

Alt-reality leaves its mark on presidential campaign

With the arrival of fall, an anxious electorate increasingly feels like the kids in the back seat asking their parents, "Are we there ... yet?" Some of us are even old enough to remember when round-the-clock television commercials were the most annoying aspect of our endless political campaigns. That now seems a calmer, gentler time.

None of the above

The current mood was captured in a late August focus group held in Brookfield, Wisconsin. Reported *The Washington Post*:



"For a small group of undecided voters here, the presidential choices this year are bleak: **Hillary Clinton** is a 'liar' with a lifetime of political skullduggery and a ruthless agenda for power, while **Donald Trump** is your 'drunk uncle' who can't be trusted to listen even to the good advice he's paying for.

"Describing the election as a cesspool, 12 swing voters participating in a focus group last week in this battleground state were deeply negative about both candidates, starkly describing their choice this year as one between a candidate they loathe (Clinton) and one they fear (Trump)."

Yet one of them will be elected president on Nov. 8. Lucky us.



Ryan triumphs

The campaign to oust House Speaker Paul Ryan was launched amid much fanfare in May, as former Alaska Gov. and 2008 GOP vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin pledged to deploy her savvy, wit and prestige on behalf of Ryan's primary challenger. Palin predicted that Ryan was "soon to be 'Cantored,' as in Eric Cantor," referring to the former House majority leader ousted in his 2014 primary.

Ryan's "political career is over but for a miracle because he has so disrespected the will of the people, and as the leader of the GOP, the convention, certainly he is to remain neutral, and for him to already come out and say who he will not



support is not a wise decision of his," Palin continued.

Palin soon was joined by such conservative luminaries as Ann Coulter and Michelle Malkin, who parachuted into Ryan's district on behalf of his opponent, Paul Nehlen, who also enjoyed the full-throated support of the alt-reality conservative media. Foremost among Nehlen's media cheerleaders was Breitbart.com, which headlined his momentum on a nearly daily basis.

"Ann Coulter lights Wisconsin on fire for Paul Nehlen against **Paul Ryan**: 'This is it, this is your last chance to save America,' " Breitbart headlined. On the day of the Aug. 9 primary, Nehlen appeared on a radio show hosted by Breitbart CEO

Steve Bannon and declared that Ryan was a "snake. He's a soulless, globalist snake, and we smoked him out of the snake hole." Bannon would shortly afterward be named CEO of Trump's presidential campaign.

Indeed, readers of Breitbart should be forgiven for believing that Ryan was about to be tossed from office. In mid-July, Breitbart headlined breathlessly: Paul Ryan plummets to 43 percent in new primary poll:

"JANESVILLE, WI — A poll of likely Republican voters shows House Speaker Paul Ryan well below 50 percent in his



race to maintain his seat in Wisconsin's First Congressional District ...

"Ryan's challenger, Wisconsin businessman **Paul Nehlen**, is polling at 32 percent.

"The new poll could be viewed as a warning sign to Ryan, as Wisconsin voters may be growing increasingly frustrated with the key elements of Ryan's



longstanding policy agenda.”

In the end, Ryan got 84 percent of the vote. And no, Palin, never visited.

The alternative-reality media

The anti-Ryan campaign not only exposed the role of the so-called alt-right but also the emergence of the alt-reality media. As we ponder what has become of the conservative movement — and where it is going — we will have to wrestle with the role of this echo chamber in shaping and distorting political debate.

Actually, as I said in a number of interviews this summer, the emerging echo chamber has effectively created competing realities in our politics. While the mainstream media has richly deserved much of the criticism it has received for its bias, double standards and oozing disdain for conservatives, it occurs to some of us that we perhaps have been too successful in breaking down its credibility.

The result is the creation of silos of alternative reality in which Ryan is about to be defeated and Trump never misleads his supporters. The gatekeepers have been delegitimized altogether, which inoculates partisans against legitimate fact-checking and against legitimate investigations. It has not helped that the mainstream media has squandered its credibility or that once-trusted voices on the right have morphed from thought leaders to shills in this presidential campaign.

As anyone who spends any time on social media has noticed, we live in an age without gatekeepers or trusted referees, and it is increasingly difficult to point out blatant falsehoods or bogus memes. As fact-checkers like PolitiFact have discredited themselves, it has become harder to point out to voters that a candidate’s statements are demonstrably false.

Admittedly, it was stories like the Drudge/Breitbart/Ingraham jihad against Ryan that were on my mind when I spoke with Oliver Darcy of Business Insider in August about the crisis of the conservative media:

“Let’s say that Donald Trump basically makes whatever you want to say, whatever claim he wants to make. And everybody knows it’s a falsehood. The big question of my audience, it is impossible for me to say that, ‘By the way, you know it’s false.’ And they’ll say, ‘Why? I saw it on Allen B. West.’ Or they’ll say, ‘I saw it on a Facebook page.’ And I’ll say, ‘The New York Times did a fact check.’ And they’ll say, ‘Oh, that’s The New York Times. That’s bulls---.’ There’s nobody — you can’t go to anybody and say, ‘Look, here are the facts.’ ”

Obviously, when this is all over, there’s going to be a reck-

oning of some kind for both the mainstream and the alternative media. And it’s not likely to be pretty.

Wins and losses

Over the summer, our scorecard was decidedly mixed. As the Obamacare train wreck gathered momentum, more insurers bailed from the program and we learned that here in Wisconsin, three insurance providers have asked for rate hikes of more than 30 percent for 2017. Voter ID was on, then off, then back on again. We marked the 20th anniversary of the passage of state welfare reform but still wrestle with the consequences of long-term, multi-generational poverty.


A fatal shooting by police led to riots in Milwaukee and calls for urgent action on social and economic issues. But the collapse of a decidedly modest education reform — a recovery district that might have saved a single failing school — died with barely a whimper. (See related stories on Pages 4 and 28.)



A glimmer of hope in academia

Even as other schools multiplied their lists of “microaggressions” and “trigger warnings,” the **University of Chicago** took a decidedly countercultural stand, sending out a welcome letter to its entering Class of 2020, warning students not to expect bubble wrapping:

“Our commitment to academic freedom means that we do not support so-called ‘trigger warnings,’ we do not cancel invited speakers because their topics might prove controversial, and we do not condone the creation of intellectual ‘safe spaces’ where individuals can retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own.”

In other words, the University of Chicago will treat students as fully functioning adults. How radical. 

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