and look to disrupt the techniques that maintain this distance, ill-mannered derailments of dominant "scripts" function as evidence of the leader's effort to achieve an unmediated encounter with the people. In short, where Cleon could not persuade his assembled audience to reject persuasion, here the

[4] In calling this a *manifestation* of populist rhetoric, I am distinguishing it from the broader phenomenon of populism—a contested concept reducible neither to demagogic manipulation nor the fraying of democratic norms (see Frank 2018).

dynamics of mediatization supply would-be demagogues with the rhetorical resources to advance their claim to act "for" the people precisely in violating communicative norms. Of course, one may suspect that such performances only further ensnare their audiences in mediatization—that is, as spectators captivated by disruptiveness. Indeed, such enactments of mediated authenticity seek to achieve the very effect conceptualized in the above account of candor captured by hypersincerity: the conflation of an actor's aggressive and exclusionary "repudiation" with a claim to their spectators' empowerment. Thus, as Moffitt argues, it follows that populist strategies constitute "the media-political form par excellence" (77).

The demagogue's ability to exploit their audience's detachment from existing scripts thus suggests an uneasy conclusion: surely, scripted appearances disempower spectators insofar as they narrow what they see and how they engage—yet the above discussion shows repudiations of scripts to leave spectators no more empowered. Indeed, this problem extends beyond the ossification of any *particular* performance of repudiation into something like a new script, as in the case of Trump's rhetorical signature. The problem is rather that such ossifications continue to prime spectators to identify with demagogic repudiations *as* manifestations of candor. In short, candor's normalization remains continually exposed to demagogic efforts to conflate candid and canned performances—and ocular democracy's idealization of candor fails to interrogate such conflations.

How, then, are we to theorize empowered spectatorship? The next section argues that this question requires an account of the *dynamics* of spectator identification, as suggested in the above account of candor's instrumentalization. Having proposed a proxy for spectator empowerment drawn from (invariably vocal) repudiations of scripts, the ideal of candor has occluded these dynamics. Missing here is precisely the *spectator's* activity in accepting candor as empowering—or, for that matter, in being interpellated as a consumer of scripts that simply champion successful repudiation.

However, to make sense of such activity it is necessary to revise a basic assumption advanced across much democratic theory: the categorical conceptual opposition between spectating and acting as such. Consider, instead, Richard Butsch's (2008, 3) definition of "audience," which takes the latter as "a situated role that people temporarily perform"—that is, *not an absence of action* but a collective activity that appears in some relation to that which tries to claim its attention. Contra Green (2010), this view resists casting "spectators" and "leaders" as predetermined subject positions. Yet this view also raises a challenge for the constructivist perspective from which this discussion has criticized Green. Even as Saward affirms audiences as "agents and actors" (2010, 54), their agency is nonetheless legible chiefly in their *reaction* to the activities of discrete claim makers categorically distinct from the audiences they seek to construct. To be sure, this approach recognizes that audiences may well contest the claims presented to them (54; see also Disch 2010), but in doing so their responses are legible as "counterclaims" (Saward 2010, 54) that effectively render them competing claim makers.[5] Put differently, here audiences seem either to acquire agency in becoming vocal or are relegated to accepting the claims imposed on them by exogenous agents. In contrast, I hold that an appreciation of audience construction must resist this trade-off if it hopes to make sense of the process of spectator identification with candor. As Butsch's emphasis on performance suggests, even "acceptance" by spectators stands in need of explication. In short, to spectate is still to *do* something, albeit something distinct from the activity of individuated claim making.

Below, I reconsider the question of candor and spectator identification from the perspective of this revision, now attending to candor's involvement in drawing spectators into particular patterns of activity—both vocal and ocular. Specifically, I turn to a case where candor becomes effectively "regularized," as ocular democracy would have it, albeit with remarkably perverse results: that of dominant social media practices. Surveying this context, I show that regularized candor can leave audiences at once more committed to spectating, more vocal, *and* increasingly disempowered.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PROBLEM OF MECHANIZED IRREVERENCE

