

Refeudalisation in 2016 American Presidential Elections: A Habermasian Perspective

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Abstract

Elections are a vital component of democratic systems wherein the collective electoral decisions of individuals significantly influence the final outcome. The exercise of the right to vote is safeguarded by the principle of anonymity, ensuring that no external parties are privy to the individual choices made by voters. Election is not a single day affair. It begins even before it is declared as the fundamental task of the contestants would be to influence the voters. Political candidates and the parties they represent utilize various conventional strategies to influence public opinion during electoral campaigns. These methods encompass a broad range of tactics such as posters and paintings displayed on public thoroughfares, advertisements disseminated through various media platforms, election rallies, news broadcasts featuring debates and discussions, video promotions, and others. Additionally, a new method of campaigning has emerged in contemporary times, which operates surreptitiously, yet with considerable force. Such tactics, which operate as undercurrents, function in a manner that makes it difficult for the targeted subjects to realize that they are being influenced. This paper is an attempt to study the effect of these invisible influences in elections, with focus on the 2016 American presidential elections. The paper uses insights of Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher and sociologist.

Keywords

Habermasian Public Sphere, Public Opinion, Election Studies, Refeudalisation

Introduction

It was in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* that Jurgen Habermas tried to define the concept of public spheres, also making a foundation to later public sphere theories (Habermas, 1991). The public sphere is commonly understood as a social arena where members of a given society congregate to engage in discourse and exchange of ideas. The subject matter of these conversations can encompass a wide range of topics, including political issues, social concerns, legal matters, and more. The physical locations of these public gatherings can vary widely, from coffee houses and saloons to halls and other public spaces. The concept of the public sphere was initially expounded by Habermas, who developed his theory in reference to eighteenth-century European society. In

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this historical context, a public sphere was made possible by the prevalence of liberal democratic ideals, which facilitated open discourse and debate. The emergence of publications, newspapers, and periodicals during this era, largely due to the advent of the printing press, provided further support for the formation of a public sphere by enabling the dissemination of ideas and opinions to a wider audience.

Ideally, a public sphere should be a platform where no propagandist initiations are made by its members and such mala fide are recognized. Habermas argues that the same currents that built the public sphere destroy it for they become victims of consumerism. In twentieth century, advertising, marketing and public relations that work within the spheres influence the choice of the individuals. He uses the idea of “refeudalisation” to explain this. Refeudalisation refers to a trend in which power and decision-making processes are increasingly concentrated in the hands of small, elite groups, leading to a fragmentation and erosion of public discourse and democratic participation.

Following Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 American Presidential Election, several controversies emerged, calling into question the legitimacy of his win. While the vote-counting process itself was not accused of any malfeasance, Trump faced extensive accusations of manipulating the social and behavioural patterns of voters during the pre-election campaigning phase. If these allegations hold true, they would represent an instance of refeudalisation of the twenty-first century public sphere, wherein democratic processes are subverted by elite interests and concentrated power.

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter represent contemporary public spheres where individuals from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations can participate in discussions and debates without limitations. With a user base of approximately two billion, Facebook constitutes the largest public sphere in existence. Political parties and candidates recognize the potential of social media platforms as a means of influencing voter behaviour, and work closely with experts to tailor customized content for dissemination on these channels. The impact of such content can be difficult to discern, as it operates as an imperceptible force that subjects may not recognize as influencing their decisions. The discovery of the part of “Cambridge Analytica”, a British election consultancy in 2016 American Presidency election is an example. This indoctrination also works through trolls, the modern day art that appear on social media platforms.

The main objectives of this paper are:

- i) To understand the invisible influence of agents during 2016 American Presidency elections.
- ii) To understand the role of trolls in causing change in social behavioural pattern.

Refeudalisation of Media for electoral gains

The 2016 American Presidential Election, held in November, featured Republican candidate Donald John Trump and Democratic candidate Hillary Diane Rodham Clinton. Clinton's candidacy initially generated excitement, as many Americans anticipated the possibility of their first female president. However, when the election results were announced, Trump emerged as the victor and was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. Trump's campaign was marked by several controversial and politically incorrect statements, including hostility towards immigrants, the LGBT community, and other marginalized groups. His campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again," resonated with many voters.

Apart from these politically incorrect statements, there was no issue of major concern that questions the authenticity of elections, until the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Scam emerged. The case erupted when in March 2018, an ex-Cambridge Analytica employee Christopher Wylie made statements that exposes the involvement of the firm in 2016 American Presidential elections. The case shook the integrity of Facebook resulting in a crash of about 100 billion USD in market. It was followed by a series of revelations that exposes the role of the political consultancy firm in elections, majorly in Trump's win.

Here, the public-sphere defined by Habermas is Facebook. According to data calculated by eMarketer in 2018, 51.5% of Americans use Facebook and they fall either to the category of eligible-voters or potential-voters (Kats, 2018). Refeudalising this public sphere is the most potential way to influence the people and cause a major social behavioural pattern shift. Cambridge Analytica took this task, according to revelations, to cause the shift. They have carefully made plans to micro-target the users and provide them with carefully-tailored messages and advertisements that carry invisible elements to influence voters to take a pro-Republican stand.

