The Technology of Truth: Revisiting Areopagitica

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Abstract: In the spring of 2012, Republican Congressman, Alan West, became a YouTube sensation when he announced that 80 members of the U.S. House of Representatives "are members of the Communist Party." Journalists contacted the Vice Chair of the USCP who said unequivocally that no members of the U.S. House of Representatives are members of the Communist Party. Questioned by a CNN Anchor about his false statement, West explained that he was referring to the Democratic members of the Progressive Caucus. "Communist, progressive, Marxist, statist, I'm looking at things they believe in." In response to West's disregard for the facts, NPR produced a segment on "the death of facts." In that segment Mary Poovey, author of A History of the Modern Fact, explained that the Enlightenment principles of observation and counting which led to factual assertion have been replaced by computer modeling and extrapolation. Further, she said, "the Internet has made it possible for people to air opinions and make those opinions seem as credible as scientific claims." In a subsequent New York Times article, "The Truth is Commentary," Jack Hitt suggested that the truth now lies in the "Comments" that follow a story posted on the Internet. According to Hitt, these "glosses" becomes their own corrective knowledge. Ironically, the "death of facts" occurs at a time when Bill Adair, editor of politifact.com reports "there are so many questions about what's accurate and what is not." Adair explains "we tend to take the attitude that more information is better and so there is the assumption that if we put the correct information out there, the facts will prevail." It seems that despite the increase in available facts, there is a simultaneous transformation of truth into emphatic assertion and the gloss of that assertion. This paper examines how this new interpretation of truth may reshape the democratic process.

Keywords: Technology, Truth, Journalism, Democratic Theory, Citizenship

Introduction

On April 11, 2012, Republican Congressman Alan West, became a YouTube sensation when, in a video clip of a town hall meeting, he announced that 80 members of the U.S. House of Representatives were members of the Communist Party. In a blog posted to the blaze.com on April 19, 2012, Jonathon Seidl reported that when questioned about his statement by CNN Anchor, Soledad O'Brien, West explained that he was referring to the Democratic members of the Progressive Caucus, "Communist, progressive, Marxist, statist, I'm looking at things they believe in."

In response to West's disregard for the facts, Guy Raz, hosted a segment on NPR called "The Death of Facts in an Age of Truthiness." Raz interviewed Mary Poovey, author of *A History of the Modern Fact,* 1998, who said "I think facts died a long time ago, and it's taken people quite a while to notice." She explained that although the concept of a fact goes back to Aristotle, it wasn't until the Enlightenment that people began to think about facts as things that could be observed and measured. Poovey said that the principles of observation and counting which supported factual assertion have been replaced by "mathematical modeling using quantification in mathematics to create a new kind of truth, one that couldn't be observed but could only be modeled". Poovey identified economics as one of the first fields to adopt mathematical modeling, but she said that it is now used to make assertions about many things including climate change and medical diagnosis (Raz 2012).

Development

Poovey's claims are supported by New York Times Washington bureau chief, David Leonhardt, in an article lamenting the incorrect reporting on the Supreme Court ruling on the Affordable Care Act (Leonhardt 2012). He revealed that many professionals, including journalists, rely on the on-line prediction markets, calling them "an unavoidable part of life." In his article titled "When the Crowd Isn't Wise," Leonhardt confirmed that the prediction markets started in the

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middle of the last decade, when behavioral economics research found that if large numbers of opinions were collected, individual biases canceled one another out resulting in accurate predictions. The Internet made collecting large numbers of opinions possible and the prediction market has been flourishing ever since (Leonhardt 2012). Hence, the competition to be first to break the news about the health care ruling may have resulted in assumptions based on the prediction markets rather than a careful reading of the text of the decision.

James Fallows in an article for The Atlantic titled, "Bit by Bit It Takes Shape: Media Evolution for the 'Post-Truth' Age," points out the difficulty that the mainstream press is having adjusting to "post-truth politics." Fallows illustrates this by quoting Rich Beeson of the Romney campaign in an interview by Steve Inskeep on NPR's Morning Edition. When questioned about a campaign advertisement assertion that President Obama gutted the work requirements in the Welfare Reform Act, which PolitiFact called "pants-on-fire false," Beeson replied "I think reasonable people can have a disagreement over this, but he has changed what President Clinton did" (Fallow, 2012). This is a rejoinder that is hard to parse.

Michael Cooper, political correspondent for the New York Times, in an article titled, "Campaigns Play Loose with the Truth in a Fact-Check Age," quotes Neil Newhouse, Presidential candidate Mitt Romney's campaign pollster, who when questioned about Republican political advertisements that the Pulitzer Prize winning fact-checking Web site PolitiFact found most deceptive, replied, "Fact checkers come to this with their own set of thoughts and beliefs, and we're not going to let our campaign be dictated by fact checkers" (Cooper 2012).

