

Tiny Bubbles



There's something about turning 50 that makes you take stock of things. This magazine celebrated its 50th birthday with the publication of our 200th issue a couple of months ago. In a strange coincidence, I also turned 50 a couple of months ago, which makes me doubly susceptible to feverish bouts of retrospection. I've noticed that after I'm done pondering what *was*, I tend to think about what *is* and, naturally, *what's to come*.

It's hard enough to know what is, never mind speculating about what's to come – harder still when the speculation is on a global scale rather than a personal one. For example, ten years ago at Wrestlemania XXIII, Donald Trump clotheslined Vince McMahon, punched him repeatedly and then shaved his head in the middle of the ring. Today, he's president of the United States. How did that happen? How *could* that happen?

In the days after the November 2016 election, CNN Politics listed their 24 reasons for the Trump victory. Because it was so close (Clinton actually *won* the popular vote by 2%), any of those reasons could have made the difference. It's like arriving at the scene of a camel mishap and trying to figure out exactly which straw broke its back. But there was one reason that didn't get the attention it deserved.

In the months leading up to the election, there was a popular recurring sketch on Saturday Night Live (SNL) in which Alec Baldwin played Trump and Kate McKinnon played Clinton. Week after week, the tone was one of utter disbelief that a clown like Trump could have come this far. Every week the SNL writers were handed a fresh Trump campaign disaster. It was comedy gold that almost wrote itself. All Hillary had to do was keep her mouth shut and cross the days off the calendar and she'd soon be sit-

ting in the White House. In one sketch, the SNL Weekend Update news anchor finished discussing the week's goings on (something about Trump shooting himself in the foot, this time with a bazooka) and then the viewer was taken to a live feed of Clinton for comment. She was popping the cork on a bottle of champagne with fellow revelers at a victory celebration. A moment later, she realized that she was on the air so she sheepishly handed off the bottle and tried to compose herself. But she couldn't stop grinning. The studio audience couldn't stop laughing and cheering.

A few weeks later, Donald Trump won.

Why? A major factor that has not been discussed is the role of social media. In a word, Clinton's supporters were *hipper*. They were more likely to be online, more likely to have smartphones, and so were more likely to get their news from Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. (and more likely to watch SNL). If you were a Clinton supporter in late October, 2016, all of your tech-savvy senses told you that she was a shoe-in. You could be so sure of this that, if, say, the weather was a bit drizzly on election day, you might not even bother to vote. Or, if, say, you had to choose between getting in line at that new bierhaus in Williamsburg and getting in line to cast your ballot, you just might choose the former. There was no sense of urgency.

Voter turnout ended up being low in general, but it was especially low among Democrats. Could this hip complacency explain why?

The promise of the Internet was that it would give regular people instant access to a world of information, knowledge, viewpoints... and cat videos. But one could argue that the very opposite has occurred (except for the cat videos). For example, when you visit YouTube

What happens
when each of us
is certain we are
blessed with all of
the correct views
about everything,
and anyone
who disagrees
is reflexively
dismissed as a
right-wing radical
or a racist or a
communist stooge or
a white supremacist
or a useful idiot or
an Islamophobe?

and search for “how to do an oil change on a car,” you’ll get 9,220,000 hits. It’s likely that one of the first few will do the trick. But notice the list of videos that appears along the right side of your window. They are all closely related to oil changes and car maintenance, so they are likely to attract another click from you. The folks behind YouTube (and every other big website and app) have a financial incentive to keep your attention. So that’s what they do – with their

opaque and increasingly effective algorithms.

What does this mean when it comes to politics rather than oil changes? Let’s say a Clinton supporter does a YouTube search for videos of Hillary’s latest campaign stop. After watching the video, the supporter will be tempted to click on one of the many other pro-Clinton videos that have magically appeared on the screen. And then another and another, until a couple of hours have been lost down a rabbit-hole of Clinton fandom. The Clintonite could be forgiven for feeling certain that everyone loves Hillary and will cast their ballot accordingly. This insulation from reality, this bubble, creates complacency, and complacency douses the urgency for voter turnout.

It’s not just YouTube. The same self-enbubbling holds true for Twitter, Facebook, Google+ and any other customizable social media. They serve to us exactly what we want to consume, with nary a Brussels sprout of dissenting opinion. We might forget that other points of view even exist. Out of sight, out of mind. YouTube has no incentive to recommend a video describing a political view that differs even slightly from the position its algorithms think you hold. This insulation from other world views may also be a contributing factor in the ever-increasing polarization of political positions. (Some have noticed that any departure from the views of the “Progressive Left” gets one smeared as a far-

right radical. Steven Pinker calls this phenomenon the “Left Pole.” When you are at the Left Pole every other vantage point is to the Right, just as when you are at the North Pole every other point is due south.)

The consequences of our isolation into individualized echo chambers and bubbles will get more profound over time given that an increasing number of people rely on social media for their knowledge of current events. In Febru-

ary, *Fortune* magazine reported that “YouTube Could Be About to Overtake TV as America’s Most Watched Platform.” “Old media” are losing audience share by the minute. Although no one would argue that those media are perfectly objective, they do provide the opportunity to at least stumble upon a diversity of thought. If they go, they will take with them opportunities for exposure to contrary opinions.

What happens when each of us is certain we are blessed with all of the correct views about everything, and anyone who disagrees is reflexively dismissed as a right-wing radical or a racist or a communist stooge or a white supremacist or a useful idiot or an Islamophobe? What chance is there for a productive exchange of ideas when discussions only happen in online comments sections filled with expletives, trolls and sock-puppets? Has a Young Earth Creationist ever been shown the error of his/her ways by an incisive and witty Tweet of 140 characters or less (including thoughtfully selected emojis)?

It’s not all bad, though. There are many great resources and opportunities online for learning and for dialogue. It’s just that these are getting harder to come by, and, someday soon, they will no longer be free of charge. The information revolution has changed many things, but the old adage remains: You get what you pay for. •

– Richard Young