

Kamala Harris has a credibility crisis. She could use some urgent media un-training

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Vice President Kamala Harris speaks to the press before Laphonza Butler is sworn in to succeed the late Sen. Dianne Feinstein, Tuesday, Oct. 3, 2023, on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/Stephanie Scarbrough)

At a news conference last Friday, Vice President Kamala Harris pounced into action, quickly defending her boss, President Joe Biden, after the Justice Department special counsel investigating Biden's handling of classified documents called him a

“sympathetic, well-meaning, elderly man with a poor memory,” in a blistering 345-page report.

But if Harris wants to help her running mate keep the White House in November, she must unlearn cliched tricks from staid media and speech training of the 1990s. They don't work in a new 21st-century era of selfie videos and camera-to-audience authenticity.

“What I saw in that report last night, I believe, is – as a former prosecutor...,” Harris stated, speaking in disjointed sentences as she moved her open palm to her heart in the outdated “Me” gesture meant to convey sincerity but had the opposite effect. “...the comments that were made by that prosecutor. Gratuitous. Inaccurate. And inappropriate.”

While Harris scored points in her speed to defend the commander-in-chief, she fell flat in authenticity.

It's not just what Harris is saying; it's how she is saying it that creates a chasm. Voters are turned off by Harris's affected gestures and flat, varnished delivery. As a result, her message goes unheard.

Harris's popularity ratings have plummeted even below Biden's, which is saying something. According to a recent average of polls, compiled by FiveThirtyEight, just 37.5 percent of people approve of Harris, with Biden's popularity hovering at 38.9 percent.

As a former television, radio, and print journalist now coaching and advising CEOs and founders on leadership, media and brand strategy, I consistently find Harris's media mannerisms to be excessive and distracting — likely a symptom of too much media training and Harris's likely insecurity and defensiveness after four years getting hammered in the press and polls by detractors for her leadership style. She is trapped in her own media persona.

Harris is routinely over-rehearsed and unable to let her actual persona break free. She may believe that she must pause often and use her hands to gesture above the waist to catch the television camera lens, as she speaks cleeeearly and slooowly and arti-cu-lates her thoughts as if talking to a child. It's a classic media training obsession with "pronunciation and enunciation" that makes Harris's presentation seem fake even when she is well-intentioned.

Case in point: Harris denounced Hur as "clearly politically motivated," and described with more hand flourishes how, on October 7, she had witnessed Biden spend hours before his lengthy deposition with Hur, responding to the terrorist attack in Israel. "It was an intense moment for the commander-in-chief of the United States of America," she said, as if we'd confuse it with another America. "And I was in almost every meeting with the president in the hours and days that followed," Harris continued, speaking carefully and punctuating her thoughts with requisite hand chops, pauses and head bobs.

Always eager to participate in a he-said, she-said slugfest, the media said Harris "slams" Hur in "forceful" defense. But did anyone believe her? As a first-generation immigrant to the United States, I share my Indian ancestry with Harris and was proud and impressed when Biden named her his running mate. I want her to succeed. But there is a veneer of aloofness and inauthenticity in Harris that makes me wonder if there's any there there.

In his first Monday night monologue after returning to The Daily Show this week, satirist Jon Stewart had a field day with the Hur report fallout. After showing a montage of news clips from the parade of Biden proxies, including Harris, swearing to Biden's purportedly bountiful energy with his team, Stewart asked: "Did anyone film that?"

"Because if you're telling us that behind the scenes, he is sharp and full of energy and on top of it all and really in control and leading," Stewart said, "you should film that. That would be good to show to people, instead of a TikTok," referring to Biden's team's decision to decline an invitation to have him appear in a coveted pre-Super Bowl interview slot in favor of a TikTok video.

Harris could benefit from that same advice. In an interview the day before Hur released his damning report, Wall Street Journal reporter Tarini Parti asked Harris whether she needed to assuage voters concerned about Biden's age. "I am ready to serve. There's no question about that," Harris said, emphasizing that those who have seen her on the job "walk away fully aware of my capacity to lead."

Harris should abandon her staged mannerisms in speech and gesture, dig deep, express her authentic self and do some media un-training as quickly as possible, if she wants to truly be a credible alternative to the aging-in-chief.