

Dr. Hansen

WRI 1000

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Synthesizing a the Ideals of a Divided Country

The 1960's were a particularly tense time for the United States, a time when conspiracy theories headlined newspapers, presidential candidates alluded to shadow agendas in their speeches, and party lines were undeniably clear. Richard Hofstadter addresses this such state of political affairs in his essay "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" as he delves into the issues surrounding the 1964 presidential election and the recants the panic that has been festering in this country for generations. Hofstadter coins the term "paranoid style" to describe the general suspicion and distrust that is palpable among Americans, but more specifically among ultra-conservative right wing voters and politicians. This paranoia described by Hofstadter regarding "opposed interests which are totally irreconcilable, and thus by nature not susceptible to the normal political processes of bargain and compromise (86), may not seem altogether foreign considering recent political history. Given the overwhelming digital presence of politics in social media, and the extent to which Americans use digital avenues to obtain information, Americans across the political spectrum are more paranoid than ever. Although Hofstadter wrote his essay in response to the political climate of the 1960's, recent authors convey political paranoia is prevalent and intensifying in today's political arena through an overabundance of false information and an over reliance on mass media as the main source for news.

As this last election progressed, responses in light of Hofstadter's theme arose in relation to how political paranoia manifests in this generation of instant gratification and "fake news".

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Henry Giroux wrote the article “Assassination Talk, the Banality of Evil, and the Paranoid State of American Politics” which highlights how this digital age “celebrates the inability to think” and brandishes the lack of a public sphere. Giroux points out that this lack of education is simply not the fault of the education system, but one of the generation that desires information over knowledge and disregards the process of sifting through fictitious news to uncover the truth.

Additionally, Emma Roller (writing for the New York Times Opinion Pages) showcases how her opinion oriented around political paranoia refers to the term “confirmation bias” to demonstrate how evidence is used to reinforce preexisting claims rather than as a medium for discussion.

America has entered into an inescapable, digitized state: a state in which the act of obtaining information receives higher praise than the development knowledge through the exchanging of ideas. Giroux implores this point in “The teaching machines of the current era... celebrate the inability to think” and “readily eliminate institutions and public spheres that make thinking possible...” (49). Without the mechanisms in place for teaching developing minds how to process information in a critical, yet objective fashion, recent generations of Americans are falling victim to paranoia through lack of exposure to and acceptance of opposing claims. The ignorance described in Giroux’s essay boasts that the general public is at fault for believing what they see on social media, whereas Emma Roller describes the news sources themselves as having “no responsibility to separate truth from fiction” (59). In both cases, it becomes clear that the most outrageous of information will get the most attention and that rarely will readers look beyond what they want to see to seek the truth because recent generations are accustomed to quickly taking in information that supports their preconceived opinion rather than processing said information through discussion.

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In consequence of the lack of education, more people are unwilling to enter into a conversation that might test their opinion. This is in part due to the instant gratification culture we live in. We are only satisfied when we accomplish something more quickly or in a better way than others, we are only satisfied when people notice our successes, and we are only satisfied when we are instantaneously rewarded for our actions. When it comes to the attention of one party that their opponents' argument has validity, a stress response is triggered causing a defensive paranoid state of mind. Roller refers to a "confirmation" bias in her essay, which is the acceptance of information that only solidifies an opinion, rather than taking opposing viewpoints and formulating an overarching consensus. This rut of thinking is so common in today's political climate due to the multitudes of competing information all vying for the attention of readers, thus an influx of news geared specifically toward one viewpoint rather than for the unity of truth. Hofstadter seems to have predicted the trouble media would have in regard to paranoia even before the boom of technology during the millennia. He notes "Important changes may also be traced to the effects of the mass media"(81). Giroux insists this problem could be alleviated through an open dialogue and improved education, he prompts readers to explore the question "Where are the agents of democracy and the public spaces that offer hope in such dark times"(51). Without education, lines are drawn and a sense of community is prevented. When in absence of community, discussion is limited and compromise is faltering. And when compromise is unreachable, democracy suffers and citizens enter into the tumultuous array of political paranoia.

In looking at how political paranoia has remained a steady part of American culture from 1964 when Hofstadter wrote his essay to today, it is no wonder that media has only elevated the discord. Thinking about how so many people lack the will to look at issues comprehensively and

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form a place of neutrality, it becomes evident how this stems from a lack of education. Readers should consider that they can make a difference in this country, whether it be by engaging in discussion or educating their children and the upcoming generations of voters, everyone can take steps to rectify the grasp political paranoia has on this country.

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This is a good draft. This paper offers an interesting discussion of some of the ideas surrounding ways that the paranoid style is influencing and developing our contemporary political discourse. The idea of a lack of education makes me wonder more what you (or Giroux) are referring to specifically—is he saying that more people need to go to college? Or what is he arguing? This paper seems to have a lot of “I Say,” but I’m having a bit of a difficult time tracing the “They Say”s that all of this is emerging from. Roller especially seems to get short shrift here, but the treatment of Giroux seems brief, too. What do you want your readers to understand about the primary arguments each of these writers is making, and what do you find interesting about those arguments? In what ways do they complement each other? And how should reading them together, in this shared context, make modern readers think more deeply about Hofstadter’s concept of the paranoid style?

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