Recent years have not been kind to social media. Once widely hailed as engines for public expression and mobilization, major social media platforms have lately become mired in charges of monopolistic behavior, mismanagement of user information, facilitation of disinformation, polarization, and censorship. These growing rebukes indicate not merely skepticism of specific platform features but a pointed suspicion that the very effort to realize mass user engagement has served, ultimately, to undermine the participatory vision therein. Yet scholars have proven reticent to embrace this suspicion fully even while continuing to suggest it. Sunstein's (2017) worry noted at this essay's outset offers an illustrative example here. Sunstein advances perhaps the most wide-ranging criticism of social media's algorithmic "personalization" of content, linking it to the rise of echo chambers, the fraying of shared experiences, and the "inertness" of a public sphere where individuals remain shielded from competing perspectives. However, he also brackets this criticism from the chief innovation claimed by social media platforms—namely, "the fascinating increase in people's ability to participate in creating widely available information," which he simply accepts as "a powerful democratizing function" (27). The result is a curious blind spot in Sunstein's approach, which decries social media practices and yet refrains from probing

[5] For a broader criticism of the logical primacy of representative claim making in the constructivist turn, see Cohen (2022).

their accompanying idealizations of collective agency. It appears that social media leaves users self-obsessed, fragmented, and inert; yet the underlying assumption that greater amplification of "voice" necessarily amplifies democracy somehow continues to elude interrogation.

The discussion below challenges this scholarly tendency. Following the previous section, I hold neither that voice is an unmitigated good that exists apart from its interaction with spectating nor that more voice serves as an adequate proxy for more democracy. Yet the emergence of social media also poses a basic definitional challenge for the above discussion. Recalling Green's (2010) opening observation that current-day political life is characterized by a distinction between elite, vocal actors and the people's silent spectatorship, it should be immediately clear that activities like tweeting, liking, or otherwise circulating information confound this distinction's apparent self-evidence. Although such practices surely do not make users into the leaders Green associates with individuated action, social media nonetheless figures spectating as an *expressive* activity wherein participants vocalize their practices of collective observation. To be sure, the conclusion of the previous section already cast doubt on this distinction, instead asserting that spectating should be understood as a performative activity. Yet social media's explicit valorization of vocal spectatorship now offers a case in which it is possible to develop this observation into a critical engagement with the *dynamics of spectator identification* at the heart of candor's instrumentalization. In turn, this context reveals that spectators can come to *limit* their capacities for communicative engagement by the same token that they embrace claims to candor.

Consider, first, how spectatorship becomes expressive online. It is crucial to understand that voice here does not simply emerge in a vacuum but is rather shaped by a particular communicative affordance—namely, that of the meme. In making this claim, I am largely following scholarship in media studies devoted to identifying the distinctive attributes of socially mediated interactions in contradistinction to their embodied counterparts (see Milner 2016; Phillips 2015; Shifman 2014). As Ryan Milner (2016, 2) argues, online interactions are "premised on participation by reappropriation"—that is, users habitually express themselves by modifying preexisting texts and images such that their addition of "new" content is framed within the parameters of visual and semantic forms recognizable to ever-expanding online communities and thereby easily amenable to mass circulation. In short, memes can be understood as speech acts that "depend on collective creation, circulation, and transformation … by balancing a fixed premise with novel expression" (14) and are thus naturally resistant to "top down" media traditionally premised on "passive" spectator uptake of some content (2). What's more, the dynamics of memetic circulation implicitly *demand* spectator participation: Grumpy Cat and Condescending Wonka exist as memes because they maintain the impression that *you*, the spectator, keep them circulating by means of your own modifications. To be an engaged spectator of digital content is, in effect, to learn to participate in the circulation of memes—and to fail to learn this lesson is to be utterly lost in digital spaces.

Of course, I am not suggesting that *all* socially mediated participation assumes the form of memetic circulation—nor that memes exist only online. As Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) argue, the above aspects of memetic circulation in fact mirror forms of "folkloric expression" that long predate the internet. Yet what distinguishes social media is the *dominance* of such communication. That is, a spectator *expects* to consume memes in their interaction with socially mediated content.[6] Memes, in this sense, are more than a means of communication the "end" of which is, simply, one's voice; rather, a meme is part of a broader genre whose dominance comes to reshape who spectators *are* online (see Wiggins and Bowers 2015). As Carolyn Miller (1984, 163) argues, genres are best understood not merely as ways of classifying texts but as "conventions of discourse that a society establishes as ways of 'acting-together.'" Put differently, genres connect speech to broader patterns of interaction. Thus, Elisabeth Anker (2014, 20) argues that genres "work as a set of interpretive conventions and affective expectations for public political life." To say that one is a "spectator" of a genre is insufficient. Instead, this claim challenges scholars to ask what one is positioned to *do* when, say, interpellated as an inheritor of fables or an employee looped into corporate memos. To identify memes as a genre is thus to notice that they, too, position their spectators: they connect the uptake of certain content (in this case, bits of modified text or image) with certain activities (further modification) and dispositions associated with spectators' identities as circulators of memes.

