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War of Words: Applying Communication Theory and Technology to Understand
the Outcome of the 2016 US Presidential Election

By

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Abstract

This paper is a qualitative analysis of news reports, broadcast media, tweets, posts, memes, books, biographies and textbooks which uncovers how technology was used to filter the words and ideas of millions of American voters, create or exploit ideological divisions, customize and deliver propaganda via “fake news” to dramatically sway the outcome of the 2016 US Presidential Election. Russian interests were able to exploit social media networks, to deliver customized messaging designed to leverage communication theory common to the social sciences to demonize a candidate and possibly install the highest ranking foreign asset in the history of The United States of America. All of this was accomplished while US security services were aware that the attack was underway. Understanding what happened is essential for the long-term viability of democracy in the information age.

Thesis

When viewed through the lens of communication theory, the results of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election can be understood. A war of words was quietly waged inside US homes using Internet-connected devices to deliver propaganda, public relations messaging, and leverage communication theory to manipulate the voting public and influence election results. This research paper identifies and examines the applied social science theories as well as the failure of leadership to mitigate these attacks on the democratic process as it occurred.

RQ1: Can publics be identified as susceptible to influence in opposition to their own self-interests?

RQ2: How are publics targeted?

RQ3: How can the effects of mass misinformation be mitigated to protect the democratic process?

Section I: Interdisciplinary Social Science Theory

In the run-up to the 2016 United States Presidential Election, American broadcast and print media were enthralled by the actions of Donald Trump. His ongoing *ad hominem* attacks during the Republican primaries and caucuses garnered a range of responses from outright dismissal to sputtering outrage. His treatment of and statements about fellow Republican candidates brought the political discourse to lows unprecedented in modern times. Most notable to a student of Communication Studies was the lack of thorough analysis by the press and pundits. Trump's insults, nicknames, and growing popularity seemed to be treated as newsworthy for their shock value. News cycles spun each day on Trump's latest tweet, insult, comment, or made-up event. With few exceptions, media outlets seemed far more interested in using Trump's latest outrageous claims and falsehoods for ratings generated by shock value rather than acting with the responsibility of the fourth estate in a democracy, which is in part, to be a check on government power. This responsibility of the fourth estate is reflected in the actions of authoritarian leaders demonizing even murdering journalists to control the message.



Donald Trump Twitter Feed

Such a statement controverts the founders;

“Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost.”—Thomas Jefferson (1786)

As a student of Communication Studies, it was more shocking to watch the reporting of the candidate's latest outrage than the outrage itself. Yet, despite what could be quantifiably proven to be falsehoods, Trump continued to gain in popularity, eclipsing long-standing Republican leaders one by one as he rose ultimately to take the Republican nomination for President. Why did this work? What social science theories can be applied to understand why this worked? How could so many Americans demonstrate such casual disregard for long-held values such as ethics and honesty?

Like every species on the planet, the human mind relies heavily on mental shortcuts called heuristics. Heuristics replace the analytical thought with automatic processing. Without heuristics, encountering a new style of chair, for instance, would force an individual to learn all over again what a chair is. Instead, heuristics allow us to apply mental schema based on prior knowledge to new experiences. This propensity simplifies mental processing, allowing us to focus on more important tasks that require close attention and leaves the rest on autopilot.

Our brains are hardwired to find patterns in everything. This is so central to cognitive psychology that in 2008, science author Michael Shermer coined the name 'patternicity'.

"...our brains tend to seek out patterns and connections among events, because of a basic evolutionary principle: "better safe than sorry." All things being equal, it's usually better to assume that a connection between two events exists than to assume that it doesn't, especially when one of the events is physically dangerous." (Lilienfeld, Lynn, & Namy, 2017, p. 15)

Michael Peterson, in his article '*Evolutionary Political Psychology: On the Origin and Structure of Heuristics and Biases*' published in *Political Psychology*, 2015, identifies several important concepts.

