The sound of my own voice

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The internet is, as a medium, fundamentally changing our conception of the political. By removing speech from its social context, it has blurred our sense of the unsayable; by uncoupling us from our real-life community, it has made us shameless; and by fetishizing fact, it has undermined the legitimacy of shared reason. All help explain the extraordinary success of Donald Trump.

Of all the internet’s uses, attractions, and conveniences, the foremost is that it involves us immediately with an indefinite number of others. Its decisive edge over television and the printed word is just this: its participatory, social character. To the extent that it is becoming our chief means of private and public discourse, it is therefore acquiring exceptional political significance. To someone who understood nothing of the internet, much of contemporary American political life would be inscrutable. It is now our primary way of dealing with each other, our most important organ of collective speech and self-knowledge. The internet is, in this way, inherently recasting our wider notions of what to say, who to be, what to count as authoritative, and how to govern and be governed. What follows are some lines of thought sketching each of these transformations in turn.

Everywhere reasons: Context and information

It used to be that, when you communicated with someone, the person you were communicating with was as important as the information. Now, on the internet, the person is unimportant at all. In fact, [the internet] was developed so that scientists could communicate ... without knowing where the other person was or even who the other person was ... In the future, you won’t know if you’re communicating with dogs, or robots, or people, and it won’t matter.

Lawrence Krauss

Communication is a community’s most important activity: what we can expect to say to each other defines and sustains our perception of the whole of which we are parts. Our
A form of community is in this sense embodied in a particular kind of running conversation and a particular conception of reason itself. Who we think we are will shape what kinds of arguments and ideas are likely to gain public purchase, what we think is most worth saying, and what is regarded as unspeakable. Making sense is an act of common faith. The internet widens the scope of what is sharable, in this sense, to humanity at large; it would seem to free us from the conventions of speaking within mere local conventions, from being judged only by a few who may or may not happen to understand us. It promises, on the face of it, to transcend the political divisions that had marked prior media, to put us on the way toward a single human community.

Yet wider scope also complicates our understanding of what we can get across and where others are coming from. And as online communication makes it easier to broaden and multiply the audience - as it moves us into a space of autonomous minds - it also abstracts us from a body of considerations governing the rhetoric and substance of other media: Who is speaking and why? Who is being addressed? What expectations are being adhered to or defied? What is the manner and likely tone? We speak online in the relative absence of circumstances by which we take our bearings to understand words on a page or overheard.

Most problems with and criticisms of online communication, most apologies for misunderstanding, or defences of past remarks, make their way back to the problem of context, the problem of how to take someone’s words. In one way it’s obvious why this should be so. As ready access to all manner of views and sources has increased – and as information is so readily copied and repurposed online – some of it is bound to be misconstrued. But context is also different in kind from what we usually mean by information: information is a matter of factual content, while context is what informs our sense of how we should respond to it.

‘Context’ denotes how things hang together; it is the set of shared practices or notions to which we appeal when we ask someone to ‘put things in perspective’ or to accord them ‘due weight’ or to see them ‘in proportion.’ These expressions invoke a set of foregrounding considerations based on what ranks highest in ‘our’ esteem, an underlying common sense that throws into relief the features most relevant to forming a fair estimate of someone’s words or deeds. We will always argue about how to weigh the relative importance of these assumptions – what should count as an ameliorating or exculpatory circumstance, for instance – nor has there ever been a time when such arguments were straightforward. But disagreements about the application of principles within a framework may be fierce without calling the existence of the framework into question.

What is unprecedented about our own situation online is the relative absence of just such a framework, as a consequence of the net’s immediate reach. What is ‘appropriate’, ‘mainstream,’ and ‘normal’? What is ‘offensive’, ‘weird’, ‘extreme’, ‘disturbing’? Where is the ‘pale’? What is a disagreement in ‘good faith’? What is the difference between good judgment and a ‘slippery slope’? It is no coincidence that it is debate about just such issues that makes up so much of online controversy, where we often have little to go on – that is, where we cannot reliably measure what someone says by who they usually are or what they take themselves to mean.
This ambiguity shows up as a problem identifying humour in particular. ‘Trolling’ is an online phenomenon that is only possible to the extent that there can be permanent uncertainty about whether someone is hostile, clueless, snarky, captious or ‘just kidding.’ The term covers a varied range of online provocations that are intrinsically unfathomable because their success depends on their not being seen by their targets to be provocations at all – a successful troll must appear to be in artless earnest. Much (if not all) humour depends on our perception of another’s intentions. When these are veiled from us, as they are online, then that ambiguity may be exploited as a means to plausible deniability. Trolling is possible because there is no way to distinguish irony from sincerity outside of some context of shared assumptions about them. To know what’s funny, we say, you had to ‘be there’ – and there is no ‘there’ online.

