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Abstract

Evil is a well-traveled word. It is a word that finds itself in many a discussion about many a subject. And it is not just an American trend; it is used in English-language countries in various ways, some mirroring its use in the States. And because evil is such a broadly used word, its rhetorical power can best be seen in part by its rhetorical scope. This is why this ethnographic study aims to analyze the uses of evil on the English language internet over the course of a day. The day chosen was October 24, 2016, situating the analysis with discourse about the 2016 American election, Halloween, but also other areas such as crime and religion. Such an analysis reveals the lack of elaborated definitions for evil but the powerful judgment it evokes in these different contexts.

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Evil is a well-traveled word. It is a word that finds itself in many a discussion about many a subject. And it is not just an American trend; it is used in English-language countries in various ways, some mirroring its use in the States. And because evil is such a broadly used word, its rhetorical power can best be seen in part by its rhetorical scope. This is why this ethnographic study aims to analyze the uses of evil on the English language internet over the course of a day. The day chosen was October 24, 2016, situating the analysis with discourse about the 2016 American election, Halloween, but also other areas such as crime and religion. Such an analysis reveals the lack of elaborated definitions for evil but the powerful judgment it evokes in these different contexts. Keywords: Evil, Internet, 2016 Election, Clinton, Trump, Crime, Ethnography

On October 24, 2016, a Twitter account named TIMJPH under the Twitter handle "@truthismaster" posted this tweet: "#Hillary sold her soul to the #Devil years ago. She is now his choice for President and #NWOQueenofdarkness. #HillaryDevilWorships. #Evil!"

On October 25, 2016, *The Afternoon Voice*, Mumbai's English language tabloid, printed a column where the author noted that "if the eminence of begging is not checked immediately, it will turn out to be a big social evil in the future" (Dixit, 2016).

And on these dates, out of 800 images under the search keyword "evil" by a Google Images search, there were 15 pictures of clowns, 14 pictures of pumpkins, and one of Pope Benedict.

These examples are part of a larger context: the use of evil on the English language internet. There is a need to better understand the role and influence of phrases like "a necessary evil," "lesser of two evils," and of course the plethora of monsters in film and TV, cats on the internet, and slogans used by companies to show their goodness (i.e., Google's "don't be evil"). But rhetorical studies that have focused on one aspect of the use of evil miss a bigger picture.[1] In some means, they miss the implications of the wide use of the word. Evil is a well-traveled word. The examples above should make that case partly. It is a word that finds itself in a many discussion about many a subject. And it is not just an American trend; it is used in English-language countries in various ways, some mirroring its use in the States.

What do I hope to gain by this wide study? What are my research questions? I am interested in the use of evil on the internet. What topics does evil get inserted into? How is the word used differently in different contexts? We seem to keep returning to evil and so I ask what are the current, contemporary uses of evil and its rhetorical implications?

A General Analysis of Contemporary Evil

Everyday use of evil – as opposed to scholarly use – operates with what rhetorical scholar Dana Cloud (2003) called a "simple understanding" of evil: one that is "undermined by knowledge of history, circumstance, and the perspective from which judgment is rendered" (p. 531). Or in the words of Sumerau, Mathers, and Cragun, the authors of the recent

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[1] For example: Casebeer, W. (2004). Knowing evil when you see it: Uses for the rhetoric of evil in international relations. *International Relations 18*(4), 441-451.

Qualitative Report article "'Can't Put My Finger on It': A Research Report on the Non-Existence and Meaninglessness of Sin," (2016) evil is not defined consistently in much everyday use. Like what the authors found with "sin," evil drifts "around without a definition as if people somehow naturally knew what it meant" (Sumerau et al., 2016, p. 1132). The role of the scholar is to offer the "gains of political contextualization" (Cloud, 2003, p. 537) while not running into relativism that suggests evil is an empty name. But it is also to study why non-scholars seem not to care about this "undermining." They use the word without reference to those perspectives that Cloud mentions. One might argue that merely tagging a tweet with "evil" as seen in the Clinton tweet above means the person who tweeted is not interested in wide contextualization. This non-contextualization does not "undermine" its use. In this use, in other words, there is no need to define evil; there is only naming it, identifying it as obvious. But it also implies a strong moral judgment, perhaps even a complex one. That paradox is important to understanding contemporary uses of evil.