1. Peterson attributes heuristics to the biological evolutionary process, drawing on examples from the animal kingdoms. These heuristics are referred to as FAPs (Fixed Action Patterns.) Cialdini discusses mother turkeys dutifully tending to puppets of predators making the ‘Cheep-Cheep’ sounds of a baby turkey, beyond their ability to control. The mother turkey will then violently attack the puppet once the heuristic trigger is discontinued (Cialdini, 1984, p. 2)
2. Peterson cites Dunbar, 1998, who postulated that the human mind is designed for societies of approximately 150 people. Large-scale politics, therefore, are extremely new to the evolution of the human mind. In the past, political action and support were based on personal experience. We knew the people we were judging politically. We had a variety of direct sources on which to base our decisions. Mass politics lacks the intimate social experience required, creating a need for new political heuristics. Large-scale political structures are maladaptive to our evolutionary way of thinking resulting in maladaptive heuristics surrounding political decision making. This is a flaw which can be easily exploited. Though a small set of political heuristics exist as learned behavior. Peterson notes that because heuristics are employed to replace actual political knowledge, people lack adequate information to develop an extensive set of political heuristics. Party, Ideology, Endorsement, Viability, and Appearance (Lau, & Redlawsk, 2001) are identified for study in ‘*Advantages and disadvantages of cognitive heuristics in political decision making.*’ (Lau, 2001)

These principles of cognitive psychology in the context of political speech and decision-making provide a scaffold from which to build a deeper understanding. This is critical to the foundations of bias and how the mind forms bias outside our conscious control.

Cognitive Bias

“A cognitive bias is a mistake in reasoning, evaluating, remembering, or other cognitive process, often occurring as a result of holding onto one's preferences and beliefs regardless of contrary information. Psychologists study cognitive biases as they relate to memory, reasoning, and decision-making.” (Chegg Study, 2018)

With this definition in mind, we understand that Cognitive Bias is not a single thing. Cognitive Bias is a term applied to a broad spectrum of erroneous conclusions our minds make regularly. We think we have come to our conclusions based on reason when in fact, our minds will spend the least amount of effort possible to draw our conclusions. Our minds have applied every shortcut possible based on past experience, patterns, evolutionary constraints, etc.. To extend our scaffold, we will take a deeper look into several key principles of social science which span the psychological, social, and political disciplines. Let's begin with Status Conferral.

Status Conferral

“Status Conferral is the notion that press coverage singles out and confers importance upon the person or group covered. If status conferral occurs, it has serious implications for traditional conceptions of how the press should function in a democracy.” (Lemert, 1969)

Status Conferral equates to PT Barnum's famous quote “There is no such thing as bad publicity.” (Phineas T. Barnum) ironically, Barnum is often referred to as the father of Agency Public Relations (Guth, 2012, p. 58.) Agency public relations is often thought of as the model of public relations employed without ethics. Grandiose, quantifiable statements are the tool in

trade for the agency public relations practitioner. *“The best chocolate cake ever.”* (Donald Trump) *“The largest audience ever to witness an inauguration, period, both in person and around the globe.”* (Donald Trump) Agency public relations are employed entirely for the benefit of the practitioner employing them. If the title is any indicator, this connection is not lost on the creators of Showtime’s “The Circus: Inside the Greatest Political Show on Earth”, a series of documentaries by Bloomberg Politics about the election. The series continues into the presidency of Donald Trump. Agency public relations are intended to and effect at, attracting Status Conferral

With media outlets tripping over each other to print, broadcast and post each successive outrageous tweet, comment and fabrication coming from Trump and his campaign, the media at largely provided status conferral for Trump. By keeping Trump’s spectacle highlighted daily, all other contenders faded into the background. This constant focus not only conferred status but is also the definition of Selection Bias.

Selection Bias

Selection bias refers to the uneven selection of coverage by media outlets. When a single story or candidate consumes the news cycle consistently, viewer lack exposure to alternative perspectives and may not even know what alternatives exist. Such a constant barrage of information on limited topics, events or individuals can lead to Narcotizing Dysfunction. Narcotizing dysfunction can be a natural byproduct of Selection Bias.

Narcotizing Dysfunction

Narcotizing Dysfunction is the inclination of individuals to replace knowledge or information exposure for action. This means that after repeated exposure to a topic of concern,

individuals have a tendency toward inertia having already processed the information and substituted that cognitive processing for action.

