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During the summer of 2008, the Hinckley Institute was honored to participate in a groundbreaking program in collaboration with Shantou University. Over the course of three months, seven students and three professors from the Cheung Kong School of Journalism at Shantou University in China, and five students from the Hinckley Institute of Politics, traveled throughout the United States to cover the U.S. 2008 presidential election. The students gained different perspectives of each other’s cultures, learned about how the U.S. media functions in election cycles, and worked side-by-side building relationships and learning from one another. From their journey to Denver to cover the Democratic Convention, to Minneapolis for the Republican Convention, the students were published in more than two-dozen major print and broadcast organizations, as well as a variety of media outlets throughout the United States and China. They had live internet coverage on China News Service (CNS), the most elite of China’s media. In addition to the conventions, students also had the opportunity to travel to Chicago for background stories on presidential candidate Barack Obama, and to Indianapolis for a workshop with the Indianapolis Star and the local television stations. Along their journey they were able to get different views from citizens, staffers, delegates, and the candidates themselves. This article is a brief look into that experience.

THE O’BRIENS

Denver, CO: Dan O’Brien’s bearded face is cast in the shadow of an oversized black Stetson hat as he methodically strums his acoustic guitar in Denver’s Civic Center Park. It’s a prickly hot August day, and O’Brien’s outfit of Wrangler Jeans and long-sleeved flannel shirt must be anything but comfortable. In his low, rough drawl, he improvises a campfire style song for a small gathering of people. With his off-the-cusp lyrics he doesn’t muse on open ranges or lost loves—he instead sings about a man O’Brien would consider a hero—his own modern day desperado: Barack Obama.

In a frame tent behind him, his wife, Janette, re-arranges CD’s and flyers displayed on a folding table, while his two children, Kyle, aged seventeen and Maura, fourteen throw a Frisbee nearby. In a few minutes Janette will be beside her husband, tugging on the strings of an upright base, with Maura on the violin and Kyle on the mandolin. At the moment, it’s down-time for the family band, and Dan is taking an opportunity to entertain a group of convention-goers who have requested an Obama song.

O’Brien and his family, who are self proclaimed “proud, card-carrying, Democrats” have travelled from the mountain town of Evergreen, fifteen miles west of Denver. They paid for a booth in the Civic Center Park during Convention week to entertain the crowds and sell merchandise, but more importantly because O’Brien says he wanted his family to enjoy the experience.

“We can’t get on the Convention floor and wanted to be in the mix,” he says. “We won’t make back what we paid to be here, but that’s OK. This is historic.”

During Colorado Rockies baseball games O’Brien and his son sell soda and popcorn at nearby Coors field, and he hopes that there will be need for an extra concessions seller at Obama’s speech, to be held at Mile High Stadium. Concessions are just a way to make money though—his true passion is his family Bluegrass band. The family of four plays in small towns across the Western U.S., places O’Brien calls “the little dots on maps.” He says that touring brings his family to places they would normally never go—particularly small communities that are not Democratic in nature.

“[On tour] we typically keep our politics to ourselves” says O’Brien. “There’s a strange…” he pauses, looking for the right word. “Prejudice is too harsh a word, but in rural America they just can’t see supporting the Democratic Party,” he says with a despair that is rapidly apparent in his voice.
Here his soft-spoken wife chimes in for the first time. “They’re often times uninformated about the issues and don’t always understand the facts.”

Naturally, the O’Briens Democratic inclinations don’t make them right and Republicans wrong, just as the hoards of Republican enthusiasts who would later convene in St. Paul are no more correct than their Democratic rivals. Yet Janette strikes an interesting chord with her comment. While it’s impossible to say that one region of America is less informed, intelligent, patriotic, or interested than another, the objective facts concerning what might be called the “intellectual habits” of Americans, particularly the current day college aged generation, are startling.

Complacency seems to reign supreme in many facets of American society today—we are an uninformed nation and generation because we are simply uninterested. The aspiration to accomplish great things appears to be waning, and the path of least resistance is the approach that many have decided upon.