It would be too simple to state that a study of evil shows us that many users of the word see it as a universal claim, not rhetorically constructed. It is obvious that evil presents a paradox – a universal claim and a rhetorical production. The better question is the more complex claim of why those who use evil name universally. Why the lack of context for this particular word? What is it about evil that urges us toward a universal, context-less claim? Such questions rest in how users understand the power of naming and naming evil specifically. One answer comes from Charles T. Mathewes (2000), a professor of religion, who wrote this about the modern American understanding of evil: "The problem with our concept of evil lies only superficially with its failure to operate smoothly within our moral system; the deeper problem lies in our presumption that this conceptualization should work smoothly" (p. 378). In other words, we comprehend evil "too well." We claim to know it "too well." Why do we know it "too well?" Religious studies professor Larry Bouchard (2001) noted "it may be quixotic to try to speak of 'evil' in our cultural setting" because the word is "so tradition-laden" and its meaning is deeply tied to "religious or philosophical narratives" ("On Contingency" p. 35).[2] This certainly can account for the universality in the use of evil. One reason to study evil broadly is to see if it has escaped, even if in part, those original narratives.

Evil operates broadly and so deserves a wider study. But it also wanders outside contextualization. A wide focus can give us insight into the urge to name without definition, without context. While all uses of evil are from a particular rhetorical context, that its users ignore or silence this context shows a lot about how they see evil as a name working outside and beyond other everyday words. Evil has a special place in their vocabulary, not merely for religious or philosophical reasons. And so evil as a word gives us some insight into rhetorical theory – a site to show their ideal of naming as persuasive act – the namer names and does not need to define.

From a wide historical perspective, Google's Ngram shows a distinct drop in the use of evil in English-language print books (or at least the ones Google has scanned, which is quite a few) since 1850.[3] ("Evil" dropped off from a peak in 1730s. I can't speculate on the difference). While this downtrend is apparent, there have been slight upticks in its use beginning in World War II and again in 2001. It is currently on an upswing not seen since before the Civil War.[4] As a word evil is perhaps more ubiquitous in the rhetorical landscape than any other time since

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[2] Mathewes (2000) seems to echo Bouchard when he notes that the name "evil" "seems a nonoperational part of our moral language, lacking fruitful purpose; it is a merely a conceptual artifact, a ghostly vestigial presence from some previous moral language" (p. 376).

[3] See https://books.google.com/ngrams. I searched evil within the years 1700 to 2018, in the English language corpus, and with a smoothing of 3 (the default setting).

[4] A closer inspection from 2004 to 2012 shows a consistent spike and decline every year or so.

the days following the attacks of September 11. It is an important moment to take stock of contemporary uses of evil.

It is important to tie that surge to the political moment. Two years after September 11, 2001 rhetorical scholar Robert Ivie (2003) wrote it was then an opportune time to study "the rhetoric of the evil enemy" because such a rhetorical production was having "deleterious" effects on our "democratic values and aspirations" (p. 182). He noted that "demagogues play the rhetorical card of evil" and so not only silence dissent with its use but also give us "a politics of coercion represented as a sacred mission" (p. 183). There are two sides here: the healthy democracy – the "discourse of agnostic pluralism" – and an unhealthy authoritarianism that brings the audience along through "mission" creep. Has this pattern continued past 2001? The Clinton tweet that began this article could be seen in this frame – with the person who posted the tweet as the demagogue. Or reflecting the demagogue they most likely voted for.

The Clinton tweet as a form of demagoguery is important not merely because it reflects a political enemy, but because it highlights the way many contemporary users see naming. Naming is based on a certain knowledge, and evil has become known with more certainty. There is a fiat here, a declaration as universal as one can make it. In other words, there is no need to define evil; there is only naming it. This is evil operating "smoothly" in discourse. This erasure of context is not new to rhetorical studies. It reflects what Kenneth Burke called terministic hubris. This phrase is not directly out of Burke, but from Ivie's Burkean analysis of George W. Bush's use of evil after September 11. Ivie notes (2004) that "Burkean evil is the error of hubris" and we are particularly prone to this hubris when using evil: "Blinded by *terministic hubris* and determined to make things simple, human societies and their spokespersons are all the more capable of bonding against a convenient scapegoat to the bitter and violent end" (para. 8, my emphasis). What is a terministic hubris? In short, we are certain we know and so label with certainty. We name and do not define. We ignore Burke's famous "terministic screens" and pronounce a universal evil. It is important evil is seen as terministic hubris so that we may perhaps have less hubris in naming other situations, contexts, things, and people. This is why it is important to study evil rhetorically.