What, exactly, are these dispositions? Above all, the work discussed above tends to identify a predilection for irreverent humor as a chief aspect of memetic circulation. Given its distinctive modifiability, such communication all but naturally rewards playful reappropriation (see Milner 2016, 79–110) and so inspires an ironic disposition toward the content that remains "fixed" in the circulation of memes. One is thus little surprised to find, for example, that political speech is more often couched in humorous terms online than in embodied spaces (see Davis, Love, and Killen 2018). Yet this phenomenon also shapes the social function of such humor: rather than serving as a counterpoint to the myopic propensities of "serious" conversation (or, as the above section had it, plain speech), ironic reappropriation now becomes a dominant communicative form. That is, memetic circulation is characterized by its tendency to subject *any* content that carries

[6] Thus, even nonmemetic speech becomes easily "memefied" when it spreads online. See, e.g., the evolution of confessional apologies—initially facilitated by social media's conflation of intimacy and mass communication—into the "YouTube Apology Video" meme (Know Your Meme 2021).

"traditional" markers of seriousness—a known origin, authorship, reference to facticity, stable meaning, and "plainness"—to ironizing. Thus, Phillips and Milner hold that online content is most strikingly distinct from embodied speech by the pervasiveness of *Poe's Law*, or the observation that "sincere extremism online (manifesting as bigotry, conspiracy theorizing, or simply being wrong about something) is often indistinguishable from satirical extremism" (2017, 78–9) such that interlocutors always seem to be "messing with their audience for a laugh" (51). The most notorious form of this conflation is the practice of trolling, or the seemingly ironic assertion of offensive claims as a means of provocation and harassment; but the potential melding of the serious and the ironic generally underlies all online circulation.

To be sure, the possibility of such polysemy exists in any context where speakers contest the meanings of words—that is, any context that might be called political. But the transformation of this possibility into a defining characteristic of online speech produces a distinct spectating practice: one that entangles an audience's uptake of content with its continuous vocal repudiation of seriousness. Note, here, the marked shift that playfulness undergoes when it ceases to serve as a reprieve from other dominant dispositions and rather comes to define communicative interaction as such. A social phenomenon like trolling becomes legible precisely when playful modifications are untethered from their prior grounding in wit and creativity and permeate all interactions. Thus, harassment comes to be playful, marginalization comes to be playful, disinformation comes to be playful; in short, anything that departs from the norms of embodied communication fits the bill.

The dominance of such a disposition can carry wide-ranging communicative consequences. That is, the social mechanization of spectatorship-as-repudiation comes to shape user interactions even when the content in question is no longer, strictly speaking, a meme and modification is not, strictly speaking, humorous. Take, for example, the now-commonplace efforts to document the sheer volume of disinformation online (e.g., Simpson 2019). Beyond registering understandable alarm, such efforts need to grapple with the above communicative development lest they neglect the rhetorical *appeal* of a departure from truthfulness when the latter comes to be associated with scripted stodginess by audiences socialized in the art of irreverent sendups. Existing empirical scholarship has likewise devoted impressive attention to determining the causes of factual misperceptions (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler 2017) and documenting their diffusion (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018), but there has been comparatively less attention paid to understanding how truth claims *as such* lose their "traditional" rhetorical appeal in particular communicative contexts. In presuming such appeal to be either natural (provided one learns "the facts") or merely exogenous to existing communicative practices, scholars risk neglecting what Hannah Arendt (1973, 385) called the "*artificially induced* inability to understand facts as facts" that follows the newfound capacity "to dissolve every statement of fact into a declaration of purpose."[7] In what follows, I reconsider the possibility of such artificial inducement—or what I call the mechanization of *memetic irreverence*—from the perspective of candor.

