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### "Why This Post Now?" : Dramaturging Politics and Social Media

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Dr. Jocelyn Buckner  
Senior Seminar: Thesis  
9 December 2022

## “Why This Post Now?”: Dramaturging Politics and Social Media

### INTRODUCTION

In theatre, we ask a very simple but powerful question when approaching a text: “Why this play now?” What is the reason that this particular play is relevant to the time, place, and audience? For creatives, it is imperative to understand why artistic content is produced and also how to produce this content with integrity and authenticity. The study of dramaturgy helps answer this question and provide accuracy to the truth of the story. As a Chapman University theatre student, we are introduced to the practice and profession of dramaturgy in our second year of studies. Under professor Dr. Jocelyn Buckner, we learned that dramaturgy is providing, “living authenticity to the words of the play” (Dr. Jocelyn Buckner Presentation). Dramaturgy has always been necessary to production, but it was not until recent years that it was given a title and a role in the artistic team. As defined by *Ghostlight: An Introductory Handbook for Dramaturgy* textbook:

“In practice, dramaturgy refers to the accumulated techniques that all theatrical artists employ to do three things:

1. Determine what the aesthetic architecture of a piece of dramatic literature actually is (analysis)
2. Discover everything needed to transform that inert script into a living piece of theater (research)

3. Apply that knowledge in a way that makes sense to a living audience at this time in this place (practical application)” (Ghostlight 3).

Being exposed to dramaturgy has provided me with incredibly rich tools to support my work as a director and performer. It has taught me how to investigate and meticulously research.

Dramaturgy requires the artist to conduct a holistic approach in their research, to create a full picture of necessary information to support the story. A dramaturg might research why a particular lamp is essential in a production of *Street Car Named Desire* or why a particular scientist was referenced during a production of *Paragon Springs*. A dramaturg analyzes a script and does a variety of analytical research to uncover every inch of nuanced meaning in the script. From there, artists are able to chisel away at the text to uncover the most profound truth of the story. Dramaturgs bridge the gap between audience perspective, director vision, and playwright script. They ensure that the audience’s perspective is receiving everything as the director intended, if the director’s choices are becoming unclear to an audience perspective, the dramaturg steps in to research what may be causing this disconnect. The study of dramaturgy has given me the skills to analyze, research, and practically apply truthful knowledge to theatrical productions..

Over the past two years, I have been bombarded with political content on social media platforms which have made it difficult for me to make an opinion of my own without feeling completely influenced. I found myself consuming social media content without feeling compelled to search for the actual story. I accepted the content at face value. Social media, like theatre, is also a storytelling medium. Content creators mimic the role of theatrical creatives, and participate in a form of performance. Social media influences audiences by participating in performances to articulate narrative in an emotionally charged way. I ask the question: is this

performance on social media informed or uninformed? I have found that social media has painted the political debates in America as black and white topics, while portraying the gray (the majority) as a nonexistent voice. As most Americans fall in a space for potential compromise, social media has influenced the population to believe there are only two sides. I watched my peers, family, and friends struggle with political communication because of the emotionally tense topics which have been fueled by media tactics. I began to notice how political social media content was driving belief through influence, and not belief through analysis. As my intersections of theatrical education and political influence began to overlap, I became curious about how my dramaturgical perspective might better inform my own intake of political social media. Dramaturgy has allowed me to find the truth of the script, and I was curious if it would also engage me to discover how to find the truthful, political story buried under the influencing tactics. If I could articulate the truth of political events, maybe I could better participate in informed conversation propelling a space for compromise and successful debate.

Social media has given everyone a voice. Users of social media accounts (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, etc.) have the opportunity to share whatever they want, to whoever they want, whenever they want. This has made the spread of information infinite and immediate. Social media is one of the most powerful forms of storytelling we have seen thus far, in terms of impacting power. Social media has created the narrative of politics in the United States. While social media has given immense opportunity for artists and creators alike, it has also made it possible for the mass spread of misinformation. Anyone has the power to spread their voice at any time. Social media is filled with underlying facts that have been contorted and manipulated by opinion to display a misshapen fact or emotional bias. Whether intended or not, the spread of misinformation is more present than ever. Social media provides a space for users to create their

own identity and be rewarded for it. Social media is a performance, and is quite theatrical in its own way. As performers, we become a character, or representation of a person. Social media gives users the power to be whoever they want to be. As social media, through likes and comments, provides a space for public approval, content creators can alter themselves in this online portrayal to receive desired recognition. To create desired recognition there may be a misshaping of fact to frame intended reception or impact. Social media has created the hunger for users to strive for viral content, which means creators are trying to post the most provocative and “wow” factor content in order to receive views and recognition. This hunger is prompting the narrative that the United States is aggressively polarized and that the middle voices are nonexistent... further promoting the idea that compromise is not an option. When content creators talk about political content, there is a need to shock audiences. This need to spread perspective on a political topic in a “viral” desire, can contribute to the possibility of uninformed performance... further propelling the polarizing effect.