This subject matter is not new to me. I became interested in evil during my graduate work in rhetorical studies. I revised my dissertation on the relationship between rhetoric and evil into a book due out in 2019. That book looks at how particular writers redefined evil for their era, including writers during World War II and after the terror attacks on September 11, 2001. As a scholar of rhetoric, I have also written about the role evil as a topic plays in technical communication. My interest in this particular study began as I noticed more and more people use "evil" in online discussions, mainly on social media. I searched for its uses on and off for several months during the summer of 2016 on Twitter, the main platform I use. That searching – or what in 1999 Barbara Sharf described as "lurking" or scanning online discussion boards – sparked my interest in a broader search.

The Method

My own searches during that summer were a kind of ethnography, limited though to one platform, and of course, one language. When people do ethnographies, Ilja Maso (2001) argues "they study a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs, and shared experiences for the purpose of helping *insiders* (cultural members) and *outsiders* (cultural strangers) better understand the culture" (cited by Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, para. 7). Evil is a common value and belief shared in many cultures. As a rhetorician I was looking for how it was being used by those who made claims with it. And studying evil as I did, I also sought to understand not only its rhetorical power but also its rhetorical scope.

This is why the site or medium of the internet is a good place to study it. According to Claire Hewson (2014), observation methods like mine "including unobtrusive data-mining techniques, are currently receiving great interest" because similar results are harder "to achieve offline" (para. 16) I was, in Hewson's (2014) terms, doing document analysis and so making use of "relatively static, published products" (para. 5). Which meant that a layered approach to ethnography was best. Because my data "happened" at the same time chronologically – all in one day – and not linearly, I felt I needed to frame my method in terms of what Carol Ronai (1992) called the "emergent experience" of doing the research. I would be reading and seeing these inputs of "evil" as they happened across different platforms. This is what makes my study an ethnography.

While my method was unobtrusive, that does not mean I ignored ethical concerns. Hewson argues those using observational methods should consider "issues related to the blurred public–private distinction online, and particularly the potential risks of harm due to leakage of personally identifiable data" (para. 22). Annette Markham (2008) has argued "some users perceive publicly accessible discourse sites as private" and some users of these sites know their posts are public but "do not want to be studied" (p. 458) While all the data I collected was publicly available (i.e., not just available to certain followers), I am naming some of the Twitter and Instagram accounts in my report, though the exposure can be limited by the relative small academic audience I aim to reach. Although, putting something on the internet anywhere means potentially having it go everywhere.

I knew from my summer searches that the 2016 presidential election was a key arena for the use of evil. I made a decision to search with terms related to that event associated with evil. If you have forgotten, it was one of the most partisan, vitriol-filled presidential elections in modern times. Both major party candidates were two of the most disliked candidates in American history, and social media, particularly Twitter, played an important role in the campaign. In other words, the online culture was integral to the campaign.

Other than the election, I chose Monday October 24, 2016 with no other pre-conceived reason in mind. That is, I did not choose it knowing a particular event would be happening that day. But I did choose it for contextual reasons. I chose it because I wanted to have a date before Halloween, as "evil" comes up in that discourse, which would give me a lot of data. And I wanted to have a date before the 2016 campaign was over. I learned that day that there were new episodes of *The Walking Dead* and *Ash v. Evil Dead* on that Sunday evening. Posts involving the shows, zombies, and other related topics skewed because of that.

I collected uses of evil on the English-language internet for two days, roughly October 23 thru October 25, 2016. I say "roughly" because I began to collect data on that Monday the 24th in the United States and some other English-speaking countries were by then into the next day. I looked for instances posted or published within that window, with 24 hours added on each "end" to my Eastern Time Zone location, limiting any data to a time stamp of those three days.

I wanted a combination of texts *and* visual imagery. This was important to me because evil is not merely a word, but a label, something we impose as captions on visuals, both directly and indirectly. In other words, some see a scary cat and label that evil. A key question is then how did I operationalize "evil" when the word itself was not used (e.g., symbols I and others might have interpreted as evil, for example Hitler)? I didn't have to label what was not already labeled evil. Those who posted images either captioned or coded their image with evil or the search engine helped them.