Recall that above, I established that candor's appeal could be captured by demagogues who instrumentalize repudiation—and held it necessary to trace how spectators come to identify with particular performances of such repudiation. The dynamics of memetic irreverence now offer a glimpse into this process in one such context. As in the case of plain speech, memetic irreverence first posits an ossified communicative norm ("seriousness"), casting it as a script in need of subversion. At first glance, such subversion again promises to check empowered actors: one may well note the many cases of public figures trying to promote themselves on social media only to be met with widespread circulations of memes featuring their (true or alleged) misdeeds. The proclivity for such spectator responses is in fact a point of pride associated with eventful (to recall Green's [2010] term) derailments on social media. No doubt such derailments exemplify a claim to candor: insofar as public figures seek to appear in a dignified way, they quickly find themselves unable to control the circulation of mocking messages framing their appearance. Yet we misconstrue the dynamics of such candor if we fail to notice that its typical target is *not* the leader identified by Green, whose public relations stunt runs afoul of a vigilant gaze. Rather, it is those whose voice defies the presumed demographic characteristics for "normal" participation online. For example, as Adrienne Massanari (2017, 331) argues in her study of such derailments on Reddit, this platform's valorization of "play and candor" more often facilitates misogynistic activism, especially when grievances are made against the irreverent "geek culture" celebrated on this platform. Milner, too, worries that the "addressivity" of typical memetic content "implies that the reader is male, and content of the images furthers the hegemony of that implied reader" (2016, 125), with memes often recycling racist and sexist "stock characters … in ways that reproduce the invisible insider status of white males" (130). Curiously, such memetic derailments establish candor by the same token that they naturalize the presumed white male spectator's distinction from vocal stock characters. What's more, they provide this spectator a chance to attain voice precisely in *perpetuating* this distinction—that is, in further circulating the meme.

Let me note one such case to outline how memetic circulation amplifies traditionally embodied marginalization. Consider the example of the "social justice warrior," a constellation of memes featuring female stock characters circulated to mock self-righteous leftist pronouncements identified as naive and often deployed in response to criticism of sexist discourse. From the perspective of its intended audience, this meme serves to expose such criticism as rhetorical posturing—that is,

[7] Italics mine.

as an effort to impose a script on candid online speech. One may, of course, suspect that the meme itself serves as a sort of script by means of which its spectators are positioned to repudiate any feminist criticism. This is indeed the case because memetic irreverence relies on its audience's mechanized uptake of stock characters in interpellating spectators as content creators "empowered" by participatory modification. By circulating this meme, a spectator gains voice—but only so in reifying the characteristics of the "social justice warrior" as a fixed premise. Put differently, this manifestation of candor repudiates overly "serious" criticism by the same token that it maintains an all-too-serious imposition of boundaries. "It's only a joke," the adage goes: one does not respond to a meme with a list of grievances. Yet as Milner (2016, 129) notes, "for participants who 'out' themselves as female, displaying their body is the 'penance' demanded for the transgression of interrupting the board's normalized masculinity." In effect, the "joke" serves to attach the ideal of candor to a rigid and aggressive policing of speech. In conflating a rejection of "outsider" criticism with such normalization, memetic irreverence thus normalizes the white, male user's undertaking to *transform* "passive" spectating into "candid" self-expression—and to become the only agent capable of doing so.

Of course, this example is not meant to suggest that social media are irrevocably bound to reproduce such marginalization. Nor is it to deny that social media are amenable to the rise of significant counterpublics, as in the case of Black Twitter. But it is to suggest that such possibilities cannot help but become entangled in the dynamics of repudiation as long as online spaces facilitate memetic communication. For example, although Milner celebrates social media's amplification of voice in communities marginalized in traditionally embodied spaces, he also worries that such amplifications often channel participation into the genre of memetic irreverence by drawing it into confrontation with the practices outlined above. That is, counterpublics often deploy memes mocking online sexism and racism—and they often find themselves "further[ing] hegemonic antagonisms" by positing reciprocal irreverence as a presumed disposition of online spectatorship (Milner 2016, 135).[8] In conforming to the above genre, such responses continue to position online audiences as consumers and circulators of irreverent memes, effectively reifying the means by which spectators identify aggressive repudiation of criticism and boundary drawing with candor. Such identification is, in turn, reinforced insofar as digital spaces continue to figure "accountability" as the power of existing users to regulate the inflow of newcomers—or, as Jennifer Forestal (2017, 158) puts it, to "[police] the boundaries of the site." Indeed, such policing again risks reducing all criticism to mere fodder for further repudiations.

The memetic conflation of repudiation and boundary drawing thus offers an account of how candor's normalization can yield a distinctly disempowering spectating experience. This is the case because here such normalization socializes spectators to deny *each other* control over their means of publicity. That is, in providing spectators with a means to assert the ideal of candor, memetic irreverence circumscribes spectators' *own* generic dispositions, casting them as audiences relentlessly entangled in the irreverent uptake of content that recognizes only more irreverence as "candid speech."[9] In essence, such irreverence maintains a practice of spectatorship whose capacity to engage content narrows as participation ostensibly increases.

