

Social Media's Black Magic: The Dynamics of American Politics

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With the rise of populism, both in American and European politics, one question seems to circulate on a regular basis. Are voters, particularly American voters, being conned by false promises and needless fear mongering?

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Are America voters becoming dumber by the day? Considering Donald Trump has received 13,406,108 votes to date¹ the answer appears to be “yes.”

An international audience watched the 2016 Republican convention with a mixture of fascination, horror and trepidation. The appearance of Rudy Giuliani, a quadrennial occurrence, was enough to make even the most objective of observers wonder how American politics reached such a sorry state. Ben Carson took to the stage and gave a speech that married together his two favorite subjects: evangelical Christianity and the demonization of Hillary Clinton. Trump closed out the fourth and final day of the convention with a speech that painted a frightening - utterly fictitious - picture of a modern-day dystopia known as the U.S.A. Transfixed and utterly mesmerized by Trump, the audience listened attentively to 75 minutes of rambling, apocalyptic, verbal diarrhea. The billionaire mogul oscillated wildly between vitriolic hatred and erroneous facts, displaying a new level of demagoguery. The speech, the likes of which conjured up images of the Nuremburg Rallies, resembled a Monty Python sketch, minus the intentional humour.

No matter how tempting it may be, simply calling ardent Trump supporters, as well as Trump himself, dumb, is not the answer.

Many supporters of Trump have legitimate grievances, but even so, why would this encourage them to embrace such xenophobic and ethno-nationalist sentiments? Trump exhales anger, and the United States has not elected an angry president since 1828, when Andrew Jackson was sworn in, long before the media made the president a ubiquitous presence in living rooms around the world.

Just how did the host of an NBC reality show reach the cusp of the ultimate job in politics? Are feelings of disillusionment and discontent enough to create such vociferous support for such a divisive character, or do more nuanced reasons for his popularity exist? If we are to accept the notion of nuance, an examination of the internet's influence seems pertinent. In this age of social media, are people simply being manipulated into believing lies and hyperbolic statements? As the internet, especially social media, has become an

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increasingly influential aspect of our daily lifestyles, has this increased dependency hampered our ability to think independently and objectively?

When confronted with a pressing question, it is common to hear a friend encourage another to "Google it." The manner in which we habitually turn to the internet for informational assistance reduces the need to engage in discourse and think critically. After all, why think when "someone" else can do it for you? The internet has brought many benefits. It has revolutionized communications. In almost everything we do, we use the internet. Want to order clothes, buy a laptop, share way too many photos of your food with friends? Go ahead, it's all just a click away. However, according to an in-depth study,² just much like too much chocolate is bad for your health, so is a reliance on the internet. Our "Net" dependence has increased as levels of originality appear to be diminishing. Could this be one of the main reasons behind Trump's ascendancy?

Confirmation Bias and Selective Exposure

Whether it involves making friends, hiring new staff or buying a pizza, many of our decisions are influenced by confirmation bias; a type of cognitive bias that involves favoring information that confirms previously existing beliefs or biases. This tendency to seek out, interpret, store, and recall information in a way that reaffirms preexisting beliefs can help form illusory correlations, where an individual falsely makes an association between two events or situations. Research has shown that a growing number of people now use social media as an informational tool for validating their political opinions, no matter how ridiculous these opinions may be.³ And when social media users of a similar mindset reinforce these beliefs through praise and acceptance, feelings of justification and validation occur.⁴ The reinforcement of these crystallized beliefs encourages the user to intentionally seek out similar online environments, while simultaneously avoiding "unknown" environments, thus perpetuating the biased cycle.

Social Media's Influence

When Mark Zuckerberg launched Facebook from his Harvard dormitory room in February of 2004, did he envisage a future when his creation would become the largest social networking site in the world, reaching 66 per cent of U.S. adults? In a recent report published by the Pew Research Center (available at pewresearch.org), the nonpartisan American think tank examined the trends and characteristics of 4,654 social media news consumers across nine social networking sites. The results were pretty astounding, with 66 per cent of Facebook users getting their daily news on the site, nearly six-in-ten (59 per cent) Twitter users get news from the microblogging service, and 70 per cent of Reddit users getting news reports directly from the platform. Tumblr was the fourth most popular, with the figure sitting at 31 per cent, while the other five social networking sites tallied up far less significant numbers, especially when compared with Facebook, Twitter and Reddit. The extensive examination of social media, which lasted from Jan. 12-Feb. 8, 2016, focused on a diverse mix, not just stereotypical teens or millennials. People of various genders, ages, races, demographics, education levels, and household incomes admitted to a heavy reliance on Facebook for news.