Along with this fraying of context there comes a recalibration of what counts as reason at all. It is telling that the internet was first conceived as a means of efficiently sharing scientific information; this remains in some sense the case. It is a consequence of the digital medium to promote the sense that data, quantitative information, is what is most reasonable, since it purports to be neutral or beyond mere opinion. Questions that would have been ethical or moral or aesthetic in other eras are now routinely framed or supported in empirical terms (‘studies have shown that...’). Even if the facts never simply speak for themselves, it is undeniably an important feature of what we mean by ‘facts’ that they seem to, and that they are therefore supposed to dispense with the need for context.

Yet even as quantitative data and the sciences become the most prestigious kind of information exchanged online, this development has, far from making it easier to conciliate our political differences, actually intensified their polarization. It is precisely as political or social information undergoes this fragmentation into ‘facts’ – precisely as all such information is evaluated by the standard of objective neutrality that scientific facts are supposed to embody – that it becomes more partisan.

Every fact is the result of a judgment made within a standard of admissibility. There is more or less balanced and sober reporting, but no such thing as objective or neutral reporting, reporting without any interest, perspective or view. So where the very characterization of what is newsworthy becomes optional for us online, where our sources of information are so varied as to be tailored and commodified to suit me, then it cannot be surprising if this variety serves the cause of polarization rather than centrist consensus. After all, there is no pressing reason to distinguish what I call ‘bias’ from what you call a ‘substantive objection.’ The sheer diversity of points of view, far from making us more ecumenical and tolerant, makes it easier to corroborate our preferences. Where more is said, less gets heard.

What is remarkable is that this retrenchment is nonetheless carried out in terms that continue to subscribe to the ideal of neutral scientific expertise. To mention a conspicuous example: those who most prominently oppose carbon caps and other environmental restrictions resort to claims that human-caused global warming is false on strictly scientific (or at any rate para-scientific) grounds, rather than countering with political or prudential arguments that other considerations should be prioritized over environmental ones. This polemic – with the suggestion that I may have ‘my’ science and you may have ‘yours’ – takes place under the shared presumption that neutral, empirical
claims are indeed the decisive ones. There has always been quasi-science, but the internet allows it to proliferate side by side with academic research, as if they represented independent and plausible alternatives. It is sometimes said (euphemistically) that on certain questions there is a ‘consensus gap’ between expert opinion and online media; but such a gap is in fact necessary so long as information is optional. Far from being able to mitigate or negotiate disagreements, therefore, the prestige of neutral ‘facts’ online is entirely compatible with their political abuse. Our commitment to neutral reasons and our partisanship continually reinforce each other.

**Everywhere people: Facing and defacing**

*People always agitated by passions are almost never satisfied.*

La Rochefoucauld

What is remarkable about digital media as our chief means of exchange is, as I’ve mentioned, its apparently apolitical character – its promise of transcending the connections between words, people and places that had previously defined politics. This has implications for something more than policy controversies and elections, since the political defines not only the goods of the public sphere, but likewise the shape of our ambitions, how we draw the lines between private and public, and how we define ourselves in contrast to others. The net provides us with the most vivid, powerful and constant experience of autonomy available to us, and it will continue to play a greater role in reforming each of us in its image.

The crucial psychological fact of online experience is that our public appearance is not where our corporeal presence is: that the face we show is up to us, while our online presence has no geographical location. The scope of what I may do and see outside of public scrutiny is wider. The severing of our public appearance from our real, offline one allows us to enjoy guilty interests we would not be caught dead indulging in person. There is a growing pool of data, for instance, that shows disparities between how Americans report their own attitudes toward various social questions, compared to the terms of their online searches – the latter betraying a much viler picture than anything we say about ourselves in surveys, even anonymous ones. [1] The conclusion is supposed to be that the uglier results provide a more accurate picture of what Americans think; ‘Google is a digital truth serum’, as Seth Stephens-Davidowitz puts it; it is supposed to show how we truly are. Even if this so, the point must also be that online searches give us a place in which to indulge our perennial nastiness with something like impunity, and that that indulgence amplifies what is worse in us.