Social Conformity and Hegemony

Hegemony and Social Conformity is the natural tendency for in-group members to comply with what is often described as ‘groupthink.’ We are social creatures by nature. We thrive in a social context and will deny our own perceptions if it threatens our place in the group, even when the group is temporary. In a notorious 1955 experiment, Solomon Asch conducted a study in which a single subject was unwittingly integrated at the end of a group of seven to nine ‘confederates’ who provided the context for the experiment. The group was shown a line on a card followed by three lines on a second card, one of which was identical in length to the line on the first card, the others were significantly different in length. The group was then asked to state if the lines were equal in length. For the first few trials, the confederates reported accurately and the subject did as well. Eventually, they began to unanimously report that a line which was clearly a different length was, in fact, the same. The experiment revealed that 37% of participants yielded to the majority opinion despite their clear discomfort in doing so.

Confirmation Bias

Confirmation bias “, the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one’s existing beliefs or theories,” was first coined by Peter Cathcart Wason in 1960 after he conducted an experiment using number sequences. This phenomenon might also be phrased as ‘hearing what you want to hear.’ Many experiments have supported his findings in subsequent years.

Motivated Reasoning

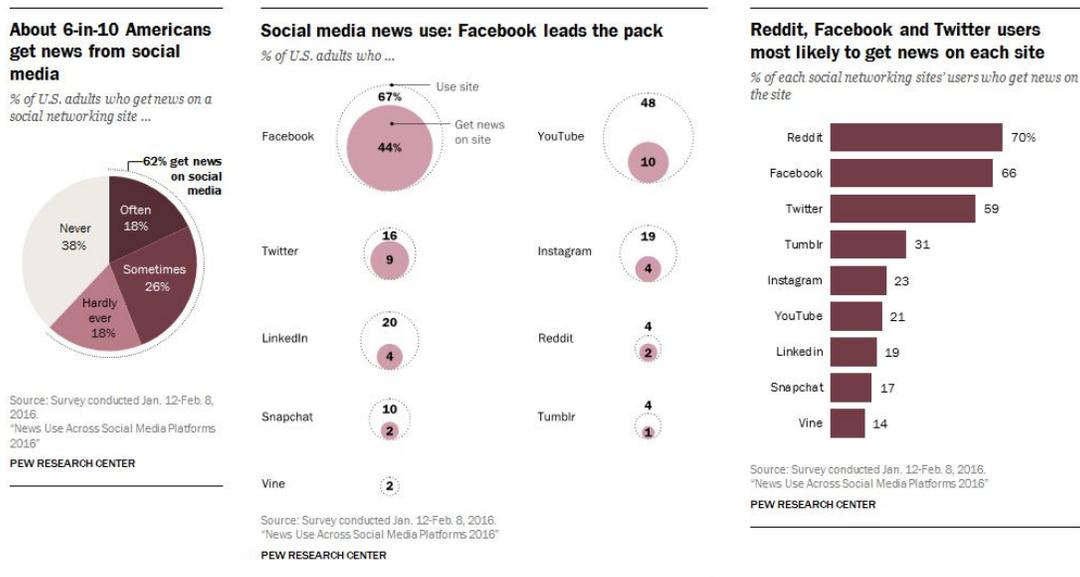
Motivated reasoning “— the tendency for what we wish were true to be true —” is different from confirmation bias in that confirmation bias is an instance of exterior information filtered to fit existing ideology or beliefs. In contrast, motivated reasoning is an interior or outbound process by which we find ways or reason internally to limit cognitive dissonance or discomfort with external reality being in contradiction to what we are comfortable with. When we experience mental discomfort with available information, we are motivated to alleviate that discomfort, which may lead to our acceptance of irrational conclusions to accommodate our established beliefs. A detective building a case around a suspect rather than following the evidence to identify a suspect could be an example of motivated reasoning. We utilize confirmation bias to accomplish motivated reasoning. With this basic scaffold in mind, we can begin to analyze the events that led up to the 2016 presidential election.

Section II - Analysis of Communication Channels and Theory use to sway the election.