Moreover, this case suggests that the danger of demagoguery articulated in the above section *relies on* such a perverse normalization of candor. Recall, again, Trump's rhetorical signature, which sought to make scapegoating and the rejection of facticity, civility, and coherence "stick" by conflating claims that he was telling it like it is and just joking. Rather than appearing as a contradiction in terms, this section suggests that such claims can come to signal authenticity precisely *because* they mirror the communicative practices of their audience. That is, in contrast to Cleon's difficulty as an orator attempting to persuade his audience to reject persuasion, socially mediated demagogic rhetoric finds its success in its leader's ability to *pose* as a member of an audience that has already abandoned persuasion. This is accomplished insofar as the leader successfully echoes their spectators' means of repudiation. In effect, this strategy asserts a shared experience between the demagogue and their audience because both target the same scripts: the leader makes a *claim* to candor precisely in appearing to join their spectators in repudiating anything that appears to lack the requisite irreverence. In short, the demagogue seeks to capture an audience's gaze by occluding the basic distinction between actor and spectator, instead appearing merely as another spectator speaking up against canned speech.

A social context marked by memetic irreverence facilitates this very occlusion. For example, this strategy is evident in the 2016 Trump campaign's efforts to connect candid repudiations of democratic norms with his retweets of followers' memes—a tactic Jessica Baldwin-Philippi (2019) terms "the technological performance of populism." Likewise, this strategy is evident in the defining characteristic ascribed to the "Twitter Presidency" by its early observers—that is, that Trump did not merely exhibit generic "bad behavior" but used social media platforms "as [they were] *meant* to be used"—that is, as "we" use them in taking up commonplace memetic practices (see Mac and Warzel

[8] Thus, Milner (2016, 123) holds that a memetic "tone" rooted in racism and misogyny can "[preclude] the adversarial encounters that Mouffe finds so essential to counterpublic agonism," instead casting difference as enmity.

[9] On the possibility of such a phenomenon in an embodied context, see Green's conception of *plebeian vulgarity* in his follow-up to ocular democracy in Green (2016, 101–29). The above discussion should raise skepticism that such vulgarity can serve as an adequate check on elites without likewise entangling plebeian agents.

2018). And the lingering effect of this strategy is likewise evident in the grievance maintained by Trump's base in the aftermath of his abortive coup—namely, that he was "censored" in being deplatformed after the January 6, 2021 insurrection. Confronting this grievance, many observers have been quick to point out the obvious deficiency of a claim to free speech advanced against private firms. But the simple dismissal of this claim risks downplaying the persistent entanglement of demagogic candor and socially mediated identification. The problem here rests less in a confusion of private and public fora and more in the effort to cast the state's chief executive as credible claimant to First Amendment protections normally claimed by citizens *against* the state. This mismatch arises from the fact that a candid demagogue appears to "gain voice" by the same means as his audience, effectively obscuring the distinction between institutionally empowered actors and spectators. In short, in all these cases spectators find themselves increasingly tethered to a leader who avoids being targeted as such by posing as another irreverent spectator—a posture made possible by the memetic mechanization of candor. To the extent that this posture succeeds, such candor effects a narrowing practice of spectating that is increasingly unable to recognize anything *but* the demagogue as the "natural" object of its gaze.

Mechanized irreverence thus offers a glimpse into the *practices* that facilitate ocular disempowerment. Accordingly, this case does more than illuminate the claims advanced by demagogic actors. Rather, it shows that candor poses a distinct concern for any appreciation of audiences as constructed and situated phenomena. Recall, again, that Saward (2010) advanced such an appreciation by situating audiences within the context of claim makers who invoke them. Yet the above case suggests that candor's place in this process cannot be reduced to any "claim" as such. Candor rather connects the content of a given claim to existing performances signifying unscriptedness. Insofar as such performances come to be dominated by demagogic rhetoric, the constructivist turn must grapple with the fact that claim makers do not merely offer content *to* audiences but can exploit fault lines in spectating practices to cast themselves as members *of* the very audiences whose gaze they capture. Therefore, although all acts of representation participate in constructing audiences by mobilizing particular group identities (Disch 2010), demagogic candor reveals a distinct problem insofar as it mobilizes audiences *themselves* to participate in narrowing their own capacities to engage the claim makers they encounter.