But anonymity is only half the story. Social media is actually motivated by the opposite principle: the desire to appear to others and to have others respond to that appearance. It allows us the pleasure of making a spectacle of ourselves, even as it is clear that this sense of publicity bears little relation to the ordinary one of being seen and known to the eyes of others. Our images take on their own personality online – they give us the possibility of self-consciously representing (or ‘curating’) ourselves in certain ideal terms, even as we surrender the ability to see who sees us and in which circumstances. The intensified narcissism of the former is attended by the necessary voyeurism of the latter.
Our faces thus take on a sort of life of their own, involving us in a new kind of social reality that is to be cared for in its own right.

As our identity becomes unmoored from some more or less particular audience in space and time, from the common settings that have always defined us, it becomes more difficult to imagine ourselves as being answerable to and formed by some fixed group or community. The expression ‘internet famous’ (in contrast to old fashioned notoriety) captures this separation exactly: that someone’s face may be known to tens or hundreds of thousands of people, and yet still be someone no one has heard of, since all those people may be so scattered as never to have met each other. It is not that we are in danger of forgetting that we have parents, neighbours or classmates in the real world – these are on the whole still the most vivid and patent markers of who we are. But to the extent that online forms of sociability become more important to us, to the extent that our self-understanding is shaped by those forms, it is because we are bound to be always tempted to a place where we may avoid the inevitable frictions of offline relationships. Our online lives unfold, in contrast, within a safe space to which and from which we may always retreat to do our will.

The disparity between anonymity and publicity online is well captured by the senses of ‘shame’ in online contexts. The internet is – as a faceless medium, as a medium of seeing without being seen – essentially a shameless medium. Shame is an experience of seeing others seeing us, and it is a corporeal affect (we blush, or the blood drains from our face). Both of these conditions are absent online where we are at removed from presence and on permanent display: we offer up instead a face that cannot blush. And yet – precisely because the internet does concentrate public visibility and attention – shame is also by far the most important term of opprobrium of internet accusation (more than guilt, say), the defining accusation of its politics. Internet ‘shaming’ comes in a wide variety of forms – from posting compromising details for the purposes of private revenge (‘doxing’), to writing insulting and politically motivated reviews of companies, to government broadcasting of the faces of offenders who cannot be easily brought to justice. Common to all of these forms is the fact that our intimate details may be readily exposed to mass visibility, that the ease with which this may be done is out of proportion to the harm that it may do, and that it is therefore subject to the abuses that attend to any kind of vigilante justice.

The separation of public shame from private shamelessness then marks out what are arguably the two most intense kinds of online satisfaction: pornography and outrage. A moderate estimate suggests that somewhere around 10–15% of all worldwide internet use is pornography related; that a majority of children are exposed to pornography online before the age of 18; and that tens of millions of American adults (mostly men) regularly watch online pornography. The ratio of pornographic web traffic to traffic that is directed to political sites is, according to one count, about 100:1. [2] Where there is no shame in onlooking – where we can move as under a spell of invisibility – the medium offers a means of indulging private desires that are (still, on the whole) outside the bounds of social accountability. Online browsing offers us an intermediate, oneiric realm in which our fantasies take on manifest forms outside our minds, and yet in which this ‘outside’ has no acknowledged public reality.

The poles of shame and shamelessness are likewise a condition of the outrage industry,
the ecstasy of grievance that so forcefully claims our public life. This is partly a consequence of a surfeit of information: the news must be sensational to compete for our interest, and this widens the market for teacup storms. But the participatory character of the net means that we may often deal with others whom we will never have to face up to, and that this intrinsic shamelessness affects how we are likely to respond to them. Anyone who has carried on a discussion with online interlocutors knows how easy it is to be roped into name-calling, no holds barred. We are prompted to immediate and spontaneous response, and since we are not likely to be held to what we say, the terms of our disagreement easily get out of hand. Where reasons are a matter of words with little possible relation to offline life, then there is nothing preventing us from talking as tough as we like. Godwin’s ‘law’ of online speech: ‘As an online discussion continues, the probability of a reference or comparison to Hitler or Nazis approaches 1.’