According to Pew researchers, although usage of social media sites has remained pretty steady over the last few years, the reliance on certain sites, especially Facebook and Twitter, for news has risen dramatically. The report also discusses the "activeness" and "passiveness" of each user, and how user behavior was influenced by the websites visited.

Researchers found YouTube, Facebook and Instagram users to be more passive, getting their news mostly “by chance.” On the other hand, active news seekers display greater signs of perspicacity, with the majority turning to Reddit, Twitter and LinkedIn for sources of information. As Paul Roberts noted in his book, *The Impulse Society*, “our entire consumer culture has elevated immediate gratification to life’s primary goal,” and with so many people getting news from social media, it appears that this desire for instant information supersedes the need for objectively sourced facts. Users frequently return to the same sites for news and general perspectives, meaning biases are likely to occur.⁵ Politically speaking, if you lean towards the left, CNN or MSNBC may seem far more appealing than Fox, for example, but if you lean towards the right, a Bret Baier, Bill O’Reilly, Sean Hannity sandwich may sound more appetizing (I apologize for any unwanted visuals).

Echo Chambers

And this brings us back to Trump. In February of this year, Newt Gingrich took to ‘Fox & Friends’ airwaves to criticize Rupert Murdoch and co. for helping create Donald Trump. It’s an obvious statement, but only a fool would argue that Fox has not played a significant role in both the creation of and the promotion of “President Trump.” Donald Trump’s dark and frightening speech at the Republican National Convention was an Americanized version of the effective propaganda used by dictators around the world, past and present. His plan to “make America great again,” to date, lacks one vital element - a plan on how this greatness will be achieved. The slogan appears to be little more than a clever sound bite, but repeat it enough times, especially within appropriate echo chambers, and it sounds ever so appealing. According to the man himself, making America great again involves evicting an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants, a ban on Muslims from entering the United States, the introduction of stiff tariffs on Mexican and Chinese imports, and encouraging Congress to pass a tax cut of \$9.5 trillion over the course of the next decade. Shipping 11 million people out of the United States is, at best, a cruel and ludicrously expensive, logistical exercise, and even if Trump was to overcome the legal and political upheaval that would surely arise, the pursuit of greatness, whatever this actually means, would, in all likelihood, lead to a furious, international backlash.

A convention devoid of innovative ideas, the primary focus, and the party’s only unifying bond, centered on the hatred of Hillary Clinton. Enclosed environments, like the RNC, where the promotion, reverberation and reinforcement of similar ideas occur are known as echo chambers. The analogy of an acoustic cavity couldn’t be more apt, as competing views are censored, disavowed, or otherwise dismissed. Trump supporters, many of whom have been influenced by a sort of echo chamber effect, have chosen a candidate who does not embody the ideologies of Reagan, namely free markets and free trade, low taxes, limited government, deregulation, welfare state reform, expansionist foreign policy, and so forth. Instead, they have chosen a candidate eager to use fear as a tool, and, as he knows only too well, fear possesses the power to prevent people from thinking clearly.

If purveyors of information make a reasonably plausible claim, which is then repeated, overheard, and repeated enough times, often in an exaggerated and distorted manner, the echo chamber effect can nurture both subjectivity and deceit.⁶ In online environments, members of communities may find their own opinions reinforced and echoed back to them, which only serves to strengthen their individual belief systems. Take the millions of Americans who see Clinton as the embodiment of deceit, for example. Their beliefs are reinforced a little more every time Trump takes to social media and tweets

"Crooked Hillary," "Rigged System," or some other contentious message. Essentially, echo chambers serve to reinforce one's own present world view, even if evidence exists proving otherwise. Think global warming, the war in Iraq, America's relationship with Saudi Arabia, and, even more ominously, Pokémon Go. Although the reference to Pikachu and friends is made in jest, Pokémon is abhorred by (and loved by) millions, many of whom regard it as a degenerative disease that started in Tokyo twenty years ago. Maybe a President Trump will round up all the undocumented Pokémon roaming around Central Park and deport them. Only time will tell.