I collected uses of the word "evil" on Twitter, Google News (where I limited the search to news articles, meaning no blogs or press releases), LexisNexis, Instagram, Google Images, and Google Video. The last platform I merely looked at the titles of videos posted in the time period, not the content of the video itself. These databases were chosen because they offered

the most user-friendly searches to me and the searches are very comprehensive (i.e., show results of many people). Or in the words of Claire Hewson (2014), "considering all the evidence, [researchers using the internet] today have an extremely large, diverse population of potential participants to draw upon" (para. 8).

What counted as data in my study then was any article, post, image, or title of video in English that included the word "evil" in it or its coded tags. How did I collect such data? On Twitter, I searched for tweets that included the word "evil" and "#evil." I searched for the same on Instagram. On Instagram I also searched for "evilclinton" and "evilhillary." There were zero posts tagged "eviltrump" on Instagram during the time period. My search terms evolved to include these politically specific hashtags because I discovered them being used on these platforms.

The other platforms I only searched for "evil" (without any hashtag) because those platforms do not rely on hashtags. I then searched Google News and LexisNexis for the word "evil" limiting my search to my time period. I did the same with Google Video, noting the date when the video was posted. I searched for "evil" on Google Images but also for "evil" and "donald trump," "evil" and "hillary clinton," "evil hillary," "evil trump," evil and hillary, evil and trump. These keywords of course limited the searches, but also mirror hashtags I'd see on social media. That is why I choose them.

I collected the data from these sites, then surveyed them for themes. Then I placed individual examples into these themes. I did not intend to create a master theme list and therefore was not interested in comparing across platforms, so I did not make the themes exact across the platforms, though there are some similarities.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) widely accepted criteria for trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) can be used to measure my method and data collected. First, have I presented an accurate picture of the phenomena? While there are limitations to mainly using one search platform (Google) that I discuss later, the use of multiple social media platforms and other databases extend my search parameters to give the data collected and its associated claim ("a day in the life…") significant credibility. While I did not have a "prolonged engagement" chronologically, I did have a "persistent observation" with multiple algorithms. This made me "open to the multiple influences – the mutual shapers and contextual factors – that impinge upon the phenomenon being studied" (p. 304), in Lincoln and Guba's words. On the issue of transferability, in discussing themes and examples in the next section, I believe I will show a thick description. Regarding dependability, there is no external audit of my work at this time, though the publication of this article may spur such work. Finally, the self-awareness of my motives, the algorithms, and political and social events that could impact my results make a case for confirmability. There is triangulation of sources through my use of multiple databases and platforms.

Results: Themes for Contemporary Evil

There are two traditional themes for understanding evil. One is where evil is the absence of good. In other words, there is no "there" there; evil is the privation of good. The second is evil is a form or power that moves from object to object. This personification of evil argues evil can take over a person or "own" their spirit. We see it in pictures of demons, cats, clowns, people who are not quite dead or human, and eyes. But a third theme emerged from my study. In the results evil became personalized. What I mean by personalization is not that a person is overtaken by a demon; it is that this person is the ground or essence of evil.

This quality is seen best in the following example. While the tweet about Hillary Clinton that began this article argued an "evil force" has control over her (she is the Devil's candidate), it also states she herself is the "queen of darkness." [The "NWO" in the tweet refers

most likely to "new world order."] She is not merely under a force; she is that force. She does not in the simplest terms merely "embody" evil, but what she does, who she is, is evil. She is not Satan's minion, but Satan herself. In this example we see a key difference between personification and personalization. That difference is that the former implies a chance for change – the demon can be exiled, good can come in (or return). The latter implies an object totally removed from any redemptive possibility. Evil is not an absent good, but an essence itself. In many ways this absence of redemption exiles in part the traditional religious narrative from the discourse. It also suggests a more profound "other-ing" of evil. This fear is enhanced by the newfound control of evil by the evil person.

A second theme I saw was a rhetorical leveling of evil, especially in textual discourse. This is where users add superlatives such as "most" or "very" to show how bad the evil is. This type of leveling only appeared in data related to the election. For example, a letter to the editor of the campus newspaper of the University of New Mexico wrote that Hillary Clinton was "evil beyond normal folk's understanding" (Macuahuitl). This use indicates a level of evil that is both complex and only to be understood by people perhaps smarter, wiser, or more intelligent than "normal." This in turn promotes the mystery of evil. Evil becomes not merely something we can see and so fear, but something only a few understand, something outside a perceived norm not just of good (the absence of it) but also of "normal" evil or badness. Evil is also seen sometimes as an extension or outsized badness.

I will discuss these two themes in the contexts below.