If many online bigots and loudmouths turn out to be perfectly pleasant in person, we can hardly be surprised then – just as there are plenty of nice dogs who bark viciously from behind a fence, and plenty of nice people who are transformed into irate bullies when they find themselves behind the wheel of a car. That’s not to say that many others won’t or don’t carry out perfectly reasonable and courteous discussions online; but that they hold themselves there according to their own will rather than by the demands that the medium makes on them. The internet makes civility and persuasiveness optional, like everything else, by allowing us to separate our political convictions from our social offline selves – to privatize, in this sense, what is public.

It is not just that internet communication makes it easier to insult others, however; it is that it does so while expanding the bounds of what we feel we ought to take into our own hands. The personalization and depersonalization of online speech renders our reasons at once more categorical and intimate: everyone has the means to police offenses against this or that group or cause, and since we can immediately weigh in – since it feels, that is, as if what is on the screen is in some sense immediate to and part of our direct personal experience – we are each liable to become an open nerve of anger. It is this combination of engorged accountability and relative impunity that makes online speech so eager to aggress and take offense. (Hence the ‘crybully.’) Godwin’s law is the flipside of the fact that you may you may punctuate any discussion with a bland ‘disagree’: it is because our punches can’t connect that we may pack them with all the force we can muster. As words matter more (because they are the main way others encounter us), they also matter less (because there is finally nothing doing). We simulate discussion and political engagement without the underlying stakes.

**Everywhere politics: Post-truth and fact-based**

> *In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever character composed, passion never fails to wrest the sceptre from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.*

> James Madison

The consummate value of our online experience is frictionless *immediacy* - the perception that I have direct access to everyone, that I can skip the line, that I can circumvent
tedious or fruitless offline procedures, that I can always get a hearing, that I can exercise my will. The impulse to bypassing or removing procedural obstacles is the very soul of online convenience. Sloppy informality and unpolished outspokenness are, far from being unfortunate side effects of constant online transacting, positively valued in online speech as symptoms of authenticity, of keeping it real. And it is this very immediacy and directness of participation that we have in mind when we refer to the internet as ‘democratic’: its promise is to obviate the gatekeepers both of knowledge and of power.

The relationship between the internet and democracy as such is a vexed and tangled one; I can’t do justice here to the question of whether digital media intrinsically favours democracy (as the Arab spring promised) or despotism (as China’s extensive online monitoring and censorship apparatus suggests). In terms of the more particular question of how digital immediacy is shaping our view of national politics, however, the disruptive force of internet ‘democratization’ is nowhere better on display than in the conflicts that have lately borne us the terms ‘fake news’ and ‘post-truth’. The latter term, before gaining notoriety as the Oxford Dictionary’s 2016 word of the year, was coined in a 2010 blog post by David Roberts, a journalist. He argued that, in contrast to the ideal of Enlightenment politics – wherein voters first gather the facts and then draw conclusions from them – we have entered into a situation in which we choose our facts only subsequently to our tribally-minded, party affiliations. [3] The term ‘post-truth’ has found resonance because there is undoubtedly something to this picture. Political polarization in the United States is at its highest pitch since the late 1960s, party affiliation is increasingly correlated to a cluster of other important identity markers (geographical location, religion, education), and there is an growing sense of the futility of reason as such within the public sphere.

But the problem here lies as much in Roberts’s characterization, which tacitly equates ‘facts’ with neutral data. Politics has never been carried out alone or primarily on the basis of facts; it is not the case today any more than it was in the eighteenth century. And so the very formulation of the problem betrays one of its causes: the tidy division of facts and values, and the scientistic superstition that pristine facts could of themselves settle questions about the common weal, as if such settlement did not also presuppose a specific view of the authority of science, and of its place within a whole hierarchy of human goods that are not themselves empirically given. A politics based on facts alone is at once fantastic and the wrong thing to want – it is yet another version of the facile commonplace contrast between ‘logic’ and ‘emotion’. The notion of ‘fact-based politics’ that has developed in response to ‘post-truth’ is thus incapable of addressing the real underlying problem, which is the internet’s democratization of knowledge at the cost of sources of shared institutional authority.