Social Influence

We have all fallen prey to the power of social influence; when our emotions, opinions, or behaviors have been affected by others. Social influence takes many forms and can be seen in conformity, socialization, peer pressure, obedience, leadership, persuasion, and especially within the realms of politics. In 1958, Herbert Kelman, a Harvard psychologist, identified three broad varieties of social influence.⁷

- (i) *Compliance*: When people appear to agree with others, but actually keep their dissenting opinions private.
- (ii) *Identification*: When people are influenced by someone who is well known and possesses charisma, such as a famous celebrity (Think Trump)
- (iii) *Internalization*: When people accept a belief or behavior and agree both publicly and privately (China is "winning," "we never win")

Of all the forms of social influence, though, conformity is the most common and pervasive.⁸ This type of social influence involves a change in behavior, belief or thinking to align with those of others or to align with normative standards. In the case of peer pressure, a person is convinced to do something (such as vote for Trump) which they might not want to do, but which they perceive as "necessary" to maintain a positive relationship with other people, such as their family members, who just happen to be Trump supporters. Conversion, on the other hand, includes an internal acceptance that is absent in compliance. The individual's original behaviour, beliefs, or thinking changes to align with that of others (the influencers), both privately as well as publicly (I was with Sanders, but now, with a heavy heart, "I'm with her"). The individual accepts the behavior, belief or thinking, before internalizing it, ultimately making it their own. Do mega news outlets like Fox, as well as various social media sites, influence some of these dramatic shifts? One would assume so. Does groupthink, a term coined by social psychologist Irving Janis, play a role in such drastic political shifts? The phenomenon occurs when a group, such as supporters of a particular candidate, make faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of moral judgment. If some Republicans who once supported Rubio, Cruz or Jeb Bush, three candidates who refuse to endorse Trump, recently switched allegiance to the billionaire, then groupthink may very well have played a role.

Persuasive Tactics

Persuasion, as displayed during presidential elections, can occur through appeals to reason or appeals to emotion. This manipulative process of guiding oneself or another toward the adoption of some attitude by some rational or symbolic means has been in operation since the dawn of mankind. Robert Cialdini, the Regents' Professor Emeritus of

Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University, defined six “weapons of influence” - Reciprocity, Commitment, Social proof, Authority, Liking, and Scarcity.⁹ How these six “weapons of influence” relate to the presidential race.

Reciprocity: The practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit. In this case, a vote for Trump results in America becoming “great again.”

Commitment and Consistency: People do not like to be self-contradictory. Once they commit to an idea or behaviour, they are averse to changing their minds without good reason. Although Trump has flip-flopped on issues like abortion and gun control, many of his supporters have maintained an undying commitment towards the candidate ever since June of last year, when the New York businessman descended the escalator of his eponymous tower on Fifth Avenue to announce his presidential candidacy.

Social Proof: People will be more open to things they see others doing. For example, seeing others backing Trump and denouncing Clinton may influence them to follow suit.

Authority: People will tend to obey authority figures, and who else in modern day America exerts a dictatorial aura quite like Trump?

Liking: People are more easily swayed by people they like, and millions like Trump, believe it or not.

Scarcity: A perceived limitation of resources, like a lack of presidential candidates, may help generate a ‘Trump or bust’ mindset.

Along with the aforementioned “weapons,” reputation also plays a leading role in the persuasive process. Those perceived as experts may exert an element of social influence as a result of their perceived expertise. Trump uses his reputation as a “great deal” maker as a tool of social influence. Supporters believe him to be a credible candidate for a variety of reasons, such as perceived experience, attractiveness (the voice of blue collar America), knowledge, etc. With access to the media, Trump has used his reputation to influence the masses; using speeches to persuade the public to support issues that he does not have the power to impose, such as the impeachment of Clinton. An underhanded tactic like this is referred to as using the “bully pulpit”. Trump’s campaign has largely been an appeal to emotion, not to reason. Emotion affects the likelihood of conformity, with a 2009 study concluding that fear increases the chance of agreeing with a group’s philosophy.¹⁰ I would also note that those who may support Trump due to fears over terrorism and economic uncertainty, for example, are fully aware of his unrelenting refusal to offer anything but his own self-professed business brilliance by way of a solution.