Contexts for Contemporary Evil

2016 U. S. Presidential Election

The data presents an undeniable pattern: by a large margin, compared to her GOP opponent, Hillary Clinton was "tagged" on social media with evil more.[5] First, of the 63 tweets in the time span that had something to do with the election, Clinton appeared with evil – labeling her or associates[6] as such – 57 times. Of about 2 million "#evil" Instagram posts[7], more than 550 were about Clinton with hashtags including "#evilclinton" and "#evilhillary."[8] Of the 800 images tagged with "evil" by Google[9] and posted within the time frame, only 4 had direct or indirect reference to Clinton. Trump images were zero.[10]

I found 220 news items in the time frame with "evil" through Google News, but only 14 had some connection with the election, based on the title and content. Of those items, only three were news articles; the rest were op-eds. In the Lexis-Nexis search, of the 651 results, only 69 had the word "Clinton" in them. There were 61 that had "Trump." Nineteen had both

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[5] If Clinton was "tagged" with evil more on social media, videos were different. Of 86 video titles with "evil" in them found through Google Video, none had any connection to Clinton or Trump.

[6] Those associates include John Podesta, Huma Abedin, Barack Obama, and George Soros.

[7] Instagram had logged more than 2 million posts with "#evil" in its entire history when I looked. There were roughly 750 posts that included hashtags that dealt with the two major party candidates. Instagram does not allow one to search by date, though it does date-stamp its posts. There were only a handful of posts about either candidate in my three-day window.

[8] Compared to 192 about Trump.

[9] At this point the reader might need a short primer on Google Images as a search engine. A Google engineer explains, in general terms: https://www.quora.com/How-does-Google-image-search-engine-work.

[10] As a reference point for comparison, about 935 image results occurred in the time frame under the search terms "evil" and "Hillary Clinton." About 845 results occurred under "evil" and "Donald Trump." If we add "evil Hillary" (also without quotes), "evil Clinton" and "evil Trump" to the mix of results, Clinton has more than 400 results.

terms, along with evil, though there are many publications that published the same article.[11] Evil as an adjective or noun appeared in mainly religious publications or used by religious figures. Because many self-identified Christians voted for Trump, it should come as no surprise that Clinton was linked to evil more than Trump.[12]

One particular feature of the anti-Hillary social media posts was her association with Hitler and other "evil" leaders. For example, Twitter account "Natalie 4 Trump" using the handle "@LookingLucky"[13] posted on October 24, in response to another tweet: "These Criminals along w/ Hitler aka #Hillary want this for #America Saul Alinsky her Mentor. The Faces of #EVIL #CorruptMedia."[14] On October 24, Instagram user "black.conservative.patriot" posted a picture of Hillary Clinton's face superimposed on a standing portrait of Adolf Hitler, complete with mustache. He (the profile picture shows a black male) captioned the image: "#nohillary #neverhillary #maga #warmonger…" Then he named some of his "fellow fighters" and then added other hashtags such as #trumptrain #trump2016 #hillaryforprison #hillaryforpresident, #killary, #kkklinton, and #evilhillary. Another image I found titled "Evil has a Dress Code" shows Clinton, Stalin, Kim Jong Un, and Dr. Evil from the Austin Powers movies all dressed in a grayish coat or suit jacket. It was posted on October 25 to Commonsenseevaluation.com, a website that posts anti-Obama, anti-Muslim, and anti-liberal texts and images. If we assume that Hitler is evil, then Clinton not only being his alias but also his face shows the personalization theme noted above.

A key theme within the election data was the appearance of "lesser evil."[15] One example of this was a news article about the presidential candidacy of Evan McMullin (McCoy). A campaign spokesperson noted that "we've got a terrible choice and it's the result of generations of lesser evil choices." Then she added, "That [the lesser evil choice] can only degrade our choices because every time we lower our standards yet a little bit more, in order to choose the lesser evil."[16] The normalization of this cliché for comparison purposes shows evil may still be a moral term but it is no longer an inherently religious one.[17]

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[11] LexisNexis categorizes results in many ways. One category is "people." Under that category, 61 results were labeled Donald Trump, 20 were labeled Hillary Rodham Clinton. Trump was top in the category, while Clinton was fourth behind Tyler Perry and Tom Cruise, each who had new movies premiering the previous weekend. Also 74 were categorized as "campaigns and elections."

[12] Though it is important to point out that Trump used racist and xenophobic "dog whistles" in his campaign and did not seem to garner the label evil as much from his opponents.