Cooper suggests that the disaggregated media, reduced reliance on traditional news organizations and the rise of social media result in non-partisan fact checking groups like *FactCheck.org*, a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania being lumped together with ideologically motivated groups who consider their partisan assertions to be fact checking, as well (Cooper 2012). As Mary Poovey said to Guy Raz, facts have always been contested, but there used to be high barriers to getting in the news. Hence, the media used to have the power to authenticate facts or to contest them. Now the Internet makes it possible for anyone to make his/her opinions sound as credible as empirical evidence (Raz 2012).

As the titles of the above mentioned news articles indicate, US journalists are unsettled by "the death of facts" (Raz 2012) and "post truth politics" (Fallows 2012). The reason lies in the history of the profession in the United States which was born from the Enlightenment challenge to the authority of the aristocracy and church. The American Revolution was the ultimate test of Milton's "self-righting principle," that truth must be given the chance to compete with falsehood and in that encounter, truth must win out (Altschull 1990, 36 - 48). John Locke, whose contract theory and doctrine of the right of revolution are considered the greatest influences on the U.S. Declaration of Independence, supported Milton's view of human nature presented in Areopagitica and elaborated further that free expression through the wide dissemination of information via the press would increase knowledge and allow citizens to utilize reason when choosing their leaders in a new democratic government. This was operationalized by journalists in the colonies who fought against restraints on their written support of succession from England (Altschull 1990, 49-54).

Benjamin Franklin endorsed the self-righting principle in "An Apology for Printers." Franklin wrote," when men differ in opinion, both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the public......when truth and error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter" (Altschull 1990, 105-108). Thomas Jefferson, in the Preamble to An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, Assembly of Virginia, wrote "the truth is great and will prevail if left to herself...... she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate......" (Altschull 1990, 114-118). It is not surprising that in a speech to the German Sociological Association, Max Weber, a student of the new and unique American experiment, would say, "for the American... wants nothing but the facts from his paper. Whatever opinions are published in the press about these facts, he regards as not worth reading; as a democrat he is convinced that, in

principle, he can interpret as well as the newspaper writer, perhaps even better" (Altschull 1990, 1).

Kevin Kruse, history professor at Princeton, in an article in The New York Times titled , "The Real Loser: Truth" identified four factors since the 1970s that have blurred the line between fact and fiction in political discourse (Kruse, 2012). The first is the loss of respect for institutions and professionals of all kinds. Confirming this assertion, New York Times journalist Michael Cooper reports that "confidence in the old arbiters, the mainstream media, has fallen in recent decades: the percentage of Americans who trust newspapers, television and radio to report the news accurately and fairly fell to 43 percent in 2010, down from 72 percent in 1976, according to the Gallup Poll"(Cooper, 2012). In a story titled "Distrust in U.S. Media Edges Up to Record High" September 21, 2012 on www.gallup.com, Lymari Morlaes reported that the record distrust in the media during the 2012 election was driven by Independents and Republicans whose trust in the media coverage fell to 31% and 26% respectively. This might reflect fear of perceived liberal bias in the media. According to W. Lance Bennett, political science professor at University of Washington, finding a balance between covering the privileged voices of government officials and covering the voices of the general public is an enduring issue for journalists (Bennett 1990, 104). Although Bennett exempts the coverage of elections from his indexing hypothesis because of journalists increased attention then to public opinion, he does express concern about the range of views that national news organizations consider appropriate to include in coverage of everyday events (Bennett 1990, 107). Since the 2012 campaign was a re-election campaign, the extreme negativity toward the press exhibited by Independents and Republicans could reflect conservative resistance to perceived press bias toward the party in power.

Second, Kruse cites the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine and the subsequent growth of partisan talk radio and cable outlets (Kruse, 2012). Cass Sunstein, law professor at Harvard University, describes, in his recent book *Going To Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide,* 2009, that his empirical studies indicate that people with clear views on a controversial issue, provided with plausible arguments on both sides of the issue tend to harden their original beliefs (Sunstein 2009, 31-98). Further, when groups of like-minded people are asked to discuss their views with one another, they tend to become more extreme in their positions (Sunstein, 2012).

Kruse's third trend is the recognition by political operatives, that they could make significant gains by stretching the truth. Kruse cites a quote by an aide to then President George W. Bush, who dismissed a journalist for being part of a "reality-based community" of people who "believe solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality" (Kruse, 2012). Studies conducted by Stephen Lewandowsky and his colleagues at University of Western Australia and reported in *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* examine the prevalence and persistence of misinformation in contemporary society. On the basis of their research, they assert that "the growth of cable TV, talk radio and the Internet have made it easier for people to find news sources that support their existing views, a phenomenon known as selective exposure. When people have more media options to choose from, they are more biased toward like-minded media sources. The emergence of the Internet in particular has led to a fractionalization of the information landscape into 'echo chambers' (links to other blogs that support similar points of view.) When this occurs it become almost impossible to correct misinformation because it has become compatible with what a person believes" (Lewandosky 2012, 110-113). Further, Lewandowsky et al assert that "once a new piece of knowledge – content information is accepted, it is highly resistant to change, and the more so the larger the compatible knowledge base is" (Lewandowsky 2012, 113).