This dynamic poses an underlying challenge for any conception of ocular empowerment beyond social media as such. That is, the effort to extricate spectators from canned interactions must involve more than checks on vocal actors; rather, it must theorize how spectators can intervene in their very interpellation as agents defined by some pregiven set of ocular activities. This essay's final section outlines an approach to this more capacious demand.

TOWARD A THEORY OF EVENTFUL SPECTATORSHIP

This essay has argued that audiences become disempowered in identifying with performances through which actors reassert control over their conditions of publicity. But this does not suggest a comprehensive rejection of the ocular approach as such. The observation that modern political life is marked by mass spectating and its implication that canned interactions deprive spectators are both crucial building blocks toward a realist democratic theory. Indeed, Green's (2010) approach errs chiefly in obscuring candor's performative construction in light of these observations. In short, my criticism does not deny that popular empowerment must attend to the ubiquity of spectating but rather advances a more realist perspective on its constituent practices. Following Disch's (2021) formulation, this perspective requires seeing performances of candor not merely as "a matter of will" but as products of communicative contexts whose terms must be interrogated to theorize ocular empowerment.

To do so, it is necessary to notice, contra Green (2010), that the language of candor in fact corresponds to another set of intuitions across intellectual history—one chiefly concerned with the comportment and activity specifically of spectators. Take, for example, the case of the U.S. *Declaration of Independence*, which famously calls on a "candid world" to bear witness to the "Facts" substantiating its grievances (Jefferson 1776). Note that here candor is neither claimed *by* certain actors (e.g., the colonists) nor asserted *against* others (King George). Rather, it is ascribed to an audience in positioning it in a particular way. As Danielle Allen (2014, 90) argues, this ascription "identifies [the *Declaration*'s] audience as consisting of the kind of living organisms that can connect facts with principles in order to make judgments." In effect, the authors of the *Declaration* ask, "are you not capable of candid judgment?" in interpellating their *readers* as a collective agent able to break from merely consuming existing scripts establishing British colonial authority.

This example suggests that the language of candor can inform a different appreciation of spectatorship. In contrast to ocular democracy's view of candor as an actor-denying proxy for ocular empowerment, here candor serves to position an audience to ask whether its *own* practices manage to escape scriptedness. The question of whether the *Declaration* motivates this task adequately is, of course, outside the scope of this essay.[10] But its example offers a fruitful starting point for theorizing candor from a perspective that foregrounds spectatorship as a dynamic and self-reflective practice.

If candor is to avoid obscuring the patterns of disempowerment identified above, it is first necessary to

[10] It may well be that the *Declaration*'s authors establish new scripts and ways of performing them, even if these performances are not premised on a claim to their candor as in the case of demagogic rhetoric (see Derrida 1986).

attend to how spectators come together as collective agents. This stipulation requires a critical revision of the chief implication Green (2010) ascribes to ocular empowerment—namely, its ambition to champion "eventful" actions by leaders. Green derives this implication from his reading of Hannah Arendt. While Arendt's effort to theorize spontaneity in human life is often linked to individuated action, Green 20–1) holds that it is in fact rooted in the "recognition of the intrinsic satisfaction of witnessing spontaneous events"—indeed, of the "value" of such actions for those who see them. This reading is correct to rebuke hasty reductions of Arendt's thought to a mere celebration of heroism, but it misses her crucial inclusion of ocular activities in the very construction of meaningful "events" as such. That is, Arendt's (1958, 23) account of the human capacity for action holds that this activity *alone* "is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others." This is the case because action does not merely connote doing something unplanned but relies on "an audience of fellow men" who maintain the possibility of "organized remembrance" in human affairs (198).[11] Thus, Patchen Markell (2017, 89) maintains that this conception of action "implicate [s] something that cannot be so easily localized in one person or at one moment, namely, the strength or weakness of that bond that holds people in an ongoing relation of presence and attention to each other and to their world, which Arendt will call 'power.'" It is not that Arendt takes spectators to be "satisfied" when they see spontaneous actions but that such spontaneity *loses its significance* without spectators' mobilization as a collective agent.