[13] While @LookingLucky has continued to post after the election, Norton SafeWeb notes the link on the account's profile is not "safe," reporting it as a "scam website." The account has more than 5,800 followers as of March 2018.

[14] That tweet included an image, a supposed list of Alinsky's rules for "How to Create a Social State." According to snopes.com, the self-described "online touchstone of rumor research," Alinsky did not write the list; it is "a modern variant of the decades-old, apocryphal Communist Rules for Revolution piece that was originally passed along without attribution until Alinsky's name became attached to it…" [http://www.snopes.com/politics/quotes/alinsky.asp]

[15] For some broader context, Google Ngram shows that the use of "lesser evil" has spiked since 1930, again in 1950, but has faded significantly since 1964.

[16] In the Lexis search, of the 651 results, 24 had "lesser of two evils" in it. Three had "lesser evil." All but one of the 24 were about the election, while only one of the three were. The latter excluded were reviews of an Indian movie. The former is an op-ed by Marilyn Mosby, the State Attorney for Baltimore, Maryland, best known for her prosecution of the police officers who arrested and transported Freddie Gray, the black man who died in police custody in 2015. Mosby wrote that "looking the other way on police misconduct [can] seem like the lesser of two evils" (Mosby).

[17] The traditional source of the phrase is Thomas a Kempis, the Catholic author of the popular (then and now) devotional The Imitation of Christ in 1441. Kempis writes that Christians should "consider yourself as having found peace when you have been tormented with many tribulations and tried with many adversities." These earthly trials pale in comparison to purgatory or the "everlasting punishments to come." "Therefore, in order that you may escape" these, "try to bear present evils patiently for the sake of God." The lesser of two evils is the earthly tribulations and it is good to bear those, lest we have to face the other evil.

Television Shows

Two television series linked to evil either by title or subject matter were prominent across all searches. As mentioned before *The Walking Dead* and *Ash v. Evil Dead,* both "zombie" shows, had new episodes the evening before in my time zone. The connection between zombie and evil goes through demon or one "possessed by evil."[18] The possession then forces evil actions. But when *The Evil Dead* the movie debuted in 1981, an interesting rhetorical phenomenon happened: it added evil as an adjective to zombie. This opens up a comparison between its "zombies" and the ones seen on *The Walking Dead*. *Ash v. Evil Dead* (both movie and its current TV series) treats zombies as evil inherently, foremost by calling them the "evil dead." But *The Walking Dead* does not explore the question of evil, only mentioning the word twice in its first two seasons.[19] It is more interested in the "evil" ways humans interact with the "walking dead," though the line between two is hardly black and white.

It is not surprising then that what is labeled evil by those who watch *The Walking Dead* – specifically those who posted to Twitter as they watched the Season 7 premiere on October 23 – was the action of one of the leaders of a human survivor group. The Twitter handle @PatrickBragdon posted: "Remember when we all thought King Joffrey was the worst? Well the crown has switched, Negan is seriously fucked up #TheWalkingDead #evil."[20] In this episode, Negan threatens to kill a group of people if his central enemy does not cut off his son's arm. Like the biblical story of Abraham, Rick, the threatened father, lifts an axe to do the deed, but Negan stops him at the last second. The handle @weRokieboys echoed Patrick when it tweeted: "Stop messing with father and son #evil @thewalkingdead." While some commented on the evil of Negan's threat, another person saw the "brilliance" of this evil. Heather Rebel using the handle @hrebel tweeted: "Best punishment: you disobey, someone else dies. No one will lash out again #evil #brilliant #TheWalkingDead @WalkingDead_AMC @AMCTalkingDead." In this particular case, Negan presents a no-win situation to Rick. The choice given to Rick is a choice of "lesser evils." And it seems the choice itself is evil, not the action needed to make the choice. That is, because Negan stopped the axe, the evil is identified with him, not the choices he proposed. This is personalization at its clearest.

Halloween and the Evil Eye

Halloween was expected to be a prominent subject. And it was. It was the largest keyword or subject in Twitter posts, outpacing the election (83 to 63, out of 440). A related subject, Satan/devil/Satanism, showed up 35 times. Pumpkins – most commonly with "sinister eyes" or grins – were included in 14 images through Google Images.[21] That eyes are or contain "evil" is not a new idea. The best example of this theme is the evil eye. At its most basic, the evil eye can either cause harm, death, or bad luck. The evil eye historically has been a singular eye which stares or gazes for a steady time on its object. And so amulets or jewelry used to

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[18] The use of zombie as a label is not new. Google Ngram shows a rise in the use of "zombie" beginning in the late 1930s that became a "spike" in the 1960s and continues today.