In 2014 Dutch intelligence had infiltrated Cozy Bear, a Russian hacker group, discovering that the Russians were planning to attack US Government sites and meddle in the US election process, specifically to discredit Hillary Clinton (Vergauwen, 2018.) US officials found themselves woefully unprepared for such attacks and though they reported this intelligence to the company responsible for DNC cybersecurity, the FBI never followed up with the DNC directly (Clinton, 2018, p. 337; Vergauwen, 2018.) Cozy Bear began releasing hacked documents to Wikileaks editor, Julian Assange. The FBI believed the breaches to the DNC, White House, and State Department to be low level, however, on June 15, 2017, the Russian

group calling itself Guccifer 2.0, suspected of being Russian Intelligence, posted stolen documents claiming to have more to release via Wikileaks (Clinton, 2018, p. 338.) Assange held the documents until such time as they could be leveraged to do the greatest amount of damage to the Clinton campaign, releasing them weekly to keep the media frenzy on the front pages across America.

From the beginning of the election cycle, Russian propaganda groups had been continuously releasing polarizing ads and memes across multiple social networks with a distinct preference for Facebook and Instagram, a Facebook subsidiary(Frenkel, & Benner, 2018.) The following charts from the Pew Research Center illustrate why.



Though Reddit leads others in the field in percentage of users looking for news, the overall user base is statistically insignificant. Additionally, Facebook's plan for combating Fake News was profoundly simple. Users were urged to flag articles they found false or disagreeable. When the complaint level reached an arbitrarily-determined critical mass, Facebook sent the link to a digital clearinghouse accessible to a handful of fact-checking organizations. Those

organizations choose stories to assess and, if their investigation deems the article to be a hoax or containing false information, it was marked “disputed” whenever it appeared on Facebook.

Instagram had no screening algorithm at all and an apparently inconsistent policy. Occasionally, offensive accounts were cancelled arbitrarily at Instagram’s discretion.

Making things worse, Facebook’s dynamic promotion algorithms delivered only news links that matched the “profile” of the user, limiting news to stories likely to be agreed with. This is why the Russian attacks were designed to polarize the potential voters. In doing so hackers were able to define parameters by which to create messaging specific to the public they wished to deceive. Conveniently, Facebook had already filtered out those voices which would challenge the propaganda designed to discredit Clinton to the specific public targeted. This made Russian propaganda ‘covert in plain sight.’ A member just needed to be a conservative in the right category to see it. This is what is referred to as ‘microtargeting.’ Conservatives make better targets for such propaganda as they are more responsive to threat than non conservatives.

This level of privacy infringement was not enough, however. Hired by the Trump campaign, Cambridge Analytica harvested the private information from tens of millions of Facebook users. If the campaign was not involved with the microtargeting, what is the use for this data? According to Christopher Wylie, who helped found Cambridge Analytica “*Rules don’t matter for them. For them, this is a war, and it’s all fair.*” (Rosenberg, Confessore, & Cadwalladr, 2018).

At the same time, the US had no shortage of unethical voices. The late Paul Horner of Phoenix, Arizona died in his bed at age 38 on Sept 27, 2017 of an apparent drug overdose. Horner claimed to have single-handedly caused Hillary Clinton to lose the election. Most

notable among his multitude of ‘fake news’ sites and fraudulent Facebook posts was the creation of the “hired protester” myth. Horner used Craigslist to hire latinos to pose for photographs claiming they had been paid by the Clinton campaign to disrupt Trump rallies. (Ganga, 2018; Caron, 2017). On YouTube, Tomi Lahren uses theatrics, circular logic and misinformation to drive public opinion. She has since been hired by Fox News bringing her 1 million plus followers with her.