The political structure of the United States has allowed two political parties to control the government and progression of the nation. Through expansion, these parties have become further polarized in their attempt to differentiate themselves, leaving no room for moderate voices to find space. Over the past twenty years the political polarization has become increasingly wide. The Polarization Index, is a tool, designed by USC professors, to give scientific measurement to the political polarization within the United States. As defined by their website, “The Polarization Index (PI) is the first data science-based measure of the overall degree of polarization in America, as well as the level of polarization across ten key issues. It reveals which side of the political spectrum is most engaged with an issue, how far apart both sides are, and points to how much unreliable information is being shared” (Polarization Index Overview). The PI also notes

that the world is not polarized because people disagree, but now people disagree because they are *polarized*. I have looked to this index because it is using social media to evaluate the level of polarization. The methodology used is as such:

“The Polarization Index measures the engagement with polarized content on Twitter, with polarization calculated by combining volume of shares with the bias and reliability ratings of the media sources publishing the shared content. The calculation is based on the premise that a share from a low-reliable source on either end of the political bias spectrum is more polarizing than a share from highly-reliable, more centered sources. The score calculated for each issue represents the delta between the partisan echo chambers of the left and right side of the political bias spectrum - and shows how they are changing over time” (Polarization Index)

Discussing this analysis Fred Cook, director of the USC Center for Public Relations at the Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism, relays, “It’s clear from our analysis that polarization has become a permanent fixture in American culture, fueled in part by partisan communications in media and politics who benefit from conflict” (NBC-LA). The polarization index gives insight to the polarization of specific topics, how these levels change over time, and how to then approach them. The development of social media has given space for parties to gain incredibly powerful influence over the population. It has allowed for the amplification of echo chambers to alter the levels of polarization of topics almost immediately. The structure and nature of social media gives political creators dramatic access to the minds and thought process of users.

Political events have always been influenced by the media, but social media has provided a much stronger influence than the typical newspaper or radio. Social media offers a space for users to participate in uninformed performance, whether intended or not, with their content. My question is: are social media consumers considering whether content, specifically political content, is actually true or are they accepting it at face value? Political events are being exacerbated by the influence of uninformed performance. From broadcasted political debates,

twitter feuds, and family dinners, “controversial” political topics are causing tears in the fabric which has held this nation together. Social media is, moment to moment, shaping the political agenda and contributing to a society filled with emotionally driven misinformation. This shaping is contributing to the black and white political narrative in the United States, while a majority of the population falls in the gray area. The majority is silenced, and is fueled against one another by social media’s need to go viral and gain recognition. Dramaturgy has made it possible for truth to be found in theatrical text and performance. I wanted to discover if a collaboration between dramaturgy and political social media, may enhance my ability to understand the actual political narrative. I was tired of being influenced by social media, and I wanted to understand the political narrative for myself. If I could understand the most authentic truth of political events, I could then successfully apply my own personal morals and beliefs. I hoped I could find a solution that might allow the United States to see compromise as an option and that would also promote respectful debate. I am proposing the application of a dramaturgical perspective for consumers when approaching political social media. I was curious if using a dramaturgical lens in social media consumption would help promote analysis of information, further informed performance, and provide a space for compromise. I applied my analysis, research, and practical application tools as a dramaturg to political social media content. I then looked at four posts by activist sites which contributed to the uninformed performance driving polarization. In order to dramaturg successfully, I did a thorough research on the background of these posts and all their implications. I then looked at primary sources to tell the truth of the narrative and not rely on biased news sources. I analyzed the political climate and social understanding to put the posts in context. Using this information, I then practically applied this knowledge to the consumption of political social media content. I investigated what these posts are promoting and whether the

content is contributing to uninformed or informed performance. In my project I used my skills as a theatre artist to dramaturgically analyze political social media content, to see if I could uncover the truthful story under informed performance. I hope that my project simply showcases how using a dramaturgical mindset can help media users successfully navigate informed and uninformed political content.

## LITERARY REVIEW

With the continued rise of social media and online sources of communication, research is flooding in on the effects of how this media is changing societal functions. I am curious about this effect and how it is specifically influencing the political climate and political engagement within the United States. Social media gives users the ability to post any unfiltered anecdote to millions of people in just seconds. While this has created exponential possibilities for creative content and user relationships, it has also provided the potential to misinform the masses. Observing the dangers of uninformed performance in social media, I will analyze how media users' opinions and beliefs have been influenced. The sources I have selected for my research on this topic are developing my knowledge as an informed artist. I am using a variety of articles, journals, and websites to understand the full picture of social media, its effects on society, and how this is influencing the current political environment. These literary materials will be the building blocks which I will use to explore my thesis artistically.

Homero Gil de Zuniga, Logan Molyneux, and Pei Zheng's article titled, "Social Media, Political Expression, and Political Participation: Panel Analysis of Lagged and Concurrent Relationships" argues that the increase of political media coverage leads to the increase of political participation. For example, traditional media consumption (television, newspaper, radio) has expanded the population's knowledge of politics. When people know about politics and what



is going on in their society, they are more likely to participate politically. The authors articulate political participation as: voting, campaign activity, contacting officials, and collective activities. The article discusses how social media is both a space for political consumption and political participation. Social media is accepted with the concept of “minimal cost” but with high influence. The question I am proposing is: If social media is enhancing political influence, how much of this participation is being backed by facts and true beliefs? I furthered my research by searching for sources that provide a more specific answer to this question.