Of course there are those among us who break this mold. The most accomplished doctors, lawyers, engineers, parents and astronauts of the future are right now in high school and college likely achieving great things and setting the bar higher for those around them. But in any mass there will be outliers. It’s the majority that one must consider.

**SCREEN TIME TRUMPS ACTUAL TIME**

Take, for example, our collective fascination with television. From 1997 to 2005, Americans watched an average of 8 hours and 11 minutes a day, while Turkey, ranked second in the world, averaged 5 hours a day (The Economist, 2007). Today, adolescents and adults now average 65 days a year watching television, while time spent with T.V., internet and music totaled 3,543 hours a year and is projected to topple 3,620 hours by 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau).

Given the number of hours our nation sits before a box that transmits but does not receive, that manipulates and distorts information and sells products in the most market friendly way, it’s little surprise that Americans have less time for other leisure activities, like reading for example. According to a 2007 study released by the National Endowment for the Arts, Americans of every age are reading less for pleasure. The study found that 65% college freshmen say they do little or no reading for pleasure while only 30% of thirteen year olds in 2004 said they read for fun almost every day (Toppo, 2007).

It seems with all that “screen time,” America’s youth has less time to do other things, such as exercise. Data from NHANES surveys show that prevalence for obesity of those aged 12–19 years has increased from 5.0% in the time of 1976-1980 to 17.6% in the time of 2003-2006 (“Childhood Overweight and Obesity”, 2009).

Naturally, if our generation is too busy, or lazy, to take care of ourselves, we invest little time in taking care of others.

A Bureau of Labor Statistics study found that persons age 35 to 44 are the most likely to volunteer (31.3 percent), while persons in their early twenties were the least likely (18.6 percent) (“Volunteering in the United States”, 2008).

It would be hard to deny that, as a nation, and more particularly as a generation, we watch too much T.V., surf too much web, and are fully addicted to our iPods. We must always be plugged in, as the desire for perpetual electronic stimulation is insatiable. It seems that the heart-pounding, dizzying excitement generated from old-fashioned protest, communication, and literature is something that is dying before our very eyes.

**UNIFYING THEME IN THE PARK**

There certainly isn’t a shortage of protest, communication, or literature in Denver during the Convention. This is not a place for the socially awkward or shy. Seemingly everyone in Denver is happy to meet new people, and even more excited at the prospect of telling others what brought them to the capital of Colorado during the week-long event. Everyone has a camera, or is on camera, or is simultaneously involved in both. People film one another without consent, people talk and argue without constraint. It’s a proactive crowd if ever there was one—everyone has a cause, belief, or at the very least a story to tell. It’s a heterogeneous and eclectic group of every imaginable demographic.

A stone’s throw away down the sidewalk from the O’Brien tent, a man who preferred to remain anonymous runs a booth that stands in staunch opposition to Obama and McCain. The man in the booth has a stubby beard that hasn’t been shaved in a few days, and he wears an orange bandana around his neck. A member of the Revolutionary Communist Party, he’s come from his hometown of Berkeley, California to discuss his ideology with anyone who will listen, but also to sell homemade t-shirts, the most interesting of which is a shot of Tommie Smith and John Carlos, standing on the Olympic podium, each with an arm raised, hands in fists, and heads bowed. Beneath the image reads the caption, “We need more of this.”

“Promoting Communism is what we need, but we’re supporting everyone out here—demonstrating against the war, or the attack on women—all of it,” he says.

While the Berkeley native is an idealist, he’s realistic enough to know that this nation will not soon become communist. This admission won’t stop him from pursuing the all too familiar cliché called “change.”

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1 On October 16th, 1968, Tommie Smith and John Carlos finished first and third in the 200 meter Olympic finals. Both raised black-gloved right fists during the national anthem ceremony. “My raised right hand was for the power in black America. Carlos’ raised left hand stood for unity in black America. Together they formed an arch of unity and power,” Smith said (Davis, 2008).
“We think that we need a movement,” he says as forcefully as his demure northern California dialect will allow. “Some people say a protest does no good. We disagree. We think it does a lot of good.”

