

IDENTITY PROBLEM: BLIND JOURNALISM, UNINFORMED TECHNOLOGY, AND CORY BOOKER

This is an op-ed; opinion herein is mine. ~Rayne

A tweet yesterday by technology-futurism pundit and sci-fi writer Bruce Sterling hinted at the problem of technology industry and journalism, with regard to politics:



Bruce Sterling @bruces

He represents the Googly-Facebookish wing of the Democratic Party: nytimes.com/2013/03/23/us/...

The tweet was spawned by a profile in The New York Times of Newark NJ's mayor, Cory Booker, who has used social media regularly as a community outreach tool. In addition to bestowing the inapt label "A Politician From the Future," a critical problem in this article is the labeling of Cory Booker as appealing to "the Googly-Facebookish wing of the [Democratic] party."

Except that Cory Booker is extremely proficient at using microblog platform Twitter, and Twitter has a significantly different demographic profile with regard to race and age. Further, Twitter's 140-character post limitation has been much easier to use on mobile devices, fitting a mobile business model long before either Google or Facebook.

It's not clear what Sterling thought about the NYT's article, though in a reply he expanded and lumped together the "Twitterly-Googly-Facebook" crowd, suggesting he's missed both NYT's error while not understanding the demographics and politics at play.

Both Sterling and NYT fail to take seriously

Booker's actions themselves; they look at the medium, not the message, which is that Booker's deeds are like that of an old-school Democrat, the kind we used to have before the corporatist Democratic Leadership Committee co-opted the Democratic Party to serve somewhat more liberal overlords.

Booker's use of Twitter was carefully noted by TIME back in 2010, after Booker had taken personal, hands-on action to help constituents during a snowstorm. It wasn't a collection of photo ops for a campaign (as another mayor-candidate demonstrated in another city), but actual response to situations where elbow grease and a shovel were required.

What both NYT missed, besides categorizing Booker as belonging to the "Googly-Facebook" portion of the Democratic Party:

- Booker's efforts with regard to his one-on-one interactions with constituents do not compare with a considerable portion of the party to which he belongs;
- His actions are highly transparent, his words sync with his deeds right there in the public forum of Twitter;
- The tool he uses for outreach more closely matches his constituents' demographics, not that of the "Googly-Facebook" crowd.
- Booker uses "big data" to make and justify decisions; "big data" is merely a contemporary expression of polling data used in the near-term past and present.

It's not clear that Sterling notes these key points, as focused as he was on the social media component and NYT's representation of Booker as a politician from the future.

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Now let's look at what computer scientist and tech pundit Jaron Lanier said about social media and "big data" in a recent interview:

“...The only one left standing at some future date is the owner of the largest computer on the network. Whoever has the biggest computer wins in our current system.

Is this true for politics as well?

Yes. If you have the biggest computer and the biggest data, you can calculate how to target people with a political message, and have almost a guaranteed deterministic level of success. Politics then becomes about who has the biggest computer instead of what the agenda is. The way Obama won the last US election was by having the best computer strategy. That method of winning an election works, but if that is to be the future of politics, it will no longer have meaning. The path we are on is not compatible with democracy. ...”

Pay attention to this argument very carefully, because this is what the major parties' consultants are trying to sell: the more data, the better the results, the biggest computer wins.

It's utterly wrong.

Ask yourself if any campaign generated message convinced you to vote one way or another in 2012. Or was it the candidates themselves, their history, their ideology, their comparative goodness/badness/rightness/wrongness on grey scale that swayed you?

I personally cannot think of anything that would have persuaded me to vote for Mitt Romney, and I suspect that was the case for much of the 47% he believed did not matter. His personal beliefs about the 47% and his previous track record could be readily seen by voters without a lick of “big data” messaging.

Let's look at Cory Booker through the same lens. His popularity as mayor has less to do with big

data than simply being an old-school, hands-on Democrat. If it ever comes out he's done any of his works because "big data" told him to, he'd be dropped hard.

It's inauthentic, inhuman, to do good deeds because "big data" told you to do so.