I then explored “The Psychological Drivers of Misinformation Belief and Its Resistance to Correction ” by Ullrich K.J. Ecker, et al. Throughout their essay, this group of researchers “...describe the cognitive, social, and affective factors that lead people to form or endorse misinformed views...” The essay notes that there is a strong relationship between the rise of contemporary technology and misinformation. They describe the potential for social media to be the “fast spread of falsehoods at the expense of accurate information” (1). They illuminate the disconnect with people consuming content and verifying the trustworthiness of the source or influencer that this information is coming from. There seems to be a lack of credibility needed when creating and distributing content. Users project this trend that they do not see credibility as an important note when absorbing content. Evaluating the news from an analytical perspective would slow the spread of misinformation because it would engage users to search for credibility and fact before posting. This source allows me to provide evidence of the lack of an analytical lens when users engage with political content. I was curious about this lack of credibility and how reposting without recognition or consideration for truthful information affects the narrative. To enhance the conversation further, I looked at an article by Jay David Botler: “Social Media Are Ruining Political Discourse.” Botler notes there is a principle of “flow” in the nature of

social media, modeled after video games, which propels this idea of constant consumption. Political flow, created by the media algorithm, “buries discussion about civic action under endless streams of text, images, and videos” (4). Botler’s research examines the spiraling effect of these new claims: how these claims evolve and propel a continued effect of misinformation. He also notes how social media, in its nature, often only gives us part of the story. This “presents incoherent, often contradictory assertions” (3). These assertions are ruining political discourse and reasoned debate. The reasoning among political anecdotes is becoming blurred, as previous research confirmed, because of misinformation and users’ susceptibility to accept it. This source gives me clues to how one seed can lead to a forest and the drastic effects social media is having on our functions as a society. I will use this information to artistically explore the cause and effect of uninformed performance on social media.

I was curious about *why* there is a lack of an analytical mindset when interpreting media messaging. Why might users continue contributing to the spiral when they know the fundamental structure of social media? I wanted to start by just considering the psychology associated with social media. In an article by Laura Moss titled, “Social Media Sharing: The Psychology of Why We Share,” the author suggests five reasons why we share and participate on social media: “To bring valuable and entertaining content to others, to define ourselves to others, to grow and nourish our relationships, to fulfill ourselves, and to get the word out about causes or brands” (2). All these reasons point to the concept of building an image or identity. Users post and curate their feed to reflect an online personality which presents their ideal image. I will use these reasons, as promoted by Moss, to curate an artistic piece that reflects these motivations in users and how this contributes to political positioning in the media. *The Conversation*, an online journal, discusses the implications of bias and how these biases affect society’s function. In this

journal, authors Giovanni Luca Ciampaglia and Flippo Menczer note: “Biases Make People Vulnerable to Misinformation Spread by Social Media.” The authors explore three biases and how they are contributing to uninformed performance on social media: bias in the brain, bias in society, and bias by the machine. These biases all contribute to “us vs. them” messaging, echo chambers, and trending reinforcement. Through the algorithmic “machine” we are receiving the information we want to hear, what we want to believe... even if it is not backed by trustworthy facts. This point relates to my research thus far; contributing to the narrative which communicates a lack of connection between what society accepts as truth and if it is truthful. If social media gives us what users want to hear, they are more likely to accept it. And because of this “machine” there is often no counter argument or consideration of other perspectives. This fuels the continued power and influence of echo chambers. I realized that because of these innate biases, users must look outside of social media to find evidence and fact. Not all sources on social media are misinformed or false, but the problem is that it is inconvenient to figure out what is true and what is not, so society jumps to accept what is trending on their curated feed. This source has provided me with the idea to expose these biases in an artistic matter to curate a realization within an audience.

To gain a precise interpretation of this data, I looked at the research conducted by the Pew Research Center. The data explains that nearly seventy percent of social media users rarely or never post political content, and the top reason for this is because people are fearful of being attacked for their views (P.R.C). To me, this means the fear of cancel culture is in full effect. So what I noticed is, there is a larger consumption of data than there is posting. If people are fearful of providing a new perspective, then most of the political social media user content is not providing a complete picture. These, “highly politically engaged social media users” are driving

the content on social media which is influencing the users that get caught in the political “flow.” Pew also identifies that roughly 64% of social media users say these platforms are creating negative effects in the United States. The question I am asking with my research is also a concern for users, as Pew states, “Those who have a negative view of the impact of social media mention, in particular, misinformation and the hate and harassment they see on social media. They also have concerns about users believing everything they see or read – or not being sure about what to believe” (Pew). I realized I am not alone in my observations, but with no change in the overall acceptance of uninformed performance... I am searching for the solution. These data points are providing me with statistics and quotes from users themselves about how they are feeling. This emotional context and data are helping shape my understanding.