At times it’s hard to hear the soft-spoken communist, as the air is teeming with competing loudspeakers playing rap music, live singing, and the voices of a young actors group from Denver. The various noises combine to create one homogeneous, electrified buzz.

**ANOTHER VIEW**

Across the street from the park, a handful of poster toting protestors are relegated to a small patch of concrete between two busy parallel streets. They too have music playing, serenading the masses with what some might call patriotic country tunes:

“They started something we’re going to finish, and we won’t rest till that day, everywhere you look, you see them flags flying, USA.”

Their posters range from the tame, “Support our Troops,” to the extreme—a caricature of Obama depicted as Osama bin Laden, wearing a turban and toting an AK 47.

A man who identifies himself as Ken from Eldorado Springs, Colorado, says he’s not protesting, but rather supporting the fight for freedom all over the world.

“Every issue has two sides, right?” he asks behind reflective sunglasses. His face is beet red from the unrelenting sun, as his designated chunk of concrete offers no shade.

“I always ask myself,” he says while scanning the crowd, “if a meteor wiped out the U.S. right now, would the world be a safer or less safe place? I believe it would be a less safe place.”

Behind him the speakers reverberate: *They started something we’re going to finish, we’ll stare right in the face of terror but lady liberty still stands.*

“If the war takes ten years you got to do it—you don’t give up now,” Ken continues. “No one here on this sidewalk wants war. But you can’t waste the 4,000 lives of American soldiers now.”

To be more exact, as of December 13, 2008, at least 4,209 members of the U.S. military had died in the Iraq war, 3,397 of whom were killed by hostile action (A.P., *U.S. Military Deaths*). While it’s hard to pin an accurate number of Iraqi civilian deaths, an August 27th, 2008 CRS report for Congress shows the figure between 86,000 and 94,000 (Fischer, 2008, p. 3). The cost to U.S. taxpayers is $720 million a day, and over five years will carry a near $1.4 trillion price tag (McConnell, 2008).

**A DIFFERENT APPROACH**

Further down Broadway Street, at the intersection of 16th Avenue, a group of fiery protestors scream out against the war. They are mostly young, some wearing black bandanas to cover their faces, many holding signs of varying cleverness (they range from *F&% the War* to the slightly more thoughtful *Riot for Peace*).

One of the most energetic in the group, a wiry young man with a beard, has assumed the role of leader.

“Tell me what democracy looks like?” he cries out (so loud that his voice cracks on “what”). In unison the marchers chant, “This is what democracy looks like!” When confronted by police, many in the group scream in their faces, demanding their rights and civil liberties and freedom to protest.

On two attempts to ask protestors why they were marching, near identical responses were given: “It’s not about me. It’s about ending this war.” They won’t give their names or reasons for protesting, as though they have lost their identities and become one cohesive, teeming entity fully of fire and exuberance. It’s a community mentality—it’s “not about me,” but about something bigger, something more significant than any one individual.

Of course anti-McCain (and Obama) chants are rampant on the streets as well, along with anti-abortion posters with pictures of week-old, bloodied fetuses. There are the “Jesus Saves” believers with massive yellow signs quoting Bible verses, and there’s a nihilist on a bike that says he is “anti everything.” The excitement spans partisanship and age and race and gender—it’s not about the individuals so much as it’s about individuals teaming up to create an atmosphere, a multi dimensional experience in and of itself.

**CONTROLLING THE OVERSPILL**

It’s the police that try to encompass this raging, emotional monster. They surround everything—the park with the booths and the musicians and the protestors—they create a barrier, like a huge beaker that prevents the contents of some very volatile and dangerous chemical reaction from erupting uncontrollably. They are all clad in dark blue uniforms, some with clear facemasks and most yielding batons and automatic weapons, reminiscent of a soccer game between mortal rivals in London. They are on foot, on bike, on motorcycle, on horse, in sedans and SUV’s and even hanging on to large, paddy wagon vans.