For his part, Trump continued his agency public relations onslaught. Constantly referring to himself in the third person, Trump was employing another public relations tool known as third-party endorsement (Guth, 2012, p. 102) Speaking to crowds which had been primed by customized, micro targeted, ads, Trump was able to engage audiences with confirmation bias, framed by Russian propagandist content. His words might seem prophetic as he breached subjects not yet available to him from government sources, but time and time again, Trump was able to appropriate the high ground on topic after topic. He successfully baited Barack Obama to pre-certify the validity of the election process when, at that time, Obama was aware of the Russian hacks. Calling his opponents treasonous while Donald Trump, Jr. was conducting meetings with Russian officials in Trump Tower fits that legal definition. Even going so far as to invoke the firing squad for people found guilty of treason, settling instead for the authoritarian chant “Lock Her Up!”. He called for the Russians to find Hillary’s email though, ironically, her private email server was never among the compromised systems and at the time it was in use, perfectly legal. But the framing was in place and the Russian Fake News deluge continued reaching millions of Americans while Trump appropriated this topic as well In

the finest of authoritarian traditions, he called his detractors in the prestige press “Fake News!”

Is he some sort of evil genius? Not according to anyone who knows him ...

*“If you can get this idiot elected twice, you would achieve something like
immortality in politics”* Sam Nunberg (Wolff, 2018, p. 290))
“What a fucking idiot,” Rupert Murdoch (Wolff, 2018, p. 36)
*“It was out of some instinctive or idiot-savant-like political understanding that
Trump Made this issue his own,”* Michael Wolff (Wolff, 2018, p. 62)
“a nut job.” Maggie Haberman (Wolff, 2018, p. 92)
“a fucking moron.” Rex Tillerson (Wolff, 2018, p. 304)
“An idiot surrounded by clowns.” Gary Cohn (Wolff, 2018, p. 186)
“idiot,” Steve Mnuchin (Wolff, 2018, p. 304)
“idiot,” Reince Priebus (Wolff, 2018, p. 304)
“Dumb as shit.” Gary Cohn (Wolff, 2018, p. 304)
“dope,” H.R. McMaster (Wolff, 2018, p. 304)

On July 7, 2016 Trump said in a speech “I will tell you this, Russia: If you’re listening, I hope you’re able to find the 30,000 emails that are missing,”(Crowley, Pager, Eckert, Yeomans, Tarquinio, Lipner, & Cunningham, 2016.) The press at the time questioned this as Trump inviting Russia to hack US government systems but without adding this frame, at face value, his words seem to imply he is aware that they have already collected emails they are currently sifting through. On August 8, 2016 Roger Stone, Trump’s longtime advisor bragged to a group of Republicans that he was in contact with Julian Assange and predicting an “October Surprise.” Followed by a Trump tweet on August 21, 2016 “Trust me, it will soon be Podesta’s time in the barrel. #CrookedHillary.” The timing of this tweet clearly indicating that Trump had knowledge, possibly coordination with the Russian attacks on our political system not to mention his appropriation of the term ‘crooked’ which would be an applicable term.

His most recent appropriation bias effort is the word “transparency.” No doubt, those who are already fully entrenched in confirmation bias surrounding his presidency will accuse the

media and the FBI of a vast conspiracy. Such a position satisfies the deep human need to avoid the discomfort cognitive dissonance would otherwise be causing.

Section III - Summary

For more than two full years prior to the 2016 US Presidential Election, Russian intelligence, under the auspices of Vladimir Putin, proactively sought to corrupt the democratic process of US and other western democratic governments (Vergauwen, 2018; Isikoff, & Corn, 2018, p. 177-178.) Russian intelligence agencies under such names as Cozy Bear, Fancy Bear, and Guccifer 2.0 were relentlessly used what the Russian intelligence agencies referred to as ‘active measures’ to generate fear, paranoia, confusion and division among democratic societies and their leadership (Isikoff, & Corn, 2018, p. 58-59, 190, 200). Though these tactics harkened back to cold-war era methodologies, new technologies enhanced the effectiveness of this approach.

Social media platforms provided a direct line into the homes of most western democracies. These false narratives, bogus news reports and campaigns of division found unlikely allies within the US political system and capitalists, among those more interested in ‘winning’ than leading as public servants. In addition to the psychological tool of the trade, well established in communication and social science theory, new tools had been added to the box through right-wing ‘Science Wars’ campaigns, as an artifact of postmodernism.

