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The Trump Branding Machine

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ABSTRACT

The 2016 presidential election is like no other. The Donald Trump campaign has thrown all traditional and conventional wisdom of campaigning out of the window. The use of social media and creation of special events drives the Donald Trump branding machine – with little funding from the usual sources – one important one being the GOP coffers. Although we have had celebrity leaders in politics the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and even a president, Ronald Regan – we have never seen such a blatant celebrity approach to seeking the presidency of the United States. An estimated \$3 billion worth of media coverage without an advertising dollar spent tells us we have something to learn from the Trump branding machine. (Schroeder, 2016)

Keywords

Branding, communication, media, politics, technology, unconventional, psychotherapy, anthropology, sociology, propositions, phenomenon, budget, vocabulary, campaign.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sociologists, anthropologists, psychotherapists and economists all have something to say about how the Trump phenomenon has been fueled. In this paper we will briefly review them and try to find some kind of generalization about it or maybe discover it's just a one-off phenomenon. The microeconomics of it has been understudied because funding has been relatively insignificant when compared to the budget of the presumptive democratic presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton.

Conventional wisdom tells us, "Marketers must create competitive advantage by constantly adapting to and instigating change...Adaptations to market changes are likely to be more successful if actions are guided by knowledge of the forces shaping market behavior and insights that enable the development of sustainable competitive advantage". (Shocker, 1994) This is certainly the thinking of the Hillary Clinton campaign – with great success.

We all know that "...brands and trademarks have become strategic assets and a source of competitive advantage". (McKinsey, 2013) On the other hand a worrying influence of the Internet and social media favors the *bite-sized* thought over the grand thesis. (Tanenhaus, 2014) And to this extent Trump has succeeded.

The Sociological Perspective

"Mass media is defined as "the channels of communication in modern societies that can reach large numbers of people, sometimes instantaneously". (Sullivan, 2007) Mass media therefore has the ability to communicate messages through various channels and as a result can influence individual attitudes, opinions and moods.

Mass media utilizes traditional and digital media channels and is a significant force in modern culture – particularly in America. And of course we can rely on the sociologists to construct a new category, which they describe as "mediated culture" and an expansion of this description is "media has a direct affect on modern culture". (Dean, 2010)

This "mediated culture" has also developed and enhances the concept of "*celebrityhood*" that can fuel ones "claim to represent a group or cause" (Street, 2004)

Historically the concept of celebrity is usually applied to political and business leaders, as well as those who are high profile, in demand and outlaws. Today, there has been exponential growth in this classification to include actors, singers, artists and other social elites. The Internet and various applications have proliferated media channels beyond which anyone could have imagined not too long ago.

Three Main Sociological Perspectives on Social Media

The *limited effects theory* posits the view that the media exerts a "negligible influence" because this group of people already has chosen what it wants to watch and read based upon their beliefs - so it reinforces their worldview. The less informed in this group can be persuaded and swayed out of their position. According to others in the field there are two problems with this perspective. The first is "they claim that limited effects theory ignores the media role in framing and limiting the discussion and debate of issues." (CliffNotes, 2008) The second critical view of this theory is based on the media's dominance when it was far less widespread. Once upon a time there were only a few networks within which news was communicated, the likes of Fox news, CNN and ABC. But today there are many others that have surfaced like Cheddar.com who specifically pitch the Millennials because they believe the market is untapped. (Ramachandran, 2016)

The *class dominant theory* “argues that the media reflects and projects the view of a minority elite which controls it,” especially in news media. (CliffNotes)

Some of this theory appears to be based on old Marxists theories and more recently much of what Bernie Sanders espoused during his campaign and that is that the owners of the means of production have all the power and therefore control the media. This means that stories can be easily avoided and/or silenced.

There are other flaws in the class dominant theory that include the fact that “advertising dollars fund most media”. (CliffNotes) Therefore networks may satisfy their advertisers for the revenue and not broadcast certain issues that might be antipathetic to their brands.

Critics of this theory counter these arguments by saying “that local control of news media largely lies beyond the reach of large corporate offices elsewhere.” They argue, good journalists not advertising moguls or big interest groups produce sound news stories. The examples they give to support this view are local news support for environmental causes and the anti-nuclear movement etc. (CliffNotes)

Do corporate elites control the media? There is a strong counter argument that a politically *liberal* elite controls the media. They support their argument by taking the view that journalists are more highly educated than the general population and hold more liberal political views, and are more likely to register as democrats. This is a powerful and persuasive argument.

Bernie Sanders much like his Marxist mentor Karl, failed in his endeavor to shift the means of production - where all the power lies – in to the hands of the proletariat. This used to be called socialism. Bernie called himself an independent even though he was running under the banner of the Democratic Party. He did, never the less, capture a whole new prospective voting market and funding from the Millennials. Bernie was very concerned this market would dissipate if he gave up the bid for the presidency too soon. New Networks like Cheddar.com are sweeping the Millennials up and are tapping into the zeitgeist of voters who are coming of age. And this is the very untapped market that the Clinton campaign is trying to sweep-up in Bernie’s wake.