As long as he genuinely cares about his constituents, makes himself available, is real, his popularity will continue.

The problem Booker must confront is the sublimation of his moral conscience to decision by data. From the NYT article one might infer Booker avoids unpopular actions because data tells him it's not popular.

But should any elected official ever confuse popular with moral and ethical?

Polling data – the older, slower, less granular version of "big data" – informed elected officials that impeaching President George W. Bush was unpopular.

That's why it never took off in Congress. Not because Bush didn't merit impeachment, that his actions may have been illegal, but that going after him for impeachable offenses wasn't popular.

Members of Congress didn't interpret this data to mean they needed to make a better case to the American public as they sought impeachment.

The moral and ethical acts of governance were set aside because of data.

Jaron Lanier also said in the course of his interview,

“...There are a lot of very positive things about the tech world. It's remarkably unprejudiced and I've never encountered racism in it. There are a lot of good qualities, so I don't want to criticize it too much. I remain in it, and I enjoy it. However, there is a smugness, or a kind of religious aspect

to it. There is a sensibility that says: we have skills that other people don't, therefore we are supermen and we deserve more. You run into this attitude, that if ordinary people cannot set their Facebook privacy settings, then they deserve what is coming to them. There is a hacker superiority complex to this. ..."

The people who will sell the use of "big data" to politicians who've already proven popularity is more critical to them than morality are going to be smug about any outcome. They have absolute faith in their products.

Unfortunately, their products are pitched to a black-and-white, yes-and-no, binary – no matter how much geek-speak they use to tell you the algorithms they use are non-linear, complex tools for decision making.

They sell to a binary they don't even recognize as wrong. They're pushing the granularity of data to people who only want to know if they can successfully run for office next term, the yes-or-no, not the gradients along a grey scale that come from making a tough moral decision.

Journalism looks on, marveling at the new tools, unable to invest the effort to research the whiz-bang technology, nor willing to take a position on whether use of a tool is good or bad ("the view from nowhere," as NYU's Jay Rosen has called it).

Technology is concerned with altogether different issues – the kinds of tools used, whether the progenitors of the tools are honest brokers, and if there's any transparency or oversight.

Except that technology has missed that the decisions being made about these tools are based on popularity – or on popularity measured by campaign contributions received by donors – rather than what is the moral or ethical choice.

At this point I should insert a map with a sign that reads, *You Are Here*.

We are told what to believe by journalists who are blind in a number of ways, about technological tools used upon us by those whose understanding is narrow. Both journalism and the technology industry have exposed their shortcomings with regard to ethics and morals in terms of governance.

And as noted yesterday in my previous post, a substantive number of professionals in both journalism and the technology industry have forgotten or have never known a time when we were more concerned with doing the right thing for our fellow man than simply aiming for the most popular, most read, most used, most sold content/application/candidate.

Cory Booker has all the hallmarks of being a fine Democratic elected official at a level higher than that of Newark's mayor, based on his deeds; he's the kind of candidate that should have emerged after 2006, the kind that I had personally hoped for as an activist.

But Booker also shows a reliance on "big data" for decision making abetted by both journalists and technology alike.

Who will tell Booker the truth? Big data's messing with him, while media's blowing smoke up his ass with beat sweetener profiles. At the same time, Twitter is working for him as a simple outreach tool, a low cost one-to-one connection with each cellphone user who can tweet him in his highly diverse city.

Who will explain all this to the Democratic Party's rank and file? Technology's hacker ethos thinks they have it coming to them if they're too stupid to grok what's going on, and journalism isn't doing them any favors with shallow puff pieces. Yet a substantive number of them get "the Facebook" while failing to understand or use Twitter.

Where does the delaminated left fit into this

mess? They're among those whose data will contribute to decision making by politicians, but whose morals and ethics will be ignored in the process.

And who will spell out all of this to the public? See above, rinse and repeat – especially since dirty bloggers who use words like “blowjob” aren't allowed on broadcast and cable communications.

This is the politics of now, if not the politics and politician of the future in question.

Perhaps that sign should read, *You Are [Expletive] Here.*