The sources I have used to focus my research create a clear narrative about the dangers of uninformed performance, and how this influences the political beliefs and participation of users. Social media increases both political consumption and political participation. There is a strong motivation to post, repost, or be politically active on social media sites but without a desire for credibility. The misinformed performances on social media create a spiral effect through this pattern and propels unreliable opinions. The biases that surround users explain why we accept the information we see. While this pattern is active, the possibility for reasoned and fact based debate is out of the equation. In consuming this research, I used my dramaturgical skillset to analyze the resources, define credibility, and look at facts from the source. How this theatrical lens can be combined with political engagement in social media is yet to be explored. The sources I have collected build a well rounded account for the basis of my project. I will use these sources to explore the cause and effect story of social media in politics. The research done on this topic has examined what is going on and why there is this spiral of uninformed performance,

but what I will be contributing to the conversation is a solution. In using the research I have derived, I will provide a new outlook on the collaboration between theatrical study and social media enhanced political discourse.

## SIGNIFICANCE

This topic is significant now because of the effects it is having on United States political discourse and function. As we discussed in my U.S. government class during the summer of 2022, the deconstruction of our democracy is happening before our eyes. For instance, the peaceful transition of power from one president to another is a key facet of the United States government and a principle of this democracy. It upholds the respect of the people to choose and accept the role of the President. On January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021, we saw the resistance to the transition of power promoted by social media influence. With social media only continuing to grow, the fate of the nation is at the hands of social media users and influencers. Every political re-election season, there has been more and more division. Social media has enhanced this division and only made it harder for truth and understanding to be decipherable because of its ability to shape the narrative. If citizens do not start investigating the truth of the story for themselves the “media” will control the nation, not the people.

The bridging of theatrical practice and political commentary for the modern audience is highly significant. Often the world, outside of the artistic community, overlooks the research and analysis artists engage in as part of the creative process. The theatrical world works in very expansive dramaturgical techniques that provide highly productive academic research. The dramaturgical work I am doing in this project is to not show theater artists how to correctly dramaturg with current topics, but it is to show social media users how to evaluate the political content they consume. My work in dramaturgically explaining these events is to show how

theatrical practices and studies are extremely useful in approaching politically based content creation. With a majority of the U.S. population involved in social media content creation, we as a nation, are then inherently performers. Theatrical performers are consistently tasked with upholding the truth of the script. But social media performers are not tasked with upholding the truth of their content, as they are giving their personal opinion through their own voice. Social media is an opinion and bias based platform, but many consumers use this information as fact. If dramaturgy is used by media users, the potential for informed performance and also informed consumption is much more vast. The crossover I am creating may lead informed conversation and actually bridge the political division in the nation and promote unified progress.

## APPROACH

To dramaturg political media content I used dramaturgical methods that are applied to analyze the script of the play: analysis, research, and practical application. I used these methods to discover if using a dramaturgical perspective can help propel my personal understanding of truth. I am not trying to condone the idea that dramaturgy will make everyone have the same beliefs, but I do think it will allow users to see the bigger picture and comprehend that there is more room for compromise than polarizing social media conditions us to believe. This method will allow for personal beliefs to simply exist without uninformed influence. I am taking on the role which Faedra Chatard Carpenter states in their essay *Reading and (re)directing "racial scripts" on and beyond the stage*: "Dramaturgs are charged with taking the time to consider all valid possibilities rather than impetuously settling on the suspected, known, or overly anticipated. Such proactive interrogations not only aid in creating artful theatre productions, but they also empower our stories to intervene, adjust, and correct archaic and/or erroneous perceptions about human difference and social networks in everyday life" (*The Routledge*

*Companion to Dramaturgy*, 149). My proactive approach has allowed me to search for all perspectives and outlooks as well as search for the unsuspected fact. And as Anne Cattaneo describes in her essay *Dramaturgy as skill, function, and verb*: a dramaturg is someone who “sees the whole picture” ( *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, 173). I meticulously searched for the whole picture, as a dramaturg does with a play. I wanted to know what the debate looks like from the perspective of all sides, as that is the way I was able to capture a true dramaturgical analysis: understanding the why from all viewpoints. Perspective, as defined by Bruce Barton in his essay *Interactual dramaturgy*, is a key point of dramaturgy as it “identifies the potential gap between what is *intended* and what is likely to be *received*” ( *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, 189). Much of the political content which is pushed out to users is interpreted in a variety of different ways. I discovered how different political viewpoints may receive these posts and the effect this reception creates. The media content demands to be analyzed but it almost never is by the consumer. The small nuances and psychological indicators of social media content create masterful ways of influence... just like the theatre. Elinor Fuchs in her essay *EF’s visit to a small planet: Some questions to ask a play*, she notes, “there is nothing in the world of a play by accident” ( *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, 406).

The political case study I have looked at in my project is the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. For the sake of this project, I did not choose a political position or favor a side of the polarization. I did my best to remain unbiased and simply tell the truth based on my research. I dramaturged social media content which has biases from all ends of the spectrum to create a strong picture of how all sides of political beliefs can participate in uninformed performance and perpetuating the black and white narrative.

