

## Declarations: The Politics of 'The Shallows'

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What impact has the modern media environment had on the 2016 campaign? I know that's a boring sentence, but journalists and politicians talk about it a lot, journalists uneasily and politicians with frustration. The 24/7 news cycle and the million multiplying platforms with their escalating demands -- for pictures, video, sound, the immediate hot take -- exhaust politicians and staff, and media people too. Everyone is tired, and chronically tired people live, perilously, on the Edge of Stupid. More important, modern media realities make everything intellectually thinner, shallower. Everything moves fast; we talk not of the scandal of the day but the scandal of the hour, reducing a great event, a presidential campaign, into an endless river of gaffes.

The need to say something becomes the tendency to say anything. It makes everything dumber, grosser, less important.

This year I am seeing something, especially among the young of politics and journalism. They have received most of what they know about political history through screens. They are college graduates, they're in their 20s or 30s, they're bright and ambitious, but they have seen the movie and not read the book. They've heard the sound bite but not read the speech. Their understanding of history, even recent history, is superficial. They grew up in the internet age and have filled their brainspace with information that came in the form of pictures and sounds. They learned through sensation, not through books, which demand something deeper from your brain. Reading forces you to imagine, question, ponder, reflect. It provides a deeper understanding of political figures and events.

Watching a movie about the Cuban Missile Crisis shows you a drama. Reading about it shows you a dilemma. The book makes you imagine the color, sound, tone and tension, the logic of events: It makes your brain do work. A movie is received passively: You sit back, see, hear. Books demand and reward. When you read them your knowledge base deepens and expands. In time that depth comes to inform your work, sometimes in ways of which you're not fully conscious.

In the past 18 months I talked to three young presidential candidates -- people running for president, real grown-ups -- who, it was clear to me by the end of our conversations, had, in their understanding of modern American political history,

seen the movie and not read the book. Two of them, I've come to know, can recite whole pages of dialogue from movies. (It is interesting to me that the movies our politicians have most memorized are "The Godfather" Parts I and II.)

Everyone in politics is getting much of what they know through the internet, through Google searches and Wikipedia. They can give you a certain sense of things but are by nature quick and shallow reads that link to other quick and shallow reads. Sometimes subjects are treated in a tendentious manner, reflecting the biases or limited knowledge of the writer.

If you get your information mostly through the Web, you'll get stuck in "The Shallows," which is the name of a book by Nicholas Carr about what the internet is doing to our brains. Media, he reminds us, are not just channels of information: "They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought." The internet is chipping away at our "capacity for concentration and contemplation." "Once I was a scuba driver in the sea of words," writes Mr. Carr. "Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."

If you can't read deeply you will not be able to think deeply. If you can't think deeply you will not be able to lead well, or report well.

There is another aspect of this year's media environment, and it would be wrong not to speak it. It is that the mainstream media appear to have decided Donald Trump is so uniquely a threat to democracy, so appalling as a political figure, such a break with wholesome political tradition, that they are justified in showing, day by day, not only opposition but utter antagonism toward him. That surely has some impact on what Kellyanne Conway calls "undercover Trump voters." They know what polite people think of them; they know their support carries a social stigma. Last week I saw a CNN daytime anchor fairly levitate with anger as she reported on Mr. Trump; I thought she was going to have an out-of-body experience and start floating over the shiny glass desk. She surely knew she'd pay no price for her shown disdain, and might gain Twitter followers.

Guys, this isn't helping. Tell the story, ask the questions, trust the people, give it to them straight, report both sides. It's the most constructive thing you could do right now, when any constructive act comes as a real relief.

In a country whose institutions are in such fragile shape, mainstream media very much among them, it does no good for its members to damage further their own reputations for fairness, probity, judgment. Books will be written about this, though I'm not sure they'll read them.

As to Monday's debate, Hillary Clinton won. The story leading up to it was that she was frail, her health bad. Instead she was vibrant, confident, smiling and present. Sometimes when Mrs. Clinton speaks you sense she's operating at a level of

distraction, reviewing her performance in real time or thinking about dinner. Here her mind was on the mission. She did not fall into the hectoring cadence that is a harassment to the ear. She said nothing remotely interesting.

Mr. Trump's job was to leave you able to imagine him as president. You could have, but it would be a grumpy, grouchy president with thin skin.

Neither quite got across the idea that they were in it for America and not themselves.

When you are a politician leaving the debate stage you always know if you won. You can feel it. You know when it worked and when it didn't. You ask everyone, "How'd I do?" but you know the answer. And you're happy. What you get after such a victory is the whoosh. The whoosh is the wind at your back that gives the spring to your step. You get the jolly look and your laugh is a real laugh and not an enactment, and all this makes you better at the next stop, which makes the crowd cheer louder, and then you really know you've got the whoosh.

The whoosh can carry you for days or weeks, until there's a reversal of some kind. Then you lose the sense of magical good fortune and peerless personal performance and the audience senses it, gets quieter, and suddenly the whoosh is gone.

But right now Mrs. Clinton has it.

She'll probably overplay her hand. That's what she does. Her sense of her own destiny blinds her to her tendency toward misjudgment. She'll call Trump supporters a bucket of baneful baddies.

Since the debate Mr. Trump is angry and is going straight into junkyard dog mode, which won't work well.

This tells me the next week or so she's on the upalator and he's on the downalator. After that, we'll see.