Scientific facts have been politically loaded for some time in American politics. The issue has made itself felt in the culture wars of the past thirty years, with the political left often claiming empirical grounds as the basis for its positions on issues like abortion, global warming, compulsory vaccines, and the teaching of sex-education and creationism in public schools. Of course, the weight and meaning of scientific evidence varies across each of these issues. But whether or not this weight is adequately understood, the conflation of the scientific with the political has contributed to a situation in which a prominent part of the political right has responded to an issue like global warming, as I’ve said, not by debating the relative priority of environmental concerns with respect to
the exigencies of, say, industry and the economy, but by recourse to junk science denying the existence of the phenomenon altogether. The answer to the ‘factualization’ of politics (treating facts per se as politically decisive) is therefore the ‘politicization’ of facts (treating facts as a matter of value or choice). Politics has been sublimated into science.

When Kellyanne Conway, Donald Trump’s counsellor, improvised the phrase ‘alternative facts’ to describe the administration’s contradiction of a fact as blatant as the crowd size at the presidential inauguration, it was as if the political right had learned a tune that had long been the province of the post-structuralist academy: that science is an instrument of power, that scientific disagreements express biases, that there are no facts beyond their interpretation, and that truth is a social construction. In political contexts like this, however, ‘alternative facts’ are nothing but cynically deployed facts, facts used as instruments or weapons. It is a position that has no intention to convince, but it is good enough for stalemate by offering up the public pretence that there are always two sides to the story, and that the difference between the sides is just a matter of interpretation. This of course amounts to claiming that there are no publicly binding facts, which is as absurd as the contrasting suggestion that politics should or could become a matter of fact alone. (The New York Times’s slogan, in the wake of Conway’s comments: ‘Just facts. No alternatives.’)

What distinguishes modern scientific reason from magic, in Max Weber’s formulation, is not that more people will be better educated about the workings of the world, but ‘the knowledge or the conviction that if only we wished to understand [something] we could do so at any time’. [4] But this feature of scientific reason, far from eliminating our need for authoritative information, in fact increases it, since no one in particular can realistically go around verifying much of anything. Rather than relying on the words of fewer authorities, we must rely on those of more and more. What is at stake in the fact wars and in the heightened scepticism of expertise that marks our age is not a matter of epistemology – no one on the right or left seriously doubts that some facts are truer than others, so that ‘fake news’ is in this sense the tribute that values pay to facts. It is instead a matter of the political legitimacy of shared reason, on the basis of which voters can make up their mind about where the nation’s priorities lie. And it is precisely this kind of legitimacy that goes missing within the public square online.

There is no shortage of empirical data or of thoughtful political arguments now. What is missing from the digital age is the necessity of attending to any of them in particular, since I have the perception that I may easily retreat elsewhere, if pressed, to some other corner of the information ecosystem. Public reason is a condition for life in common as a nation: it is the common measure by which we may distinguish right from violence. To the extent that this imaginative unity of ‘basic facts’ erodes, [5] we are in danger of losing meaningful distinctions between idea and ideology, and between the law of the land and arbitrary edict. The ‘democratization’ of knowledge is unraveling political legitimacy into the assertion of naked power.

**Everywhere leaders: Little men, bigly**

*When the gap between ideal and real becomes too wide, the system breaks down.*

Barbara Tuchman
What do presidents Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump have in common? Each was or is extraordinarily successful at working out the terms of his particular media environment. Lincoln’s eloquence was borne of circumstances that placed a premium on virtues specific to the rhetoric of the printed and oral word. The first Lincoln-Douglas debate ran to three hours of talk before a local Illinois audience. A later one totalled seven hours (not counting a break for dinner). Roosevelt’s fire-side chats ran to about thirty minutes each; they were likewise instrumental in allowing him to justify his policies within terms of apparent heart-to-heart intimacy – tens of millions tuned in with attentive interest to hear the refined and magnetic voice of a frail-looking man. Reagan was not the first president of the television era but, like Kennedy, he looked the part: it is only within a media environment in which television predominates that actors like him become viable political candidates. Trump is, along the same lines, our first internet president. The whole world logs in to watch and comment.