I utilized the research I have conducted about social media and politics to support my discovery and analysis. To dramaturg the case study effectively, I outlined the original *Roe v. Wade* case to understand what was determined by this case and how it has become precedent. I defined the relationships between Republican and Democrat viewpoints as well as the meanings of pro-life vs pro-choice. From there I looked at what the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has done and how this has changed the political landscape around abortion, and how polarizations are reacting on social media accounts. My intention in my dramaturgy was to use my research to consume political social media with an analytical eye. I am demonstrating how to dramaturg the discussion which these posts promote in search for the truthful narrative. Even when some of these posts seem to promote fact, I continue to challenge them to be certain I have found the factual information needed to make productive opinions. In the textbook, *Keeping the Republic: Power and Citizenship in American Politics*, the authors, Christine Barbour and Gerald Wright note, “Political scientists acknowledge that ideological bias may exist, but they conclude that it isn’t so much that the media tells us what to think as they tell us what to think *about* and how to think about it” (*Keeping the Republic*, 441). This is exactly the influence I research, and I identify how the media has shaped the user thought process when approaching political content.

#### CASE STUDY APPLICATION: OVERTURNING OF *ROE V. WADE*

In order to dramaturg political content created in response to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, I needed to understand the case implications before I could look at the social media content. A dramaturg, when approaching a new play, does background research on all of the topics and specificities mentioned which need clarity. To begin my research I needed to have a clear and factual understanding of what this case is, who is involved, and what was achieved with the ruling. This case being highly politicized by all spectrums of political beliefs, I knew I



needed to look at the case itself before allowing biased opinions from news sources to dictate my research. Looking at the original case document through the online database for the Library of Congress I was able to identify important facts of the case to outline my research. The case notes: “A pregnant single woman brought a class action challenging the constitutionality of the Texas criminal abortion laws, which proscribe procuring or attempting an abortion except on medical advice for the purpose of saving a mother’s life” (*Roe v. Wade*). Prior to the ruling of *Roe v. Wade*, which was decided on January 22, 1973, abortion rights were handled by the states. In the state of Texas, abortion was banned unless for the reason to save a mothers life. In an interview by PBS, Amns Nawaz says, “Before the 1973 Supreme Court decision *Roe v. Wade*, abortions were prohibited in 33 states and only allowed in special circumstances in 13 others” (PBS). To discover what Roe precisely wanted with her action against Texas, I looked to the case which outlines:

“Roe alleged that she was unmarried and pregnant; that she wished to terminate her pregnancy by an abortion "performed by a competent, licensed physician, under safe, clinical conditions"; that she was unable to get a "legal" abortion in Texas because her life did not appear to be threatened by the continuation of her pregnancy; and that she could not afford to travel to another jurisdiction in order to secure a legal abortion under safe conditions. She claimed that the Texas statutes were unconstitutionally vague and that they abridged her right of personal privacy, protected by the First, Fourth, Fifth, Ninth, and Fourteenth Amendments. By an amendment to her complaint Roe purported to sue "on behalf of herself and all other women" similarly situated” (*Roe v. Wade*).

The case made its way to the supreme court where they voted in favor of Roe and the following was decided: “In the first three months of pregnancy, it held, there can be no compelling state interest that offsets a women’s privacy rights. In the second three months, the state can regulate access to abortions if it does so reasonably. In the last trimester, the state’s interest becomes far more compelling, and a state can limit or even prohibit abortions as long as the mother’s life is

not in danger” (*Keeping the Republic*, 131). Through this ruling, the Supreme Court tried to find a balance between a woman’s right to privacy and also protecting human life. In doing so they separated the three trimesters of a women’s pregnancy to define abortion rights. The right to privacy, as it is implied and not explicitly mentioned in the constitution, is one of the most controversial and debated rights in America. In the ruling of *Roe v. Wade*, “the justices held that the right to privacy did indeed encompass the right to an abortion” (*Keeping the Republic*, 131). The Supreme Court used the 14th amendment which establishes that, “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (Library of Congress). The court decided that the vague right to privacy, which is not clearly displayed in the constitution, but it implied through rights and amendments, did encompass a women’s right to abortion.

After the case was decided, the courts used the judiciary concept of precedent to uphold the ruling of *Roe v. Wade*. Precedent is defined as, “a previous decision or ruling that, in common law tradition, is bringing on subsequent decisions”(*Keeping the Republic*, 283). This book also notes that the United States upholds the practice of Common Law tradition which is based on, “previous legal decisions, which were applied uniformly, or commonly, across the lands” (*Keeping the Republic*, 283). This means that the judges use the idea of precedent to make case decisions, and precedent is set when Supreme Court decisions create a law of the land. The ruling of *Roe v. Wade* took abortion law out of the hands of the states, and into the hands of the federal government; establishing precedent for future cases.