The *culturalist theory* combines the limited effect and class dominant theories based on the idea that people interact with media to create their own meanings “out of the images and messages they receive”. Social media developments may have and will continue to play a part in how a passive audience versus interactive audience participation impacts belief systems. The culturalist theorists have concluded that taking everything else into account – “personal perspective

plays a more powerful role in how the audience members interpret those messages”. (CliffNotes)

The Anthropological Perspective

An anthropological perspective defines the rise of Donald Trump from a cultural vantage. “He is the embodiment of celebrity culture – a world filled with glitz, fantasy and illusion.” (Stoller, 2016) Where shallow perception reigns king or queen depends on your preference.

His presentational platform consists almost entirely of him, sometimes members of his family, and occasionally celebrities of various kinds – all on the stage to sing his praises. Powerfully missing are members of the GOP party – the party he is supposed to be representing as the presumptive heir to the presidency. He then treats the attending audience to such pearls of wisdom as, “how bad things are in America and how he is the man to make things better.” (Stoller)

A race for the presidency of the most responsible and respected continent on the planet is presented as a theatrical production and a country that’s filled with woes - that only he can make better. His tightly controlled theatrical production reinforces “the myth of Mr. Trump’s fearless strength, his invincibility and his inevitability – a real strong man.” (Stoller)

In the debate format however he has less control but never the less he continues to talk America down and denigrates members of his own party who are sharing the platform because they are competing with him for the nomination. He captivated our attention with such pearls of wisdom as “Little Rubio” and “Lying Ted” and “Crooked Hillary”. But he uses his marketing and branding savvy to change the spelling and enunciation to appeal to a different constituency of voters – “Liddle Rubio” and “Lysin Ted”. (Stoller)

“There is none so blind as those who will not see.”
(Sharman, 1874)

In another context, when he was confirmed as the GOP nominee for president, which was staged to look like a presidential press conference, he offered yet another pearl, which was his solution to all our problems – it is simple – we need him because he knows how to negotiate. In other words we need a self-professed, dazzlingly wealthy businessperson who is successful because he knows how to negotiate? He would use this one strategy to solve all manner of global issues including the Syrian migrant crisis. And for some reason he is not using this amazing skill to negotiate himself out of an IRS audit. Puzzling.

So far Mr. Trump in his pseudo presidential acceptance speech did manage to convince many viewers that he was actually the president. But what happened to the other showbiz president, Tony Goldwyn (of Scandal)? Well, at least the latter is sexy! Trump’s ignorance about the social political complexities of the world as well as the US

Constitution does not seem to matter in his world of fantasy. Some analysts and psychotherapists call this condition *narcissism* or as some British journalists have coined as “Trump Derangement Syndrome.” (Ginsburg, 2016) Is he trumpeting his own horn? The phrase was coined long before Trump was born, but how apt.

The culture of celebrity is a world of illusion in which he can carefully develop his mythic image. So what do Harry Potter, Superman, Batman and Trump have in common? The first 3 are not running for president and they know they are actors and are tasked with creating characters in stories that are all about myth and illusion.

What will happen when the lights are turned on?

The Psychotherapeutic Perspective

“The truth doesn’t matter if you build a strong brand.” Perception is reality – even if it’s not true. In the face of factual information is it possible for people to still believe a myth or still believe a lie? So what can we learn from the Trump phenomenon? Lesson: “tell a consistent narrative, persistently, frequently and well.” This will captivate many people. (Pfeffer, 2016)

To borrow from the world of family psychotherapy, this mantra comes pretty close to a very well known and powerful intervention from the world of family therapy called *changing family propositions*, reframing the problem (about dysfunction in the family) and getting it to stick by means of a repetitive narrative. The therapeutic challenge is to create, with the family, a new proposition. The therapist’s task is to construct a narrative that fits around the new proposition – and moves it from an individual proposition to a systemic one. The new proposition (narrative) is then repeated frequently to get it to stick. Trump does something similar.

In the branding of Trump it becomes a narcissistic parody of the psychotherapeutic change-making effort. And he’s achieved considerable mileage out of it.

In the world of psychotherapy this intervention can be a wonderful and powerful change-maker because it is used for the good. Trump, on the other hand, has hijacked it and used it for his own gain. Think about it – construct a narrative that contains a new proposition and repeat it in as many ways as possible - over and over again.

Interesting that the Wharton School is just next door to the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic where these interventions were given life in the early and late 1970’s. (Minuchin/Fishman, 2009)

“Trump’s ghostwriter for ‘*The Art of the Deal*’ has expressed regret about his role in creating the myth of Trump’s business acumen.” (Pfeffer) Trump has so embodied this mythology, *that he is a rich and successful business executive*, and his endless repetition of this

narrative leads him to believe he should be the president of the United States. He has built around himself all the trappings of success and wealth to underscore what he seems to believe is his reality. He acts and plays the part almost flawlessly. As a result, many people have bought into the narrative and the illusion of success and wealth.