[19] The first is when characters were forced to cover themselves in "walker" (i.e., zombie) guts to avoid the "walking dead." A character suggested chopping up "human" bodies was evil. A second use came when a character described the dogs he had that would he would train on others: "They're the evilest, nastiest man-eating bitches you ever saw. I picked them up from Satan at a yard sale."

[20] Also included is an icon of a baseball bat, the weapon Negan used to fatally beat a fellow human referenced in the beginning of the episode.

[21] Also prominent in the images were clowns or jesters with abnormal eyes. This category may have skewed even more than usual because in and around October 2016 some people in the United States reported to police not a few sightings of "evil clowns."

counter it also include this singular eye. Many such amulets are singular eyes that work to deflect the evil stare from another evil eye. Advertisements for this jewelry were a large portion of the "evil eye" results in the search, a very prominent search result in my time frame. It was the top category in Google Images (40 out of 800), though it was only mentioned five times on Twitter.[22]

The "evil eye" shows the belief that evil can travel from person to person, or in some cases, that travel can be stopped. For example, a group calling itself the Spiritual Science Research Foundation using the Twitter handle @ssrfinc tweeted on October 24: "Is #evil eye a superstition?" with a link to its website, answering this question in the negative. It notes the phenomenon is real and there are ways to stop its effects. How might that work? The SSRF aims to go beyond science for a more "holistic" approach through what it calls "spiritual research… verified by a Saint of the highest order." The SSRF notes its work is grounded in the work of a "saint residing in Goa, India." It is not surprising then that an Indian newspaper called *The Pioneer* published an article on October 24 describing a new "War Heroes Memorial and Museum" in Amritsar, a city in the northwest part of the nation. An Indian official told the newspaper that the memorial's chief benefactor, a highly placed government official, was most concerned with the security and safety of the country and assured the newspaper that "if anyone stares our country with evil eye, then not only serving Army soldiers but even war veterans would teach them a harsh lesson" (Veterans…).

International Social Evils

While in America, a personalized or personified evil was dominant, in other countries "social" evils were seen more. The tweet in the opening set of examples bears repeating now. On October 25, 2016, *The Afternoon Voice*, Mumbai's English language tabloid, printed a column where the author noted that "if the eminence of begging is not checked immediately, it will turn out to be a big social evil in the future" (Dixit, 2016). Also in India, in Kashmir, in an article published October 23 (Editor) about the festival of lights known as Diwali, an Indian minister for education "exhorted upon the students to take inspiration from our age old ethos of truthfulness and righteousness and refrain themselves from certain social evils like drug menace, alcoholism which can lead them only to self-destruction."[23] *The Sunday Guardian* in India published on October 23 an article exposing the "social evil" that is "child marriage" (Hazra). The article does not argue why the practice is evil, but suggests such marriages are practiced by "economically backward classes" with a lack of education. The practice then only keeps such "backwardness" in place, repeating what the article calls the cycle of a "child becoming mother of a child phenomenon." Of course, it's hard to know more about how evil is used in these two examples because of the cultural context and translation into English. But the phrase "social evil" tends to support the idea that evil is not merely the absence of good but something that moves or grows or acts collectively in a society. In short, the individual actions described above have social consequences and perhaps are motivated in part by the presence of a "social evil."

This tension between individual and social evil is seen best in the results about crime. For example, an October 23 letter to the editor of the Herald Sun in Australia (Waterhouse) about the debate over reintroducing the death penalty in that country noted: "In the clear case of murder, for example, the ultimate evil act demands the ultimate retribution."[24] The individual act is met with society's moral judgment, a "retribution" done by an "arm of the

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[22] As of October 31, 2016, as an Instagram hashtag it appeared more than 384,000 times.

[23] She added that the "history of Diwali is replete with legends and the central theme of all legends point to the classic truth of the victory of the good over the evil."

[24] The Australian article is another example of levels of evil with its use of "ultimate evil."

state." This implies that the individual act could be or is part of a larger collective sense that could spread if this one act is not judged.