The first infiltration into the public sphere Facebook, which was believed to ensure user privacy, happened way back before elections. The revelations indicates that data of about 50 million Facebook users have been accessed, making this one of the largest data breaches in history. Aleksandr Kogan, a data scientist developed an app called "This is your Digital Life" for

Cambridge Analytica to be put on Facebook. The application which was said to be for academic purpose had ulterior motives of collecting personal data of users. Apart from these, they also made a study of the digital footprints that the users leave behind to study their likes and dislikes. Judging all these data and behaviours, they tailored customized advertisements and messages to be supplied on individual profiles.

Donald Trump was a supporter of the Second Amendment in US legal system and declared the amendment shall never be repealed. This opinion of Trump was pushed to Facebook users by manipulating the latter, thereby creating an affinity for the opinion in the latter. Users received advertisements and posters based on their taste. A user who has a character of being a protector or a guardian must have received something that shows the need of a gun in safeguarding others. A user who is attached to his/her family might have received posters showing the need of gun to fight threats that could come to their home unexpectedly. Here, the public is influenced without showing a single picture of Donald Trump, or any symbol related to the Republican Party.

To the group whose vote are unsure were shown photos of high-profiled supporters of Donald Trump. This includes his own daughter Ivanka Trump, a celebrity from the reality TV show called Duck Dynasty and Dana White, president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

Native advertising is rather a camouflage advertising technique that blends with the theme of the website on which the advertisement appears. One such advertisement campaigning for Donald Trump appeared on Political news website called Politico. This interactive advertisement appeared to be a journalistic writing but was not. It carried the title “10 inconvenient truths about the Clinton Foundation”. This propagandist advertisement masquerading as a journalistic article must have caused psychological effects in the users. These appeared on geography of swing-votes, where voters were uncertain if to vote for Donald Trump.

“Persuasion search advertising” on Google Ads was used to yield pro-Trump and anti-Clinton results. Referring to a search made on “Trump Iraq War”, the results read “Hillary voted for the Iraq war- Donald Trump opposed it”. Anti-Clinton sentiments were widened with similar advertisements showing she will support NAFTA and will ship jobs overseas. The pro-Trump advertisements read how he will go on to implement a neat economic plan. Reading these advertisements, a user (most probably voters who are uncertain of their choice or first-time voter) will form a negative impression on Hillary Clinton.

Trolls and cartoons are powerful mediums of communication and therefore building campaigns and infiltrating ideas via trolls and cartoons is a very potential thought. The Republicans have used trolls to create pro-Trump and anti-Hillary sentiments. A particular troll shows ex-president Barak Obama on a negative light and states he has destroyed America and it is Donald Trump who can solve the problem. There were many trolls that showed the opposition candidate Hillary Clinton on a negative shade with the famous undesirable nickname Donald Trump gave her, “Crooked Hillary”. Her picture with the same nickname appeared as a meme of the famous game “Pokemon Go”, which was changed to “Crooked Hillary No”.

Often, the news media works as mouth-piece to political parties and sometimes a detached observer will find it hard to understand the narrow line between news and propaganda. In America, Fox News was the propaganda machine for Donald Trump during the elections. “The people will believe what the media tells they believe”, says George Orwell. There is a psychology that works through news anchors. The rhetoric of anchors has power to convince the viewers. The anchors might be hiding truth or saying alternate truth, slanted to his/her side of political spectrum. But the viewer usually has the tendency to believe that what is reported is true. Here the public sphere idea is rather a monologue because the viewer cannot talk back and they are usually not given scope of imagination due to collision of new ideas and points told by the news anchor in a rather convincing rhetoric.

The pre-election exit-polls by different television channels and other media can also sometimes play role in helping parties win elections. The exit-polls predict the victory of one party and this might have a psychological effect on the viewers which is defined as the “Bandwagon” effect. The voters might believe that one party will the election and they will end up voting for that same party because they think the party is going to win the election. The phenomenon of the bandwagon effect may also be stimulated through endorsements of political candidates by celebrities and other influential public figures. During the 2016 American Presidential Election, for instance, Donald Trump garnered support from Clint Eastwood, an acclaimed actor who spoke favourably of Trump. Such endorsements have the potential to exert a psychological impact on voters, as they may perceive that if a figure of Eastwood's stature is endorsing Trump, then Trump must be a favourable choice.

Conclusion

Elections are considered as a vital mechanism for democratic decision-making, providing voters with the freedom to anonymously cast their vote based on their individual choices. However, despite the ideal concept of voting being an expression of individuality, several factors may influence voter behavior. In contemporary times, Habermas' notion of the public sphere has expanded to digital platforms, such as social media, mobile phones, and television, where millions of individuals can gather to exchange ideas. The political arena has recognized the significance of utilizing this public sphere to reach and influence a vast number of voters, employing covert tactics to sway public opinion. For instance, television news programs present favourable images of preferred candidates, creating a convincing impact on viewers. Similarly, online trolls and cartoons aim to serve the same purpose.

The question of a post-habermasian society arises here. It is rather an idealistic vision of a society whose public spheres are vigilant enough to recognize these invisible influences. It is rather a difficult process. Facebook after confessing to various data breaches has decided to make algorithm changes to filter out these influencers. Vote should be a testimony of absolute liberty that a person enjoys in making an individual choice and therefore should always be uninfluenced by any external or internal agents. The society may not be able to purify popular culture and popular media entirely out of propaganda, but can really be aware about such forces.

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