In contrast to the primacy of eventfulness as such, this discussion points to an effort to articulate the significance of events that come into being when audiences actively assemble. In fact, the persistence of "eventful" actions *without* an ability to maintain engaged spectatorship serves as a distinct mark of totalitarian propaganda on Arendt's account. As she maintains, the "ability to lie" is an "obvious" example of "human freedom"; indeed, lies can be eventful (and draw attention) insofar as they attempt "to change the record" (Arendt 2006, 245–6). But totalitarian movements venture to proliferate the presentation of such counterfeit "events" for "masses whose chief characteristic is that they belong to no social or political body" (Arendt 1973, 348) and whose fundamental dislocation from political activity thereby primes them to find an "escape from reality" appealing (352). The extensive institutionalization of such a dynamic—what the above section associated with the mechanization of irreverence and what Arendt calls "organized lying"—is profoundly disempowering precisely because it translates the typical human desire for eventfulness into a "constant shifting and shuffling in utter sterility" characteristic of eye-catching action presented to detached spectators who have lost the capacity to "believe in the truth of anything" (Arendt 2006, 252–4). Put differently, such "sterility" shows that eventfulness itself can become canned when spectators lose their place as a dynamic collective agent capable of mutually reflecting on their own activity and making normative judgments therein.

This need for collective self-reflexivity suggests a substantively different conception of spectator empowerment. Instead of seeking agents who do things spontaneously before already-constituted audiences, the above discussion suggests that interactions become eventful only insofar as spectators experience the fact of coming together and interrogating what they encounter in doing so. And such collective experiences are meaningful only when spectating is actively practiced rather than assumed as a fixed subject position. We may well call such experiences candid—but only insofar as this approach locates collective efforts to *recast* the popular gaze at the nexus of candor and spectator empowerment. Thus, here spectators—and not leaders or claim makers—evoke candid eventfulness when they bring *what they do in becoming spectators* into their own purview.[12]

To make sense of this reconceptualization of eventfulness, consider two contrasting ocular developments that have gained attention in light of the Black Lives Matter movement: police body cameras and bystander videos of police encounters. Both developments purport to turn surveillance technologies employed by the state on its own agents, thus endeavoring to achieve surveillance *over* those in positions of power.[13] Therefore, both can be said to subject policing to the ideal of candor championed by ocular democracy, in effect denying police control over their normal means of publicity. At first glance, it may even seem that bodycams achieve this task to a greater extent insofar as they institutionalize such surveillance as a regular practice, as Green's (2010) standard would have it. Indeed, such regularization has earned bodycams accolades as more "objective" checks on policing—albeit often by police agencies themselves (Newell 2019, 61).

This verdict is, of course, inverted by Black Lives Matter activists, who express continued skepticism of bodycams while finding unique value in bystander videos. As *The Verge* (2021) argues, "using a camera and sharing a video isn't passive—it is itself an act of protest" that fuels the movement. This claim echoes Arendt's (1958) view of eventfulness. In making police the object of surveillance, bystander videos do not merely seek unscripted content. Rather, they render spectating a specific, situated *activity*. Thus, Mary Angela Bock (2016, 26) holds that "using a camera to document events from a citizen's perspective creates a unique record, one that represents not only the

[11] As Susan Bickford (1996, 63) argues, the Arendtian venture to realize one's "distinctive public self" requires the "active attention" of others.

[12] This discussion carries parallel implications for the constructivist turn conception of representative claims as events (see Saward 2010, 39–43), suggesting the need for a distinct appreciation of eventful *spectating*.

[13] On the broader phenomenon of "inverse" surveillance, see Mann, Nolan, and Wellman (2003).

camera's facticity but the body's reality." The "body" in question is that of the bystander, who enacts a "civic performance" (27) in asserting their presence by means of spectating. Unlike bodycams, bystander videos thus offer examples of what Michael Feola (2017, 207–9) calls "acts of bodily theater" insofar as they "implicate" their very "onlookers." Put differently, the bystander's effort to film police encounters is at once an effort to *take up* agency against practices that anchor citizens' ongoing inabilities to intervene in racially disparate forms of state coercion. In contrast, the very presentation of bodycam content as "transparent" perpetually minimizes any effort to account for what its audiences do. As in the above discussion of Arendt, at stake here is the very production of a candid spectator's gaze. That such an agent can recast its gaze—and does so deliberately—is precisely what makes eventfulness normatively significant and not merely eye catching.

To be sure, the "civic performances" outlined above cannot help but render bystanders *exceptional* agents in contrast to the generic "condition" that Green's (2010) model posits as a springboard for democratic theorizing. But their example nonetheless channels ocular democracy's realist sensibilities in advancing agentic possibilities from within an experience available to all citizens—namely, spectating. That is, these protesters take up agency from their condition *as* onlookers—and thus, they advance a new claim to agency in *showing* citizens recasting their gaze *as an event.* Doing so, bystander videos illuminate the normative stakes behind this essay's effort to challenge the "realism" of an approach that does not interrogate ongoing contestation over the practices it thematizes. Where ocular democracy's reduction of spectating to a fixed activity obscures the construction of a popular gaze enthralled by particular performances of candor, bystander videos exemplify how spectators come to resist such construction.