In 2022, the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. This caused much political upheaval in the country, and many citizens have taken to social media to use their voice and to also listen to the voices of others. As noted in the Polarization Index, “Over the last six months, the level of polarization around abortion increased by almost 10 points due to mounting reaction from the Left to restrictive state legislation that could potentially pave the way for overturning *Roe v. Wade*” (Polarization Index 2022). Even before the overturning, the suspicion of the overturning caused polarization to increase dramatically. Before I analyzed the political content and its ability to provide informed or uninformed performance, I wanted to be clear of how overturning *Roe v. Wade* affects the United States. *Roe v. Wade* was overturned by the *Dobbs v. Jackson’s Women’s Health Organization* case on June 24th, 2022. The case declares: “The Constitution does not confer a right to abortion; *Roe* and *Casey* are overruled; and the authority to regulate abortion is returned to the people and their elected representatives” (Library of Congress- *Dobbs v Jackson*). The court ruled to overturn *Roe v. Wade* because they felt the fourteenth amendment and implied right to privacy were not significant enough for there to be federal law regulating abortion and “The Constitution makes no express reference to a right to obtain an abortion” (Library of Congress- *Dobbs v. Jackson*). The case also states, “Given that procuring an abortion is not a fundamental constitutional right, it follows that the States may regulate abortion for legitimate reasons, and when such regulations are challenged under the Constitution, courts cannot “substitute their social and economic beliefs for the judgment of legislative bodies” (*Library of Congress- Dobbs v. Jackson*). This removes the current three trimester regulation set up in *Roe v Wade*, and it is up to voters in individual states to vote for their abortion policy. This means abortion in the first trimester is no longer viable across all states. Individual states may vote to replicate the three trimester standard, vote for exceptions, vote for abortion at all terms of

pregnancy, or vote to ban abortion. According to a US News Daily Analysis, since the overturning, twelve states have officially voted to ban abortion all together, five states allow abortion with no restrictions, and the other thirty-three states lie somewhere in between-regulating depending on the trimester (US News Daily).

To understand the social media content surrounding the overturning of Roe v Wade, I needed to define the polarizations behind abortion. I needed to articulate what it means to be pro-life and pro-choice. As defined by Oxford Languages pro-choice is, “advocating legalized abortion” while pro-life is, “opposing abortion and euthanasia” (Oxford Languages). These definitions are black and white, but in my experience and conversation, I have found that most people feel somewhere in the gray area. The Republican party has become identified with the pro-life label and the Democratic party has become identified with the pro-choice label. Citizens in these categories accept the label of pro-life or pro-choice without acknowledging that they may not actually believe in the dictionary definitions of these labels. Many have exceptions or permissions to these straightforward definitions which creates a variety of social definitions. We do not often recognize that perception is a big factor here. People may have their own version of these labels while also not recognizing that someone of the opposite viewpoint may have their own definition that does not match the dictionary definition. This creates polarizations without perspective recognition. For example, a Republican who adopts the label of pro-life, might adopt this label without recognizing that they also believe abortion is permitted in terms of rape, incest, mother’s health, etc.. Having the pro-life label with the above exception makes this person not the dictionary definition of pro-life. But from the opposite side, a person who adopts the pro-choice label may see this Republican with the label pro-life and think they don’t believe in abortion on any level. This exact situation can and does occur vice versa. The social definitions are different

for these labels depending on where you stand, and because these black or white definitions permeate social media, the room for compromise is non-existent.

As the United States is defined by the two party system, I looked at the Democratic and Republican stances on abortion and define clearly, what these are, and how the social media content surrounding abortion is created with a bias towards one side. The Republican party views abortion as such, “that an unborn child has a “fundamental individual right to life which cannot be infringed” ” (Republican Views.org). What stands out to me here is that the Republican party is adamant about giving the unborn child the fundamental right to life as soon as it is conceived. Although the party itself has not adopted exceptions for rape, incest, birth defect, or risk to mother’s life, many Republican politicians and citizens believe in exceptions. It is important to note the party identifies with this agenda, but not all party members participate with the agenda in its fullness. On the contrary the Democratic party believes, “that every woman should be able to access high-quality reproductive health care services, including safe and legal abortion” (Democrats.org). This means that the democratic party includes abortion in health care, and they believe all women should be able to have an abortion. But just as above, many Democrats also believe there are exceptions where abortion should not be allowed. It is clear to me that there is such a divide based on nonuniform label identification (pro-life and pro-choice). The meaning of these labels mean different things depending on one's own perception and position. This then perpetuates an extensive number of narratives surrounding *Roe v. Wade*, depending on each person’s viewpoint.

According to a Pew Research study conducted in July of 2022, “Nearly one-in-five U.S. adults (19%) say that abortion should be legal in all cases, with no exceptions. Fewer (8%) say abortion should be illegal in every case, without exception. By contrast, 71% either say it should

be mostly legal or mostly illegal, or say there are exceptions to their blanket support for, or opposition to, legal abortion” (Pew Research). This shows that a majority of the population believes there are reasons abortion should and should not occur (understanding there is a very broad spectrum within this). This is most interesting because the majority of political social media commentary lies in the extreme nineteen and eight percent categories. While the majority is not acknowledged, it is clearly the greatest space for compromise.

As a dramaturg, I surrounded myself with factual information and educated context to support my analysis of polarized political social media surrounding the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. I then used this knowledge to engage in my exploration of political performance on social media, and discover how this may be manipulating the political narrative in the country. To get a greater picture of the type of social media content which was put out to discuss this case, I looked at trending Instagram posts from activist sites. I acknowledge that these posts do not cover the complexities of political social media content, but they provide an example of the content and how it can be dramaturged. I have chosen the specification of Instagram to make my analysis as specific as possible. To engage with the media content I am discussing, reference the index at the end of the paper. I did not try to decide whether abortion is justified with my research, but I tried to find out as much information as I can, so then I can apply my own personal beliefs to the whole picture of the situation. Then I could debate my personal opinion and not influences which have been projected on me.