Kruse's fourth factor is the rise of fact-checking as the province of a specialized few organizations and its abandonment by journalists tied to the updating content clock (Kruse 2012) and engaging in what Margaret Sullivan, public editor for the New York Times calls false equivalency which she defines as "the journalistic practice of giving equal weight to both sides of the story, regardless of an established truth on one side" (Sullivan 2012). Sullivan says this occurs because of the rise of media criticism and claims by partisans that the press is biased.

Sometimes, she says, readers who demand "just the facts," are really demanding their version of the facts. In another Sunday column, Sullivan mentions a further complication, the increasing inability of readers to distinguish between fact and opinion. She attributes this to online newspapers "where the usual signals of location and labeling are less obvious than in print" (Sullivan 2012).

Another blow to the foundation of "the truth" may be the influence of postmodernism. In an essay, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," delivered as a James Lecture at New York University in 1981, Jurgen Habermas states "Enlightenment thinkers of the cast of mind of Condorcet still had the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces, but also would further understanding of the world itself, would promote moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings. The 20th Century shattered this optimism. The differentiation of science, morality and art has come to mean the autonomy of the segments treated by the specialist and at the same time split off from the hermeneutics of everyday communication. This splitting off is the problem that has given rise to those efforts to "negate" the culture of expertise. But the problem won't go away: should we try to hold on to the *intensions* of the Enlightenment, feeble as they may be, or should we declare the entire project of modernity a lost cause?" (Habermas 1981, 9).

Jean-Francois Lyotard would declare modernity a lost cause. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* 1984, he rejects metanarratives like the Enlightenment, which he considers a totalizing story about the goals of the human race which legitimates particular knowledge. Rather, Lyotard describes postmodernity as an age of fragmentation and pluralism in which many metanarratives compete, keeping a single interpretation from becoming hegemonic. Hence, in Lyotard's view, in postmodernity there is no longer a need to produce "the truth" because there are many truths, depending on one's identity and subjectivity (Lyotard 1984). As is apparent from the concerns expressed by the journalists and academicians referred to previously in this article, Lyotard's perspective may be frustrating for those who are still trying to function in the "reality-based community " (Kruse 2012).

Habermas describes the journalist's confusion "when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form: an emancipatory effect does not follow" (Habermas 1981, 10).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is not to bemoan the changes that have clearly made contemporary journalism difficult and there is no wish on this author's part for a return to times past. If we examine the present state of journalism through the lens of information society theory, the transitions in the media industries due to the ability to send, receive and aggregate knowledge via new technologies is moving much faster than both education and regulation, and therefore creating uncertainty about how unfiltered information will affect existing institutions. It appears to be time to rethink the profession. Some are already doing so.

Since democratic governments and public spheres exist in an interdependent relationship, there is hope that the Internet can function as the new public sphere. One thing is clear, lack of information is not a problem. Everyone has a website – businesses, political parties, individual politicians, NGOs, non-profits. The issue is no longer providing information to inform the citizen, it has become how does the journalist differentiate himself/herself from a person or organization with a website and a vested interest. Jay Rosen, professor of journalism at New York University hosts a blog called *pressthink.org.* which contains a lively debate about the future of journalism. The discussion explores the traditional values of neutrality and objectivity versus the activist values of investigative journalism and good old fashioned muckraking. Questions are posed like, Should a journalist be trustworthy? Should he/she have integrity? How do these qualities differ from impartiality and balance? How are these qualities communicated to a reader? The documentary film *Page One* illustrates the value of large a news organization's

ability to create a community of professionals with years of expertise, access to important sources, and research tools that allow for in-depth reporting at a level not possible by individual bloggers or news aggregators. But the how can a contemporary journalist deal with an increasingly blurry conception of what constitutes the truth?

One of the most interesting approaches to this problem can be found in an article about the recently spotted ivory billed woodpecker. Jack Hitt, a contributing writer to The New York Times Magazine suggests that in scientific fields the definitive copy of any article is no longer the one published in an academic journal, but the online version that will be read and annotated by interested readers. Hitt says that the print version has become the trophy version, but the comments section of the online version contains arguments, corrections and additional information that generate an ongoing discussion. Instead of writing glosses in the margins of manuscripts as was done in the Middle Ages, contemporary scientists use the on-line comments section to create the modern day version of a glossary or wiki. Extrapolating to all forms of journalism, Hitt suggests that an in-depth story could be "crowd-reviewed, crowd-corrected and crowd-improved if there is appropriate curating to eliminate the lunatic fringe. Hitt suggests that the "writer gains the glory of the writing and the curator wins credit for chaperoning the best and most provocative pieces" (Hitt 2012). This might well be the future for publications like Scientific American.

The New York Times is trying a version of curating in the Op/Ed Sunday Review/ Letters. A letter is printed during the week that readers are invited to respond to. In the Sunday Review, Sunday Dialogue, selected responses are printed and the author of the original letter responds to them in.

One wonders how curating could be employed during reporting on a Presidential campaign.

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