There were particularly acute security concerns at the Denver convention, as the first African-American presidential nominee was the center of attention. The city brought in nearly 1,500 police officers from all over Colorado; $2.1 million was spent on protection equipment for the officers, $1.4 million for barricades, and $850,000 on supplies for arresting and processing lawbreakers (Johnston and Schmitt, 2008, A12).

The officers all wear faces of indifference and look slightly on edge, and while it might be a front to intimidate civil disobedience, as they scowl in unison they look daunting—a force to be reckoned with. It looks like something out of 1984—everyone watching one another and Big Brother watching it all.
WHY THE SPILLAGE DID (AND DIDN’T) MATTER
The week in Denver was a historic event—but not just because the first man with African-American descent had a strong chance of winning the presidency. It wasn’t just about the much-anticipated Thursday night speech, or Bill and Hillary, or the protests or the riot geared police. Its significance came from the fact that such a numbered, motley group of people could be so passionate about such a slew of causes and because they had a very public forum to voice their opinions.

The Convention mattered because everyone had an opinion—it was a cultural and intellectual melting pot where oft times great minds were uniting, carousing, and at times butting. People of all walks and backgrounds were leveled in Denver—everyone was worthy of the camera and being asked for a sound byte.

Where else can a Hinckley intern from Salt Lake be swept up in a sea of angry protestors, run into Tom Brokaw on a downtown Denver sidewalk, listen to a boisterous Samoan delegate discuss communism with a group of Chinese journalists over a hotel breakfast of Styrofoam eggs and watery coffee, chat for five minutes with Charlie Wilson at the bathroom sink of a swank hotel, drink “Obama beer” at a black tie dinner, and ride in a cab with the editor of the Congressional Quarterly, all in two days?

REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT
About 1,000 miles away and four days later, the Republican convention generated the same enthusiasm. The first day was postponed by a raging storm named Gustav, but that didn’t deter proud Republicans from showing up in droves, visibly energized to celebrate their ideologies.

While St. Paul played host to the same unbounded enthusiasm as Denver, it also displayed the same pageantry, opulence, and over the top flaunting of (perceived) wealth and (perceived) power. Both conventions had a certain beauty-queen element, and at times the decadent, even spurious nature was overwhelming. American documentary filmmaker Pat Dollard commented before the Mile High acceptance speech: “Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama’s big speech on Thursday night will be delivered from an elaborate columned stage resembling a miniature Greek temple.” That’s not to mention what wasn’t captured on television: the after hours parties infused with expensive liquor, hemmed Italian suits, flashy, unsubstantiated smiles and handshakes lacking a direct look in the eyes.

Of course it would be a lie to deny that much of the election process is pomp and arrogance. It’s undeniable that much of the election hype exists to generate publicity and to give a handful of privileged Americans a platform to hear their own voices that they are convinced spew infallible, perfectly logical argument. It’s true that much of it is a media circus, where everyone hides behind clichéd rhetoric, makeup and expensive outfits.

But to say the conventions and the election process is nothing more than a superficial, money driven show would be woefully inaccurate. While some of these accusations hold sway, such a cynical generalization misses the mark on what gatherings of this magnitude and significance have to offer.

While there was an over the top attitude in both cities, another theme that linked both was the hodge-podge of participants. Age, race, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and personal hygiene had no bearing on who chimed in at either convention.

Regardless of political ideology or presidential preference, it seems that Senator John McCain did the best job summing up the attitudes of many who were at the conventions and later in Washington, D.C., when he expressed his desire for Americans to seek causes greater than their own individual self-interests. There was a competition on YouTube, sponsored by the Republican National Convention and McCain’s campaign, asking individuals to submit videos of someone in their neighborhood who goes above the call of duty to serve a cause greater than their own.

That’s what these people were trying to do—serve a cause greater than their own personal interests. The conventions and elections could be one elongated, drawn out submission to YouTube.

At times, ours seems to be a society where complacency and resignation reign supreme. This is particularly true in the political realm, where Americans often feel disheveled and left out, which may account for the meager 64% voter turnout in 2004 (U.S. Census Bureau and Federal Elections Commission). While the 2008 elections seemed to generate more excitement than in elections past, they garnered essentially the same percentage of voter turnout as 2004 (“That Huge Voter Turnout?”). Many seem resigned to the fact that a few wealthy, (usually) intelligent people run the show, and that there is nothing they can do to change anything.