This first post is content creation by @liveactionorg. This post is notated as Figure 1 in the index. This account has a following of 528k. In their bio, this account notes themselves as “A global human rights movement dedicated to ending abortion and building a culture of life” (Instagram- @liveactionorg). The particular post I am looking at says, “Don’t fall for the anti-life

lie that your baby will stop you from achieving your dreams.” I analytically decided that the concept of a baby not stopping one from researching one's dreams is an opinion. This is not a factual political statement, although it is trying to influence audiences to believe so. The most provocative part of this statement is the use of the term, “anti-life.” The “anti-life” phrase is emotionally charged and intended to “expose the pro-choice” argument. This perspective is projecting that pro-choice is anti-life, and about killing potential life. While this dramatic statement may be true in a practical sense, it ignores the variety of social definitions of pro-choice. The biggest challenge here is the meaning of pro-choice as dictionary definition and social definition. The social definition is subject to the perspective of the person who holds the label, and can mean a variety of things. This post perpetuates the black and white debate, leaving no room for other voices and compromise. From this post I learned how perception and bias play into the creation of social media content, and how this creation enables the polarization around political topics.

The second post I looked at is a collaboration post by @theprogressivists and @ipasorg. This post is notated as Figure 2 in the index. The Progressivits is a site dedicated to climate, civil, and racial justice, and IpasOrg is a nonprofit organization which is working to “advance reproductive justice by expanding access to abortion and contraception” (Instagram- @ipaorg). Together they have a following greater than 820k. This is a graphic post with the phrase “Do you have rights in the U.S.?” on the top. Under that there are four phrases, three which have a green check and the last phrase, “Can you get pregnant?”, has a red x next to it. This post is enhancing emotional frustration in its portrayal of promoting that if you can get pregnant, then you will have no rights. As an emotional trigger that is very provocative. Now the first thing I acknowledged is that someone who can get pregnant is also a human and a citizen, which means

they have rights, so this immediately debunks the statement. But what I think the post is trying to promote is that the ruling of *Dobbs v. Jackson* will now make it so that all pregnant persons in the United States no longer have the the right to abortion. Now, that is not necessarily true. As I know from the research, there are twelve states who have voted to ban abortion, so this makes abortion accessible in some form in, in the other thirty-eight states. This post is not clear in its decision to talk about the affect of overturning *Roe v. Wade*, and how the jurisdiction on abortion is not gone but it is moved from Federal to State law. The dramatization of this post and its desired effect projects fear and influences an audience. This post participates in uninformed performance and it is up to the consumer to analyze or dramaturg its authenticity.

The next post I looked at is by @secularprolife. This post is notated as Figure 3 in the index. Their post involves a graphic of a woman drowning and a child coloring and the text says, “Elective abortion is not refusing to save someone who is dying. It is killing someone who would otherwise live” (Instagram- @secularprolife). The first thing I needed to do as a dramaturg is get more contextual information. I needed to clarify the definition of elective abortion and also how its definition may be different dependent on social and dictionary perceptions. In completing my holistic research on elective abortion, I found a variety of results that were quite complex. The original definition is, “Elective abortion is done because a woman chooses (elects) to end the pregnancy” (Medline). But what I noticed is that this definition has shifted overtime and many want to get rid of this term. In the article *Eliminating the phrase "elective abortion": why language matters* by Elizabeth Janiak and Alisa Goldberg, they articulate,

“The phrase "elective abortion" is often used to describe induced abortions performed for reasons other than a direct, immediate threat to maternal physical health. We argue that the term "elective abortion" is variably defined, misrepresents the complexity and multiplicity of indications for abortion and perpetuates stigma” (Janiak and Goldberg).



There might be reasons related to health that a doctor might not be able to subjectively find justifiable for an abortion, so they are opting to discuss that elective abortion may be used for personal health reasons outside a doctor's opinion. Others believe all elective abortion is simply choosing to end the pregnancy because the woman does not *want* to have a child. Based on this understanding, elective abortion has multiple meanings for multiple people, so the perception of this post is going to promote and project different, hyper emotional responses. Using the term “killing” in the post is a hyper provocative response intended to push emotional boundaries to engage users. This post is contributing to the polarized divide as it is using opinion as fact to eliminate the moderate voices (majority). The moral debate with this post is dependent on if someone thinks abortion is *killing* of life or not. There is extreme debates on if abortion is considered killing life or not, but it is a personal moral understanding. This is where the elective abortion social understanding becomes blurred. Using this provocative language is promoting emotional opinion as fact and is fueling polarized consumption and response. Elective abortion does mean that the potential life within the whom is being destroyed... that is true. But the meaning behind why and the divide in moral debate fuels the black and white conversation.

