Ok, we got here, so where do we go next?

05/08/2019

> Inspired by Trevor's FB post 5/8/19. He's watching the Great Hack and is ruminating on behavioural modification, achieved via smartphone ubiquity, attractiveness, addictiveness and so on. Wendy chimes in with good points about advertising since the C20. I'll take some quotes from each and raise my own points.

I'll begin at the end, where Wendy says "We need to understand our own new comms technology revolution much much quicker & better". She is absolutely right and everything else comes from this. We are in the beginning of the eye of the storm, a huge tumultuous cyclone or any other chaotic analogy you'd like to choose, that has thrown everything up in the air. Some of us don't even realise that our homes, jobs, possessions, families, friends, enemies, behaviours are all swirling around up in the mid stream of a vast and amorphous data cacophony. So, imagine that. That's where we are.

Before I go back into data chaos, a short word on behaviour. Trevor's point about staying at home, inertia encouragement, disengagement. All these techniques for controlling society – simply to maintain some equilibrium and not descend into anarchy – have been used for centuries. Nothing about them is new. When you're thinking about a new car that's better than your neighbour's car, your being totally ineffective at societal change. Likewise planning to attend Glastonbury in '95, or a gladiator match in 5th century Rome. I think old style TV and mass media communication, including print media, are hardly any different to what we now consume digitally. It is the data collected that is different, not the content consumption. And you know, I'm a musician and we generally always stay at home, unless we're out partying hard ⏺ . This is a longer discussion, but here I'm gonna focus on data.

So, back to data. Think about the mega-platforms that are enabling our chaos: Amazon, IBM, Microsoft, Samsung, Apple, Huawei, and a few others. Think about the communication networks for individuals, Facebook and Google chief among these. New words appear: Cloud, SaaS, Big Data, Twitterati, Influencer, AI, YouTuber, Cookie, Platform … there's a short list here but there are many more than this. All since around 2010, many are more recent than that. All of this enables chaos, but enables normal life at the same time.

These platforms enable our working and everyday communication, they enable information sharing and knowledge at grand scale. They enable incredible access to repositories of art and science like never before. The internet is essentially a global library. I might suggest that our data therefore is our payment to use these services. But what 'our data' actually constitutes is currently anyone's guess. Dependent on each private company's own handling of data: which is essentially a two fold gating. The first is your own sign up agreements when you make an account with that company. The second is the access to their API by third party apps and services, and then your subsequent gateway control to your own little silo of data self. It is this second that was so vulnerable and misused by CA. Some of the holes that 'manifested' have since been plugged, but I'm probably fairly sure not all.

Then there is this idea that data is not magic (raised by Wendy). Actually, it is. That is exactly what it is, and it's getting more magical and less controllable with every passing day and passing algorithm design. The gap between understanding fully how algorithms work and the fact that they do work is growing larger and larger, Jonathan Zittrain has begun to follow this here and here. And that's how magic works isn't it? We don't really know how it

works but it just does. As to 'snake oil' that Trevor refers to, yes that's part of the mix, but it is not only what is going on. Reading the Zittrain articles gives you an idea.

Think about the sheer capability of AI. To pick up Wendy's fair point about advertising models from the 1950s onwards, we are now in a position to deliver extremely personalised versions of 'the same' experience across multiple platforms, gaining knowledge of a person's internet travels, with their preferences and even their moods being swept up. That is a long way from subliminal advertising of the 1950s onwards. The data compiled is associated with general (or even very specific) demographics to build pictures of citizen behaviour across social and economic class strata far more detailed than anything available to market researchers even of the 1980s and 1990s. A good easy read on AI potentials (aimed at designers), is 'User experience opportunities & challenges of AI' which outlines it pretty well. That webpage looks harmless, but it's describing a data bomb.