Trump isn’t the only person who tells his own narrative and has learned how repetition can reinforce the views expressed in his narrative; he helps them take root in the public consciousness while excluding key contributors to “his success”. (Pfeffer) He is like Dorsey, one of the founding members of Twitter, who omits referencing Glass from any involvement in the genesis of the company. With each retelling of his narrative, Dorsey increases his own role and importance. So much so, no one knows who Glass is, he just happens to be the co-founder of Twitter.

We agree with Trump, the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania is a great business school. He has built his affiliation with Wharton into his narrative. The school however unfortunately has “declined to comment about the famous alumni” and his classmates don’t seem to remember him. (Pfeffer)

Similarly, most people don’t remember who Admiral John Byng was.

A descendent of Admiral John Byng many generations later, called Dr. John Byng Hall spent time in Philadelphia at the Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic (a world renowned training center) as a visiting consultant from the Tavistock Clinic in London – another world renowned clinic and training center. Until his retirement, he was one of the leading psychotherapists in the field of family psychotherapy. He tells the story of his ancestor Admiral John Byng to his training clinicians (which included the co-author of this paper). He told both sides of the story as recorded in history. Some cite the Admiral as a hero and some as a coward.

Admiral John Byng was executed on March 14, 1757 for “Failing to do His Utmost”. (Cavendish, 2007) Admiral Byng was charged with a task of sailing to the Mediterranean island of Minorca, then a British possession, in order to defend it from attack – but by the time he arrived he couldn’t save it because the island was already under attack. His fleet was totally inadequate for the task. He did one skirmish and then could do nothing and retreated to Gibraltar leaving Minorca to the enemy. British public opinion branded him as a coward. The prime minister ordered he was put on trial for neglect of duty and he was court-martialled in Portsmouth and found guilty despite his plea that he had been inadequately supplied for his mission. Byng was executed by firing squad on board his own flagship. How different would this play out today had Byng had a marketing company to influence public opinion in his favor and get them to buy-in to his narrative - that he had

been inadequately equipped for the task? Was he a coward or was he a hero? Depends on what commentary you read.

Had Admiral Byng applied the Trump branding technique and had mass media tools at his disposal, he could have created a narrative and repeated it until the people believed him. His destiny could have been changed.

Interestingly enough, Dr. John Byng-Hall is renowned also for the work he has done on families, myths and legends. (Byng-Hall, J., 1979)

America's Founding Fathers

"The poll manufactured drama of the long and laborious 2016 campaign is presented as though it is the only development in the life of the planet that's current and newsworthy." (Burstein/Isenberg, 2016) As with drama, the language is sometimes inflated and traumatic situations become amplified into melodramas and Greek tragedy. Is this what we can expect in several months time if Trump loses? We can predict if this is the outcome, he will deliver a new narrative in which he has been robbed and that the whole process was rigged and crooked.

In a straw poll around our dinner table all our guests consider the drama in the primaries this year as nothing less than theatre at its very worst.

"The culture warring drums are a daily beat of the reverberations of 18th century enlightenment and 19th century struggles to define America's moral position in the world." So how far have we come, really? (Burstein/Isenberg)

"We are not independent from our cultural inheritance". (Burstein/Isenberg)

"History reminds us that immigrants from Mexico were a hot button issue then and the Islamic world - and that new arrivals were tarred as pollutants and regarded on masse as objects of suspicion." (Burstein/Isenberg) And these attitudes and beliefs are as old as the country itself, yet Trump has repackaged them and made them a subject of his electoral platform, as though they are new.

He has persuaded his followers using the technique of repetitive narrative that contains a germ of a new proposition that these attitudes towards immigration are current or new - and are a consequence of weak leadership. When indeed these attitudes are as old as the country itself but do not take into account generations of evolution that the country has evolved into an embracing multiracial, multicultural continent that's inclusive. Trumps rhetoric is divisive. Trumps platform is retrograde and has the potential to wash away generations of evolution.

2. CONCLUSION

One of the most outstanding myths about America is that we had arms open wide to anyone from anywhere around the world. It's what we were all taught in our early years in

school. Yet is this a myth? Is it who we are or who we think we are?

History will decide this and its not looking too good at the moment. Trump's narrative appears to be quite close to that of our founding fathers. "In short, popular ignorance kept the powerful safe." (Burstein/Isenberg)

The more we delve into history the more we can see Trump is recreating the wheel - except he has access to very sophisticated media tools to drive his narrative.

Early this year President Obama remarked that the Trump phenomenon was "nothing new in American history". He's right. (Burstein/Isenberg)

What's going to happen when the lights go on?

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PS: "Donald Trump has received the equivalent of nearly \$3 billion in free advertising since last May." (Schroeder, 2016)

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