The last post I looked at is by @prochoiceamerica. This post is notated as Figure 4 in the index. Their post of a picture of protesters with the caption “Reproductive Freedom is a Fundamental Freedom” (Instagram- @prochoiceamerica). I first wanted to make sure I understood what fundamental freedoms are as articulated by the governmental understanding. Civil rights and civil liberties both encompass this idea of *fundamental freedom*, but they differ in how they provide these freedoms. Civil liberties are “individual freedoms guaranteed to the people primarily by the Bill of Rights. In general, civil liberties protect our right to think and act without government interference” (*Keeping the Republic*, 101). On the other hand “civil rights

refer to the extension of government action to secure citizenship rights for all members of society” (*Keeping the Republic*, 102). Civil liberties are the bill of rights and civil rights are in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, Nineteenth, and Twenty-six Amendments. This is important when recognizing how populations want to receive these fundamental rights. Do they want the government to protect them or do they want the government to not interfere? Reproductive rights are: about the legal right to contraception, abortion, fertility treatment, reproductive health, and access to information about one's reproductive body” (International Encyclopedia of Human Geography). It is impeccable to understand what fundamental rights are: “a group of rights that have been recognized by the Supreme Court as requiring a high degree of protection from government encroachment. These fundamental rights are specifically identified in the Constitution... especially in the Bill of Rights” (Legal Information Institute). Reproductive rights are not explicitly mentioned in the constitution, so they are therefore not a *fundamental* right in terms of constitutional understanding. Now I understand this is not a given right, and I can apply my own beliefs to whether it should or should not become a fundamental freedom. The intention of this post is urging the demand of reproductive rights to be fundamental rights, but audiences may interpret this as that reproductive rights are actually stated in the constitution. This post is an example of how language and perception are so subjective, and with many people with many different relationships to political language, it is incredibly difficult to get on the same page and find compromise or even just understanding.

## CONCLUSION

The polarization within the nation is dictated by the black and white narrative which social media creates. I have learned that the majority or “gray” voices do not get recognition on social media. Through the viralness desire, political social media content has developed an

aggressive approach which perpetuates polarization ideas. Because “gray” voices are not provocative and surprising they are not being seen by algorithms and echo chambers. Social media has become the truth for so many, and social media projects that there are only black and white approaches to political topics. This divide is only being perpetuated further in live debates, relationships, and political elections. I caught myself being influenced by social media, and I struggled to have an opinion of my own. In being introduced to the study of dramaturgy, I became curious about how my intersection of political social media and dramaturgical analysis might better help me navigate uninformed performance and polarization effects in political social media.

Through this application, I found how I can apply my dramaturgical tools to help me discover the truthful narrative under the influence of uninformed political social media performance. I learned that the United States is not as polarized as the media makes users believe, and there is space for conversation... we just have to look for it. Just like theater, social media is a performance with a story. Social media paints narratives, dictates understanding, and has the power to manipulate mass opinion. I wanted to see if my application might help me make my own opinion. This project was designed to showcase how to discover the accurate story, so then one can apply their own beliefs and morals. After my case study on the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, I felt that I was able to comprehend the truth of the story. I know the history and how it is affecting the United States today. I found the resources I needed to analyze uninformed performance, and how this performance might have influenced me without my research. These social media posts also taught me that I need to do extra research to really understand social context and a variety of perspectives as well. In my study, the biggest trend I found was that the United States really struggles with a lack of cohesive language understanding across all

perspectives. There is such a nonuniform understanding of labels and meaning that it is so difficult to actually understand what other perspectives identify as. The disjointed variety of social definitions and dictionary definitions make it incredibly challenging to see how most users lie in the middle ground segmentation, which is the greatest space for compromise.

To dramaturgically understand the authentic narrative in theater, we analyze, research, and practically apply our knowledge to the story. As a director and creator, I may use the dramaturgical information I have found in this study to create an informed performance. This is the type of research and understanding I would need to create an informed production on the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Dramaturgs support the director with this truthfully articulated narrative so that the director can conduct the most authentic performance on stage. Maybe one day I will use this study to dramaturg my own devised piece of theatre.

In my application, I have learned that there is no hope for compromise unless we can all dramaturg or realize the authentic narrative. I hope that my project simply showcases how using a dramaturgical lens can help social media users successfully navigate informed and uninformed performance in political social media content.

INDEX:

FIGURE 1:



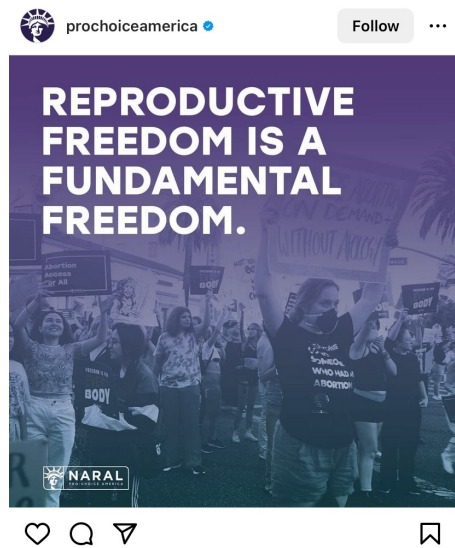
FIGURE 2:



FIGURE 3:



FIGURE 4:



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