WHAT CONCERNS US
The conventions, however, united a diverse group of individuals who thought otherwise, who wanted to be a part of something historic, and who wanted to make their opinions heard.

What the conventions offer—what they give rise to—are people who want to be a part of the discussion in America. It seems a valid concern that America has “disengaged” when the November 2006 elections, where every member of the House of Representatives and a third of the Senate was up for election, garnered 48% of voting-age citizens (File).

As a nation we retain information for an instant, then forget it the moment we turn the channel or click a mouse. We absorb but do not engage. We sit and listen and watch, but do not stand up or argue or ask. The people involved in the election have decided not to be relegated to this fate.

They go about it by drastically different means—some wear suit and tie, others bandanas over their faces and tattered black clothes. Some shout to be heard, and others use
pen and paper. There are those whose ideas are carried on signs, while others hold them close to their chests. Some are disingenuous, some are loud, some use too much mousse in their hair, and others smell like they could use a good, hour long scrubbing. But they are all doing something. They are all engaged.

No matter what the issue—be it Drill Baby Drill, childhood PE programs for an obese nation, genocide in Darfur (remember that?), poverty in the streets of America and throughout the world, the degeneration of a generation because of MySpace and text-messaging, or a war on terror—no one has ever changed the world from the comfort of their couch. Moreover, no one will ever accomplish anything sneering at or criticizing those who are trying. It’s easy to say how ridiculous the guy with the sign looks, or how phony the politician on TV is, but until one enters the public discourse, they have little room to complain.

Don’t like the government? Join local politics. Now that Obama-mania has subsided, will all of us who had cardboard signs in our yards and bumper stickers on our cars stayed involved? Or will we become stagnant, moving only to out-stretch our hands in search of a freebee? Will this be a repeat of post 9-11 America, when freedom fries, flags, and country music united our nation for a brief instant until many of us became complacent and forgot about the war, our troops, and our collective conscience when dealing with the big issues?

Don’t like genocides? Do more than buy a t-shirt. Hate the war? Instead of complaining to your TV (which cannot hear your witty quips and insults) or adhering a clever phrase to your car or quoting John Lennon on your Facebook page, make your voice heard. It’s meaningful whether ten or ten million people listen.

**BACK IN THE PARK**

That’s why Dan and Janette O’Brien came to Civic Center Park in Denver: because they wanted to serve a cause greater than their own self-interests, and hoped to bestow this mentality onto their children.

As he strums his guitar and chats with me I ask if he’s bothered by the hit he’ll take financially, being out of work for the week and paying for the tent.

A smile comes across his weathered face and his eyes light up. His fingers stop strumming, the melody of his guitar momentarily dead. He pauses a moment to reflect on his answer—O’Brien is a man who picks his words carefully.

He looks over to his children, who are inviting strangers to throw the Frisbee with them, then looks back at me.

“I wouldn’t be any place else.”

**REFERENCES**


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1 No one knows just how much oil and gas lies within 200 miles of the U.S. coasts. The Minerals Management Service of the Interior Department has estimated that the off-limits areas could contain an additional 18 billion barrels of accessible oil, on top of 68 billion barrels still beneath the sea in the areas where drilling is allowed. That new offshore oil would be enough to cover the nation’s energy needs for nearly 2.5 years. But the U.S. oil industry views that estimate as conservative, largely because it is based on decades-old research that has not been updated using the latest seismic exploration tools (Witt, 2008).

2 32% of American schoolchildren are overweight or obese (Parker-Pope, 2008).

3 International experts estimate 200,000 people have died in Darfur in west Sudan since mostly African rebels took up arms against the Arab-dominated Khartoum government and Arab militias in 2003 (Shahine, 2008).

4 In January 2007, 671,888 people in the U.S. were living on the streets or in shelters (Koch, 2008).

