An Era of Trumps? The Disappearance of Knowledge in Contemporary Politics

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In the wake of Donald Trump winning the 2016 presidential election, many individuals are perplexed as to how someone so unqualified and unworthy managed to claim victory over Clinton, who personified the attributes of what it takes to be a prosperous political leader. Trump’s win gives rise to sociological questions such as whether it exemplifies the false universalism that US citizens are moving towards a neo-liberal way of life. Perhaps Trump’s win more accurately reflects society’s inability to recognise the impact of new technologies.

I will draw upon Webster’s conceptualisation of the ‘Information Society’ (2006), David Lyon and Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of surveillance society and Castell’s power of identity (2004) in order to analyse whether the development of information in a post-modern society has made us a more knowledgeable economy. Furthermore, I query whether Trump’s victory reflects the idea that society is learning through ‘white noise’, which dominates information technologies.

The introduction of new media and information communication technologies (ICTS) has transcended the way in which knowledge circulates in society (McKee, 2005; Webster, 2006). New technologies are enabling everybody to publish ‘information’ online, and in a society where controversy succeeds rationality how can we regulate what ‘information’ will be internalised more so than others? Moreover, in the technological era where most individuals are well informed, how might we differentiate between information from the experts and the ill-informed? These thoughts of learning through technologies are closely linked to Webster’s (2006) conceptualisation of the information society.

The United States is one of the most demanding users of ICTs, and thus it better exemplifies the characteristics of an ‘information society’ (Webster, 2006). What I pose here is quite the contrary, societies with a “techno-economic paradigm” (Webster, 2006: 11) prove to be less educated,
particularly in relation to contemporary politics (Castells, 2004). Access to the internet gives rise to the illusion that we are a knowledge society yet it produces a massive amount of white noise in the form of fake news. Such information is extremely penetrative, especially in the paradigm of the mass media (Webster, 2006).

During the US presidential election, society was engulfed by Donald Trump’s controversial actions and remarks; social networking sites, newspapers, radios – Trump’s campaign was presented everywhere. However, the proliferation of information divorced of content results in “a collapse of meaning” (Webster, 2006: 20). Post-modernity has permitted the emergence of the ‘self’, and thus provoked individuals to obtain information and knowledge themselves (Giddens, 1991). However, in a post-modern society there is “such a bewildering web of signs they lose their salience” (Webster, 2006: 20). As such, the information that is exercised in post-modernity “is real without origin” (Baudrillard, 1994: 1), and therefore can be more accurately perceived as a ‘hyper reality’ (Ibid.). Consequently, individuals seek and internalizing knowledge without knowing that such information is feigned.

All information has connotations: “it is intelligence or instruction about something or someone” (Webster, 2006: 26) and this perception, as Webster argues, has been abandoned in post-modernity (Ibid.). As Stonier argues: information “does not need to be perceived to exist. It does not need to be understood to exist. It requires no intelligence to interpret it. It does not have to have meaning to exist. It exists.” (1990: 21). In a post-modern society, information and facts are no longer viewed as one. In relation to politics, it appears the proliferation of information had been ‘Trumped’ by an emphasis on ideology rather than facts. The notion that the nature of information has shifted could theorise Donald Trump’s surprising victory, as US citizen were living under the false pretense that just because they had information on Trump, they were well informed (Webster, 2006).

Technology has become integral in all aspects of the new, post-modern era; education, occupation, politics and principles have now entered into the dimension of telecommunications (Webster, 2006). Castells (2004) uses the term ‘Informational Politics’ to describe the way in which politicians are utilising the technological paradigm to succeed, arguing that “electronic media has become the privileged space of politics” (Castells, 2004: 369). With more than half of American citizens owning a mobile phone, it was
extremely advantageous of Trump to create as much noise on social media as possible.

Unlike other conservative politicians, Trump evidently exploited the impact of ‘trending’ in a technological society. Figures indicate that Donald Trump accumulated $400 million worth of free media in February 2016, more than some people spend on their whole campaign (Confessore and Yourish, 2016). Trump gained such attention for his racist, homophobic and sexist remarks. Most recently, Trump glorified rape culture by bragging about sexual assault stating, “I don’t even wait, and when you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything” (Donald Trump, 2015).

Immigration has been central in Trump’s political campaign also. Despite the fact that Mexican immigrants account for a great deal of the United States’ labour force, and provide valuable to the economy as they work for low wage; Trump alleged, “They’re bringing drugs and they’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.” (Donald Trump, 16 June 2015, reported on BBC, 2015). Such controversial and derogatory comments have overshadowed Trump’s presidential election, as well as his irrational, impractical proposition to build a wall between the border of Mexico and the United States to overcome the issue of illegal immigration.

David Lyon (2010) spoke of the increasing surveillance in a post-modern society. If in fact surveillance is central in society, Trump’s success could be a result of his ability to exercise the processes that have been brought about through Lyon’s concept of surveillance. Both Webster’s conceptualisation of information and Lyon’s notion of surveillance arise in the context of post-modernity. Trump predominantly used social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook to present the ideas in his campaign. Whilst heavily criticised for such methods, in the context of Lyon’s surveillance society it proves to be a successful systemic approach. Social networking sites are used to connect individuals through a technological platform, thus enabling connection on a global scale. However, these paradigms are arguably created to establish and maintain surveillance, and their intrusive nature is glamourised through the myth that they are creating opportunities for individuals to connect rather than be surveyed (Lyon, 2010). Donald Trump was able to observe individual’s opinions, which were made public on social networking sites, and use this to his advantage to tell everyone want they want to hear.

Zygmunt Bauman argues surveillance “relates not to security but to what he calls
‘seduction’” (2007, quoted in Lyon, 2010: 327). Bauman’s (1998, cited in Lyon, 2010) use of the panopticon gives rise to the nature of freedom in society, and how information has become asymmetrical across societies. Consequently, our knowledge as individuals are restricted to the limitations established by disproportionate access to information. Did US citizens have true freedom in forming their vote if they had uneven access to information of all candidates?

The success of such irrational political candidates in post-modern society very much exhibits the disappearance of knowledge in relations to politics. Despite the development of information communication technologies, information is now disappearing into the lines of fact and fiction (Webster, 2006). Therefore, the nature of knowledge in contemporary society must be questioned to prevent it for being internalising into many individual’s principles. A better representation of ‘information’ in ICTs is ‘white noise’, as this illustrates the fallaciousness that is presented in such knowledge.

Lyon’s concept of surveillance society could theorise why Donald Trump gained so much attention as the theory circulates around the nature of observing one another. There is an increasing obsession with paradigms that enable individuals to survey the thoughts, opinions and actions of individuals, possibly due to the fact that we live in an era where there are many platforms in which we present ourselves, resulting in an identity crisis. Through surveying the actions and perceptions of others, it is easier to adopt another’s identity to enable the feeling of social conformity and acceptance. In this sense, individuals in society become like ‘sheep’ as they merely reiterate the opinions of others. Individuals such as Trump are aware of the naivety of those who use such technologies and he arguably uses this to his advantage.

**Bibliography**


advantage-in-free-media.html> [Accessed 13 December 2016].


IMAGES


Image2: https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2016/02/02/10/12/icon-set-1175041_960_720.jpg

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