So our duties here are multiple:

- Acknowledge we are in a shitstorm of unknown.
- Begin to work intensely with lobbying groups, expert associations and organisations, non profits and any other platform we can find to contribute to discussion and planning for how to get out of this shitstorm.
- Get knowledgeable, follow some of the leading lights who are growing more significant every day, Like Ben Williamson, Jonathan Zittrain, danah boyd, and others you might want to recommend.
- Acknowledge the good and usefulness of connected society – it's idiotic to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Connected society really can be very good, both on personal level, colleague and discourse level, town and city level, societal level.
- Acknowledge the deeply flawed legal provision for use and ownership of data, but stop thinking that private company service provision is, you know, free. It's not and it's never going to be.
- Focus on specific areas: personal data gathering, permission and ownership; public private partnership handshaking of billion dollar contracts to provide core services like Education with no valid mechanism for success criteria, evaluation, maintenance or legacy access; societal political system provision – national/private ownership, future purpose permission, territorial sharing, manipulation risk, legacy archiving and access.
- Accept that 90% of people who are trying to make decisions about this are either completely ignorant of technology in all forms (often not able to even use a smartphone adequately for anything more than sending an email), or only somewhat able. These are the senior government policy makers or senior management in large institutions like universities.
- Even experts (real experts at IBM or Facebook, for example) are in a place of total unknown. They've invented incredibly clever and sophisticated technologies, and it is absolutely impossible to predict many or all of the problems we currently now see. That's why we didn't know about them.
- Beware AI, listen to Stephen Hawking.

This post is part of an ever expanding discussion amongst several academic colleagues past and future who are motivated to discuss the ongoing crisis of data society.

Original post and comment

Trevor (status post)
I am watching this now. I thought I knew about the story but there is so much more here. You must watch it. One of the most compelling points isn't that Cambridge Analytica persuaded swing voters to vote a particular way but rather that it was a behaviour modification company that used metadata points. So I am thinking about how my

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behaviour has been modified over the last few years since the dominance of Facebook and the mobile internet on my phone. I now spend most of my free time at home, and my phone is never far away. Is it expedient for many of us to be kept at home, cocooned? I used to spend all of my free time out and about, looking at things, visiting exhibitions and lectures and talks and avidly swallowing up as much of everything as I could, even just walking about. Does what some of us see on our phones make us happier to stay at home? One of Cambridge Analytica's campaigns in the Caribbean involved generating as much apathy as they could, which resulted in a 40% reduction in the youth vote and a 6% electoral swing. Manipulation might be just as much about generating inaction as action. I've been rather shocked by this thought of what might be coming at me out of my phone, that it is praxis rather than opinion or polemical idea. That seems hopelessly naive, I'm sure, but given the way the data manipulation works with narcissism it's not implausible to think we're being triggered in ways that appear to suit us but don't. 'Wreckage sites and crippling divisions' is one of the film's final ideas.

Wendy (comment)
Well, one way of thinking about this is that it's an intensification of the behaviour modification that advertising has got better & better at since early in the C20. Century of the Self begins with Edward Bernays (Freud's brother in law – check name) using Freudian insights to persuade women to smoke in large numbers. Soc media, of course, provides loads more data and can use it in more covert ways. It's still just data, not magic. You are now the product. Prob best to use soc media sparingly (all the tech millionaires keep their own kids off it). CA really not a demon co. & not the great magician Carol Cadwalladr imagined. Don't think she really understood how much was just self-bigging up boasting. Print technology was treated as having magical powers for centuries. Reformation cldn't hv happened without it. We need to understand our own new comms technology revolution much much quicker & better.

Links

(posted minus referral query url additions, those bits that start with a ?)
https://www.netflix.com/gb/title/80117542
https://www.ourcommunity.com.au/tech/tech_article.jsp?articleId=74
https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-hidden-costs-of-automated-thinking
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https://www.campaignlive.co.uk/article/marlboro-coke-kfc-used-subliminal-advertising/1383489
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/497057
https://www.notion.so/User-experience-opportunities-challenges-of-AI-1676367e2d1d453b97da8de8a142a69e
https://www.cnbc.com/2017/11/06/stephen-hawking-ai-could-be-worst-event-in-civilization.html
From Trevor's post
https://twitter.com/ravina1k/status/1153995756438786048
https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/45334/1/this-is-how-your-data-is-being-harvested

Img: Darius Bashar on Unsplash

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