In summary, this reconceptualization of eventfulness distinguishes spectating practices less liable to become ensnared in mechanized candor. In the previous section, social media supplied a *genre* of user participation that tethered the uptake of content to a regularization of irreverence. Bystander videos resist this sort of ensnarement insofar as their presentation of content specifically questions *who spectators are.* That is, they link their audience's uptake of content to an ongoing effort to interrogate its participation in the very process of genre formation. This effort indeed illuminates a central component of democratic life undertheorized in recent literature: insofar as popular agency involves the production of a collective gaze, empowerment is the set of unfolding interactions by means of which this gaze resists falling into generic spectating practices.

CONCLUSION

To be a member of an audience is always to be primed to undergo some sort of change. But what does it mean for this change to be empowering? Recent theorizations of spectatorship have culminated in a powerful criticism of the notion that spectators must be changed into individuated vocal actors to be meaningful agents. Rather, a collective gaze offers a distinct relationship to power. Yet I have maintained that this gaze suffers insofar as it is held constant. The *ubiquity* of spectatorship in democratic life should not be conflated with its supposed *immutability.* My criticism of candor shows the danger of this very conflation. It is the demagogue who seeks to obscure spectators' reorientation away from normative interrogations of vocal action, castigating the latter as irrevocably rhetorical and their own audacity in undermining democratic norms as candor *par excellence.* To champion candor's self-evident measurability is to obscure precisely what this actor seeks to obscure in claiming to speak for the people while constricting their legibility—namely, the spectator's own participation in constructing a gaze that recognizes only particular performances of candor. The case of memetic irreverence thus offers a glimpse into how one such context facilitates an experience of disempowerment that confounds traditional notions of agency—of how "participation" comes to mean an increasing inability see with different eyes.

The collective effort to see with different eyes is indeed the chief challenge of ocular empowerment. To recognize a mutual entanglement in a shared context, to see things anew as a result, and to establish a relationship to one's perspective as an unfolding phenomenon—this process alone distinguishes shared ocular agency. At the core of this process is not simply its collectivity. Rather, as Arendt (1958, 57) maintains, "a common world" appears only insofar as "everybody sees and hears from a different position." Put differently, the eyes of *the people* are normatively distinct in the foundational possibility of their collective plurality and dynamism. They are not merely the many but the promise of many-sidedness; their desire to exert an empowered gaze is not a desire for mere surveillance but the effort to interrogate the surveilling agent. And so, they seek not only to see but to render the construction of sight a collective project. To echo Stewart (2019), such a claim to the people's eyes endeavors to "flip" traditional structures of agency by placing spectators—indeed, the activity of spectating—"up on stage."

This conclusion should leave democratic theorists asking what to do with social media. Insofar as the latter has come to dominate current-day communication, no account of ocular empowerment can be sufficient without attending to it. What, then, would it mean for social media to break out of memetic irreverence? This question is, of course, not simply hypothetical. Following increasing castigations, social media platforms have been busy tweaking their designs, especially to reverse their amenability to disinformation. However, such a solution already casts user empowerment in an irrevocably narrow light. As Forestal (2021, 307) argues, a focus on false content alone can lend itself easily to "gatekeeping measures" that seek to "passively subject" users to "determinations of quality made by external (and often invisible) 'experts.'" The desire simply to purge disinformation indeed fails to

ask what it would mean to empower spectators as democratic decision makers. Yet this essay further suggests that the ideal of deliberative decision making itself cannot be disentangled from how emergent genres shape what it means to "make" decisions as a spectator. Thus, any conception of socially mediated empowerment must ask how users come to interrogate their own spectating practices. This task will prove to be challenging for spaces that are designed to conflate voice and advertising, uptake and myopia, attention and distraction, and modification and mimicry—conflations that have so effectively established and normalized new patterns of behavior. In short, this task calls for nothing less than placing users "up on stage" above these taken-for-granted developments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Aylon Cohen, Emre Gercek, Sidra Hamidi, and Désirée Weber for their invaluable comments and encouragement on multiple drafts of this essay. This essay also benefitted from extensive comments and suggestions from three anonymous *APSR* reviewers as well as the editors of *APSR*. I am also grateful to the participants at the 2019 Association for Political Theory panel in which an early draft of this paper was presented.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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