Applying postmodern theory to the physical sciences gave the appearance of scientific validity. We see the result of over 40 years of this type of assault on reality in the casual

disregard for it reflected for instance in the words of Kellyanne Conway “Sean Spicer gave alternative facts.” Though postmodern argument may find a comfortable and appropriate home in literature and creative interpretation, it’s application to hard science (McIntyre, 2018) has been used to undermine health, safety and reality for the purpose of ideological, political and financial gain, contrary to the public good.

We are informed through the work of Ari Rabin-Havt, Naomi Oreskes, Erik Conway and Lee McIntyre that today’s Post-Truth era finds its roots in the well-funded art of Science Denial going back to the TIRC(Tobacco Industry Research Council) (McIntyre, 2018, p. 237; Rampton, & Stauber, 2002, p. 230) and beyond. The effectiveness of these campaigns inspired more robust attacks on science in Climate Denial and other offenses against the common good. By ‘muddying the waters,’ publics can be lead astray and under the decline of investigative journalism are often broadcast or published to attract an audience rather than seek quantifiable truth. This is not necessarily an insidious intentional process. Information bias can be identified as a causal factor for many news outlets in their attempt to remain fair and balanced during coverage. In a 24 hour news cycle with shrinking budgets and limited fact checking resources, confirmation bias may also play a role for those forced to fact-check their own work.

Artfully woven within the messaging and delivery resulting from the applied theories of Jacque Ellul, Robert Cialdini, and a host of other social scientists whose good works have been leverage by ideologues and authoritarians, are powerful and misleading campaigns of misinformation. Using promotion algorithms, self curation and marketing data, very specific messaging can be ‘tight beamed’ into the computers of very specific publics regardless of borders, physical location, or public self-identification. PII (Personal Identifying Information)

has and will be harvested covertly from the computers of millions of unsuspecting voters across multiple democracies as evidenced in The Guardian, and Cambridge Analytica scandals to name a few well known cases. This data can then be used against individuals and publics to achieve a desired goal, whatever that may be, however that may damage a society or individual.

Germany, under the leadership of Chancellor Angela Merkel, has lead the way in forcing social media moguls to take responsibility for what amounts to war profiteering in a war of words. Germany was the first western government to introduce strict penalties and fines on social media sites for each identifiable false post masquerading as journalism. Such laws have begun to proliferate across western democracies following Germany's lead resulting in the EU adoption of the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation,) yet nothing here in the United States. Here leadership continues to pander to profit and foreign powers in detriment to our democracy and right to free speech. In a marketplace of ideas we depend on leadership to enforce guidelines for exchange. Whether we can expect appropriate action from a president who is the beneficiary of such anti-American propaganda is questionable at best. Faced with the reality of their failure to lead, many conservatives have opted to retire rather than do right by the American people. It will be up to patriots and freedom loving democratic societies to force our leadership to protect democracy. Such action begins with the individual.

We, as members of a democratic capitalist society must come to terms with who we are and want to remain. This begins and ends with education through a commitment to lifelong learning and active involvement in the political process. It is the responsibility of the individual to apply critical thinking when faced with incongruous information or conveniently agreeable reporting. Our progenitors understood the need for investigative reporting and diversity of

sources and this can not be accomplished for free. Americans need to come to realize that newspaper subscriptions buy us a free press whether tangible or virtual. It is the nature of capitalism, it is who we are. Weekend local press are ripe for consolidation which has long been underway and will require greater leadership than our congress has demonstrated to remove infections to the marketplace of ideas like Breitbart, Sinclair Broadcast Group, and Fox News. These providers are not being highlighted because of ideology. They are highlighted for quantifiable abuse of the public trust in their willingness to profit from the proliferation of misinformation. Active use of status conferral, confirmation bias, information bias, selection bias and appropriation bias should be as contemptible to the public trust as yelling “fire!” in a crowded public space. Such abuses are akin to the war of words waged upon our society by enemies of our state. To protect against enemies, foreign and domestic is already a part of our American ideals and should be enforced consistently.

Citizens of democratic societies have a responsibility to take their own ‘Active Measures’ to ensure that their participation in the democratic process is principled and guided by quantifiable facts filtered by critical thinking. We have come too far as a people to be succumb to hucksters, press agents and foreign authoritarian regimes.

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