Some permanent features of online politics are easy to forecast: the micro-management of election campaigns by data – a fine-toothed approach to political ads, grassroots recruitment, and fund-raising – is surely here to stay. The days in which candidates for anything will knock on doors are likely numbered. And social media demands a kind of vis-à-vis familiarity that has been put to good effect by the social media broadcasts of politicians as different as Beto O’Rourke, Matteo Salvini and Benjamin Netanyahu. Other developments are harder to extrapolate, since we cannot yet separate them from Donald Trump’s meteoric success. It is true that he first entered into public consciousness not on the internet, but on TV. It is also true that he represents only one type of possible online politician – a president who, despite his background, has managed to claim ‘somewhere’ or ‘nationalist’ appeal – and that we have not yet seen what the globalist ‘everywhere’ alternative to him would be in this country. (Obama might have fit this bill in some ways, but it was not through his conscious, strategic use of online media. Justin Trudeau and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez are better approximations.) However, that President Trump has thrived by galvanizing the new medium, that the internet has been a necessary instrument of his political success, that he has shown a special genius at channelling current media forces in a way that will be impossible for future politicians to simply dismiss or ignore, is a near certainty. He has gained an edge online that others will and must match in some way. What, then, have been the formal or rhetorical conditions of his presidency?

Trump has, generally speaking, understood that politics must be riveting and sensational online, more so than on television; that the fact of being in the spotlight is more important than the reasons for it; that having an influential ‘brand’ matters more than being right; that catching attention by controversy and polemic is, day in and out, to set the terms of debate. He campaigned with free publicity, to which he gained access by virtue of already being a recognizable celebrity. (Not any kind of celebrity, furthermore, but one iconic for the reality-TV performance of authority.) He is, as is often noted, the best thing that has happened to traditional media, which have seen resurgent numbers of readers and subscribers: he is walking clickbait, a steroid to the metabolism of the daily news cycle. He has been extraordinarily successful at marketing phrases and putting them into wide circulation (‘nasty woman’, ‘Liddle Marco’, ‘Pocahontas’, ‘Lyin’ Ted’, to name some of the PG-rated ones). His showmanship has extended to his major policies: a
The wall is more straightforward and meme-ready than other more effective solutions (its symbolic appeal being precisely that it offers up a brute concrete fact in a world of shifting virtual identities).

More importantly still, he has realized that words are cheap and that logical consistency has almost no importance within our online media environment. Where ‘I was for it before I was against it’ was a gaffe that sunk John Kerry’s candidacy, Trump has realized that the sheer amount of headlines he can generate every day makes flip-flopping irrelevant. (‘I don’t see any reason why it would be Russia’ became ‘wouldn’t be Russia’ the next day: not a retraction, but a new version.) He has taught us not to mind his words or their coherence, except as speculative bids for more publicity. He scarcely may be said to formulate arguments for his positions: there are no reasons or values, only interests. He has felt the void in public reason and has used it to weaponize information in order to castigate his opponents (‘fake news!’ ‘hoax!’) – the fact of contesting what is said is more important than what or why. He understands that you may change your mind as often as you like, so long as you do not admit you were wrong. He has realized that speech online is all talk, and that all talk is for show.

He has presented himself as the president of authenticity. He has used social media to great effect, effacing any sharp line between his ruminations about Celebrity Apprentice and policy announcements, firings, and other presidential decisions. (He tweeted over 2,500 times during his first year in office.) He has succeeded in presenting his bluster and vulgarity as a kind of special truthfulness (@realDonaldTrump) – cultivating the style of confessional intimacy that we have been taught to expect from reality television and online celebrity. His supporters like that he ‘tells it like it is,’ that he ‘doesn’t parse every word’: in other words, he has mastered the equation in our popular imagination between what is crude and what is heartfelt, between breaking rules or flouting conventions and being true to self. He has thrived on vicarious outrage against political correctness and its pieties. His shoot-from-the-hip, ‘honey badger’ brazenness has somehow rendered him impervious to criticism to many of his own party, who give him a pass as prone, like any marketer, to embellishment and exaggeration. (‘I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot someone, and not lose any voters.’) He has been successful by managing to seem more ‘unfiltered’ and shameless than any of his opponents.

