



Gender Bending Can Challenge Our Biases

Would you think differently about Donald Trump if he were a woman?

Watching Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton go head-to-head during the U.S. presidential debates was good theatre, but it was unlikely anyone's mind was changed by the spectacle.

Trump supporters were used to, and probably applauded, his aggressive approach, stalking around the stage, attacking Clinton at every opportunity and fiercely bringing each question back to the same topics – lower taxes, more jobs. His opponent maintained a composed, unemotional stance, unruffled and smiling through the most vicious of attacks. It is likely Clinton's supporters were repulsed by Trump's demeanour, while his fans would have felt their opinions of Clinton justified by her smooth "poli-speak".

What we saw were two very different opponents presenting themselves as expected. But what would happen if the positions were reversed, if Trump were a woman and Clinton a man? Is there anything in the way they expressed themselves that makes us like them more or less just because of their gender? And could experiencing what the U.S. presidential candidates said and how they said it through gender-inverted characters, cause us to revisit our own gender bias and develop insights from different perspectives?

This was the thinking which inspired "**Her**

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Opponent", a project I conceived with Joe Salvatore, a director and NYU professor, and which restaged parts of the three 2016 presidential debates. The performance replayed each word, action, tone and pause of the two candidates with a twist – the part of Donald Trump was played by a woman, Rachel Tuggle Whorton, a PhD candidate and adjunct instructor at NYU, while a man, NYU Adjunct Professor Daryl Embry, took on the persona of Hillary Clinton. The candidates were given new names, Brenda King and Jonathan Gordon. The performance was live-streamed thanks to our collaboration with Andrew Freiband, a film-maker and faculty member at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Seeing through gender bias

By swapping gender but staying authentic to speech patterns and gestures, we were able to shake the audience from their normal reaction. Trump was no longer seen as a reality star or Hillary as a female icon. Free from their preconceived biases, audiences found themselves seeing things differently and gaining insight into how others saw these two very public figures.

It was an unusual experiment which sparked some surprising reactions in a talkback session after the events. The expectation, held by myself and the majority of people polled before the performance,

had been that Clinton would look “more presidential” as a man and Trump’s lack of respect for, and aggression towards, his opponent would not be tolerated in a woman. Our predictions were way off.

As one male audience member noted, “About halfway through watching this it hit me – I see how he (Trump) won.”

A female viewer admitted, “I found I could see how King got the emotional response from people. With Trump, I couldn’t, I never even tried.”

“I expected to feel validated in my beliefs,” a left-leaning member of the audience noted. “But I thought Gordon was weak. I found myself expecting him, as a man, to attack more.”

Many agreed that the words coming out of Gordon’s mouth seemed less believable. Whereas in the real debate, Clinton had seemed confident and liberated, standing firm and cool while taking on the aggressive Trump, in the re-enactment Gordon appeared trapped. “I thought he seemed weak, he should have fought back,” was one response. Another noted the constant smile accepted, even expected, on a female politician, on Gordon seemed smug and “really punchable”.

“I could finally identify with Brenda/Trump, (but) Jonathan seemed untrustworthy... by acting so cool he looked fake.”

How we feel affects what we see

The spectrum of responses was far from homogenous as the audience reacted according to their personal gender bias. Protected by the distance which comes from watching a performance in a theatre or on a computer screen, their response was from the gut. This was most notable with regards to the female politician. Some found Brenda King’s performance refreshing and eye-opening.

“When she was attacking, I had so much respect for her and her level of confidence,” one woman noted. Others recognised that, as a woman, they were more ready to listen to what King had to say. “Brenda owned the stage. Irrespective of whether you agreed with her, it was easier to absorb.”

There were those, however, who found King’s aggressive tactics and stalking around the stage jarring: “A woman behaving like that is considered out of control.”

It highlighted the way in which the real Clinton’s performance had evolved and adapted to society’s expectations of how a woman is allowed to behave. When a man takes on this persona, he is seen as smug or condescending; Gordon seemed, as one

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viewer pointed out, to be “mansplaining”.

Why could we not predict what would happen?

“Her Opponent” has been helpful as a tool to investigate perception. How we think we will perceive something is very different to how we actually feel about it. Because we’re staging this as a theatre performance, re-enacting life through art, the audience is judging based on their emotional reactions, their responses are guided by their feelings rather than their intellect.

It also raised questions as to how much distaste for Trump’s rhetoric is due to him being seen as a boorish TV star. When his words were put into the mouth of a woman, many found it sounded less brash or crazy; perhaps because it is more acceptable for a woman to be more dramatic and emotional.

While there is no evidence the cross-gender casting changed anyone’s preference, it gave people enough distance to reflect on their own deeply ingrained gender bias, and to think about how they might have better understood the debates and the other perspective if they had not held such strong preference or distaste for a specific candidate. As one member of the audience admitted, “In the real debates I thought Hillary won hands down, (but) this has totally made me question my judgment.”

‘Her Opponent’ was performed at the Provincetown Playhouse in the West Village, New York City and screened at INSEAD in Singapore. It is the first stage of a multi-phase project, the second stage, a recorded version, will feature a shot-for-shot video reproduction of the debates, which will be used in classrooms to help uncover perceptual biases.

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