Religion

In the words of the late, great Christopher Hitchens, “religion poisons everything.” Politics and intelligence are not exempt from this poisoning. Cast your minds back to 2012, when partisan battles over religion dominated the media landscape. The Republican Party platform accused the Democratic Party of waging a “war on religion,” declaring that the absence of the word “God” from the initial 2012 Democratic Party platform was entirely un-American. The “God Gap” had never been clearer; the more religious sections of society formed, and still form, a large part of the Republican Party base. The less religious have become a larger part of the Democratic Party base. Various conventional explanation for this trend exist, with some noting the influence of Christian Right organizations, such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, mobilizing religious activists on behalf of

the Republican Party. Common sense tells us that religion and politics should never mix. History proves that when religious beliefs and political ideologies are married together, the results are usually catastrophic. More recent times have seen people like Rick Perry, under the guise of spirituality, manipulate religion for partisan political advantage. Interestingly, in a 2013 meta-analysis carried out by Professor Miron Zuckerman, of 63 scientific studies involving IQ and religiosity in the U.S, a negative relation between intelligence and religiosity was found in 53. The results showed a strong negative correlation between intelligence and religiosity among American voters.¹¹ The researchers believe that intelligent people see the world in a more orderly and predictable light, and have sense of personal control and self-regulation that is absent in more religiously inclined individuals. When you relate these conclusions to Trump supporters, it's easy to see Trump's appeal. He paints a picture of a world that is anything but orderly and predictable, where personal control is pointless because, if he is not in charge, the end is nigh.

External influences

In this technologically advanced time we find ourselves in, cyber attack are becoming more prevalent and more destructive in nature. On July 25th, just as the Democrats' convention was kicking off in Philadelphia, researchers concluded that the DNC intelligence was compromised by two Russian intelligence agencies - the very same attackers responsible for previous cyber operations at the White House, the State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff last year.¹² The Clinton campaign, quick to drag Trump into the "hack gate", attempted to divert attention away from the thousands of emails that were leaked. The accusation of Trump's involvement was, to say the very least, sensational. Even at the height of the Cold War, the accusation would have been considered extreme. The attempt to portray Mr. Trump not only as reckless, but also as an isolationist essentially aiding an American adversary, was seen as little more than a pointless effort to deflect attention away from yet another email scandal. However, on closer inspection, Trump appears to have a financial reliance on Russian parties close to Putin, as well as a suspect solicitousness to Russian foreign policy interests.¹³ one can't help but wonder if the reason for Trump's reluctance to release his tax returns is because it would expose a reliance on foreign investment to finance up his companies. Then, two days after the emails were leaked, Trump willingly entered yet another political and foreign policy minefield. When asked if he thought Russia had damning information on Clinton, Trump responded; "They probably have her 33,000 emails, too. I hope they do," before adding, "Russia, if you're listening, I hope you're able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing. I think you will probably be rewarded mightily by our press."¹⁴

There are numerous potential problems with Trump's plea, one of those being the notion of a foreign power ultimately deciding how and when to disseminate sensitive information about a presidential candidate. Although Trump did not explicitly ask Russia to use the emails for the purposes of blackmail or espionage, his outburst raises a troubling question: Is Trump seeking Russia's assistance to help him get elected to the White House?

Conclusion

Yes, the dynamics of the American political system have changed at an exponential rate, and choosing the right person, and I stress the word right, has become a more difficult task. But facts don't lie: the U.S. economy, far healthier than it was a few years ago, is, at the time of writing, outperforming most of the industrial world. However, with the wealth of

disinformation being distributed, millions think otherwise. Do Trump voters, many of whom are disillusioned by the concepts of systemic favoritism and immigrants “taking our jobs,” really believe walling off Mexico, getting tough on China, and “wiping out” the Islamic State are really going to happen? (or going to help?) With an almost instinctual passivity nurtured by pandering politicians and manipulative media tactics, Trump voters see the political system as being “rigged,” and the man to re-rig it is a man that reflects and stimulates voter nihilism. Augusto Pinochet, Robert Mugabe, Silvio Berlusconi, Hugo Chávez, Vladimír Putin, Rodrigo Duterte, Donald Trump. The sad thing is that Trump’s name looks right at home alongside such heinous dictators. A salesman whose favourite product is himself, Trump’s moral code is defined by what works for himself. President Trump, sorry, Kaiser Trump, is that what America wants?

Notes

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- ¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/07/25/is-donald-trump-a-putin-patsy/?tid=a_inl
- ¹³ <http://talkingpointsmemo.com/edblog/trump-putin-yes-it-s-really-a-thing>
- ¹⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/27/donald-trump-basically-just-encouraged-russia-to-spy-on-hillary-clinton/?tid=pm_pop_b

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