

Vote what you know, or don't

The editor encourages smart voting in the coming presidential election



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When I was 18, I lived in the shadow of my own political ignorance. If I were asked what singularly important American event happened every four years, I wouldn't have said anything about the Presidential election. My answer would likely have been the Olympics, or maybe an eclipse.

I was too young to vote in the '96 election, but I probably wouldn't have anyway. I was too busy wasting time, spending my parents' disposable income and reading articles about how my generation had no sense of responsibility. I scoffed.

We didn't have responsibility because we didn't feel the need. The wars at the time were overseas, between other countries. The environment wasn't perfect, but we had the impression that we were moving in the right direction. The air of thought, at least in my world, was that of euphoria. My worries didn't extend past my fingertips, and I was allowed to be so ignorant.

Bill Clinton had just won his second election. The United States had everything to lose, but no one seemed to realize it. The economy, that glorious cruise ship of the late nineties, staved off and hid all the environmental and societal ills that appeared in less fortunate times. They were there, but somehow less obvious.

What we all suffered instead was the deluge of news about Presidential

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dalliances. Story after story played, fueled by partisan politics. If 9-11 had happened in 1997 Clinton would be swimming in praise about how well he raised his daughter. He would have had the golden ticket, the free pass that the media gave George W. Bush. There would still be a democrat in the White House.

It's a bold statement, I know, but as the public was allowed to bathe in the glow of indifference, the media and government's focus was drawn to the lives of our politicians rather than the policy they create. When there's more news about a White House intern than the latest land use legislation, it's easy for the people to stop listening.

It's most decidedly different now. The United States is facing the possibility of the new version of the Cold War. It could be a war without end, not because of mutually assured destruction, but because of an almost invisible threat. And as we are encouraged to go on with our lives, we are also encouraged to worry, to fear that threat.

Terrorism is the single most pervasive news story of the past two years. But what scares me isn't rooted in any one place, or in the ever more confusing web that's come of the "War on Terror." It's that we aren't paying enough attention to the other issues that affect us all. The environment, healthcare, jobs and the economy are too often given the back seat to the so-called security of the homeland.

I'm more responsible now. I follow the political news, the infighting, the primaries and caucuses. I know enough to see this as the calm before the coming storm, a battle royale between the Republicans and Democrats in the next election. Now I know I need to do more than just vote. I need to read stories like the ones in this magazine. I need to know what affects my world, and what Bush, or the Democratic nominee is going to do about it.

I have my opinions, and I will vote them. It was always my responsibility. But now I can go about it responsibly.

Knight Center provides land use reporting help

Perhaps the environmental issue most challenging for the media to cover is how land gets used.

How such a limited natural resource is used affects issues as diverse as traffic congestion, urban decay, loss of open space, economic development, recreational conflicts, habitat destruction, religious conflicts, loss of tax base, health and quality of life.

Small wonder that land use is front page news in Michigan and nationwide.

To help professional journalists tell those stories and make the connections that link them, MSU's Knight Center for Environmental Journalism has organized a workshop for West Michigan journalists.

The idea is to focus on regional issues, sources and news angles while providing statewide context. And the hope is to give journalists the tools to pound at the issue from a variety of angles over time, and not just in multi-day series.

WORKSHOP DATE: April 26

LOCATION: Grand Valley State University

FOR MORE INFO: Contact Knight Center Assistant Director Dave Poulson at poulson@msu.edu or (517) 432-5417