Other crimes were also called evil in the data. Nigeria is best known as the country that in 2014 passed one of the world's strongest punishments for gay sex and gay marriage, prison sentences of up to 14 years on those found guilty of the latter. That the 2014 law has unleashed many instances of torture, false arrests, and other persecution. Two news items appeared in my time frame from Nigeria dealing with the crime of homosexuality and evil. One was an October 23 article in The (Nigerian) Sun about a woman wanted by police for "alleged criminal activities, including lesbianism" noted that the woman and her partner "have been on the run since their evil act was uncovered" (Nwosu). The other was about a man who killed his wife and daughter. The act was called an "evil deed" by the newspaper (Atuma).

But the action also was spoken of in broader terms by the husband of one of the women who told the newspaper: "I could not stomach such evil; that was why I reported the matter to the police." It seems that it was not merely the individual "evil" that led the husband to report the crime, but the social one. Yet also individuals who commit crimes of a certain nature were also labeled evil. For example, an October 23 article (Shaikh) about the sentencing to life of three men who robbed and killed another man in South Africa quoted the widow as saying: "The criminals who killed my husband are evil. I am thankful they are finally where they belong and can no longer harm anybody."[25] The labeling of individuals as evil and not merely their crimes as evil point to the personification of evil. In this frame, evil can only be stopped by the imprisonment or death of the evil person.

Comparisons

While there are a lot of studies on how we define and perceive evil, particularly in political or philosophical contexts, Aliraza Javaid argued in 2015 that there is an "unfamiliarity" with evil because there "remains a considerable lack of sociological and social science research on" evil (p. 1). This means that studies on this specific word used across the internet as a whole are rare. But even as I looked at a lesser studied site, it is important to remember the internet is not a blank slate; it is a part of our discursive world, not separate from it. So my traditional accounts of evil come from those studies and my own sense of the rhetorical situation of evil as I have encountered it. For example, one important study that is comparable to mine is "The Political Psychology of Evil" by Fred Alford. Published in 1997, Alford's study asked 58 people – students, retirees, inmates and others – to define evil. Alford argued that the most consistent definition of evil was one that shows that people "experience evil as an ethical problem, leading them to 'privatize' evil – experiencing it in terms of their own terror" (p. 1). From this, Alford argues that we must confront this individualization so that evil can be applied more broadly. Alford also echoes my "leveling" of evil results when he notes to many people "evil is a special quality of badness."

Limitations

There are some limitations to my study. I was limited by my choice of search engines and the algorithms that are coded into them. Second, my search was limited by the unavailability of non-public accounts (i.e., locked to the public and only available to certain followers). I can't make a more sweeping claim that the results represent all uses of "evil" on the internet in my time frame. Nor can I gauge how much of the uses I actually collected. A

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[25] In the US there is a long tradition of associating serial killers and large mass killings with evil. For example, "searches related to" evil crime on Google include a list of serial killers.

final limitation of my study is I have no idea how many Twitter posts were made by real people or fake accounts. We now know definitively that Russian trolls were part of the online culture leading up to the 2016 election.

Implications

My study helps us understand how evil is being used today. From a rhetorical standpoint, understanding current uses of evil aids new uses of it. This is the lesson of Hannah Arendt. Her famous line at the end of her stellar analysis of a Nazi war criminal, describing him and his motives as the banality of evil, is the best example of how throughout history, we have had – or been forced – to unlearn and then redefine evil. Hers was a direct repudiation of the "evil" other-than-human Nazis "saw."

If we ignore current uses of evil, criminologist Melissa Dearey (2014) argues, the "more vulnerable to its most pernicious damage we seem to become and the more [evil] tends to proliferate…" (p. *xiv*). Most importantly, possibility for invention is lost. Then our uses of evil become, paraphrasing rhetorical scholar Robert Ivie (2004) on the 43rd president's use of evil, "ordinary, common, everyday, shallow, and routine phenomenon uninterrupted by moments of reflexivity" (para. 9). This banality is "the absence or collective loss of imagination" (para. 9). The lack of thought is the definition of evil for Arendt. It is the closest one might come to a rhetorical definition of evil – thoughtless word use. I would suggest a lot of the #evil used in the posts I studied were that kind of thoughtless, banal use.

Evil as a rhetorical object is a word that ends all comparisons; one can't be worse than evil. But as a rhetorical theory, it is a terministic end, an end to terms, and end to words as associative material for invention; evil is that which ends conversations, dialogue. It is the label as fiat. Contemporary uses of evil on the internet show us both. And contemporary rhetorical theory can redeem both. If we work to understand how evil is being used.

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