He has presented himself as a president of immediacy, one possessed of a mandate directly representative of the people, presenting the media and the technocratic elite as obstacles or intermediaries between people and their will. He campaigned as an outsider, as someone whose lack of political experience was an asset, as someone who is not identified or affiliated with political institutions. He has continued while in office to campaign on the disruption of existing norms and institutions, on scepticism of expert opinions, on draining ‘the swamp’, on destroying the ‘deep state’ – his is a ‘wrecking-ball presidency’, his statesmanship is ‘shock-jock’ diplomacy. (He has bragged about not having the patience to sit through long, detailed briefings.) He has strived to ‘disintermediate’ politics by foregoing the usual norms of the office and by going so far as to present himself as an adversary to state agencies under the executive branch, surrounding himself with staff and cabinet with little or no experience of government. He has in this way sought to be the ‘Uber of politics’ (as Pippa Malmgren has called him) – his political theory has been to seek direct rule, the immediate exercise of authority, while avoiding the staple principles of post-war political dealing, which at least paid lip-
service to multilateralism and negotiation.

All of these principles have made him an extraordinarily polarizing figure. Yet he has also managed to turn his very unpopularity into his greatest political asset, consistently presenting himself as an emblem of ‘one of us,’ rather than as ‘one of them,’ alternating the roles of bully and victim. Since he himself hardly typifies his average supporters, this identification has been achieved by establishing that he has been rejected by the same cosmopolitan elite that has rejected or is rejected by them. He has thrived on the sense that he is a victim of unreasonable and unthinking persecution (‘witch hunt!’). His presidency squarely depends on the conflict between cosmopolitanism and nativism – he does not take himself to speak for the people, but for his people. He has understood the connection between identity politics and the politics of grievance: he has made white (or white male) identity politics the centre of his minoritarian strategy. And he has understood that within a situation of widespread anxiety about globalism, atomism, placelessness and diffuse identity, a stronger hand is more attractive, actually serving to cement a new, sharpened version of that identity – a self-reinforcing project, since being a ‘Trump voter’ means something much more definite than being a ‘Reagan voter’ ever did or could.

Trump is of course the consequence of conditions other than the internet; where political processes of compromise and negotiation are jammed, the ‘paranoid style’ of politics is more likely to arise. His boosters will claim that American politics was already void of substance and that he has only understood how to manoeuvre with clarity within that situation. How one finally feels about him will depend on what one thinks about the china shop. Still, what is perhaps most remarkable about the whole of his presidency is the unprecedented breakdown between words and deeds, between rhetoric and policy, and between means and meaning. And this should be a telltale indication that the online medium of his presidency finds itself, to an unusual degree, at odds with the message – that we are in the process of shifting our national politics into a new key.

I mean that many or most of the controversies surrounding the Trump administration are not really substantive. They involve what the President has said and how others have reacted – how it has looked, sounded, or played. And yet, when he vituperates particular newspapers or TV channels or websites, when he does not unequivocally disavow the support of white nationalists, when he is obliging to foreign dictators or refuses to acknowledge their full role in meddling with American elections, when he disparages members of his own cabinet or developing countries, when he trades insults with sports stars or with dictators possessed of nuclear weapons, when he badmouths the war record of decorated veterans and their families, it is difficult not to take his words, in some sense, seriously.

There has been a rhetorical shift away from the sense of words that Americans had long expected from the office of the presidency, and toward a different kind of reading of them, as gambits for position and attention – as social media performances, that is – with but tenuous connection to the offline world. At the same time, to be forced to disregard the ordinary, public sense of the words of the nation’s single most important public servant is to deny that they have any meaning at all for the purposes of supposedly deliberative, democratic life. The restraint once deemed appropriate to the ‘role’ or office of the president – however imperfectly maintained, however flagrantly hypocritical it so
often seemed – was not simply a matter of optics. It was a means of expressing the fact that the executive should not be a contender, but the expression of the people’s will: the living law. When Trump casually and persistently attacks rights and institutions, when he blurs the distinction between policy disagreements and personal vendettas – even if (and especially because) it is ‘only’ a matter of words – he is therefore not simply expressing a difference of opinion within the conditions of his authority, but is degrading the very framework that sustains it. Winning is good so long as one is on the winning side: but norms and institutions exist precisely as a means of protection against the fact that one is not always at winning, and that even in loss there must be ways of governing in common.

Just how consequential this form of presidency proves to be to the institution, just how much online speech is hollowing out our shared principles, will only become gradually clearer. However, that the form does not simply leave the content intact, that a national discourse that is at odds with its political reality may then corrode and eat into the latter, is the chief insight of media studies. With the invention of writing, empires replaced nomadic tribes all over the world. Two or three millennia later, those empires bit the dust when a German artisan figured out movable type: the birth of the nation state. What now?

Footnotes


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