

Editorial introduction: Cambridge Analytica, ‘Nudge Theory’, and ‘figures of the audience’

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The growing scandal that has hit Cambridge Analytica, SCI (formerly Strategic Communication Laboratories), AggregateIQ, and Facebook has a number of intriguing aspects. First, of course, there are the accusations relating to ‘privacy’ and social media, and the sharing of personal details – whether by accident, carelessness, or strategy – on the part of Facebook. Second, the charge that CA, SCL and AIQ sought to interfere both in the American Presidential election, and the British Brexit referendum (and some other electoral situations, including Nigeria [if less successfully there]) – with a clear conservative political agenda. Arising out of these, of course, are very troubling questions about the role of secretly funded and mounted political campaigns and their impact on democratic processes. There is of course a question-mark over precisely how ‘secret’ these things are. It may have been a case of people not knowing where to look – SCL apparently used to describe itself openly as a ‘global election management agency’ – under what circumstances does that not generate shivers? And then there’s the fact that each of these cases appears to involve the harvesting of Big Data, and the search for persuadable people and how to persuade them, which adds yet another strand to the complexity of the problem. Ethical and political issues ring loud through all of them.

But there is another aspect which so far has received less attention – and which makes the whole affair of real interest to this Journal. This is the rising influence of new psychological models which legitimate and make saleable everything that CA and its partners have apparently been doing. This is variously named as the ‘new behavioural science’, or ‘nudge theory’. And behind it, lurking behind but playing important roles, are various kinds of neuroscience. The operation of these kinds of ideas take what CA and others have done beyond what Emma Briant has called the ‘dark arts’ of persuasion.¹

‘Nudge theory’ comes with a supposedly positive track record. The product of two American economists, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, and embodied more than anything in their (2008) book *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*, it is of course cheerfully self-promotional. A number of governments have already ‘signed up’ to its principles, and established working parties to try out its techniques. It promises all kinds

of good things, like getting unwilling people to sign up for organ donation, or choosing to eat more healthily. And who could not support these goals? And of course there are signs that some at least of the tactics associated with it do work. The open naming of their approach as ‘libertarian paternalism’ raised eyebrows and hackles in various quarters, but it for sure identified this as a distinctively American approach. It has even earned one of its authors the Nobel Prize for Economics ...

That people can sometimes be persuaded, especially if they are unclear, uncertain, angry, or feel that their world is in a bad state, is no surprise to anyone. To raise that to the level of a theory purporting to explain, predict, and isolate the means to do this requires a number of special conditions to be met. Most importantly, it needs a *model* of the persuasion process. And boy, does Nudge Theory have one of those! In line with a lot of recent theorising, it operates with a split-level ontology of the human mind. At base, and fastest to respond to things, are responses which are sensory, ‘instinctual’, habitual – and if advertisers, marketers, propagandists can activate those, they are on a winner. On top, and slower to respond, are rational and strategic processes. Waiting in the wings are various kinds of contemporary cognitive neuroscience, which postulate evolutionarily based higher and lower brains, sitting awkwardly together. This renewed reductionist ontology is increasingly popular. Nudge theory borrows chunks of its neuroscientific rhetoric.

This quite easily generates a ‘reception theory’. Certain kinds of materials might be designed to bypass the ‘rational’ levels of brain response, by being too fast, or too visual, or by appealing to ‘basic’ fears and anxieties. Or, appeals to ‘basic’ desires might be built in, so that receivers respond before/without realising what is involved.

As a number of critics have pointed out, there is a high degree of selectivity around the evidence for the ‘effectiveness’ of attempts to use these sorts of techniques. Martin Robbins, for instance, points to the risks of citing Ted Cruz ‘winning’ one election through use of CA’s techniques, when he went on to lose the next four ...² But it is also interesting to see that even thoughtful respondents can easily slip into the trap of repeating the languages of this kind of thinking about human persuasion. For instance, George Monbiot recently discussed the topic carefully, in a discussion piece on the implications of the CA disclosures. He argued: ‘Our capacity to resist manipulation is limited. Even the crudest forms of subliminal advertising swerve past our capacity for reason and make critical thinking impossible.’³ He thus manages to echo the very model which underpins and drives CA’s work: that the brain has weak rational tendencies easily undercut by more primitive irrational impulses.

The particularly interesting point to me is Monbiot’s illustrative example: ‘The simplest language shifts can trip us up. For example, when Americans were asked whether the federal government was spending too little on “assistance to the poor”, 65% agreed. When they were asked whether it was spending too little on “welfare”, 25% agreed. What hope do we have of resisting carefully targeted digital messaging that uses trigger words to influence our judgment? Those who are charged with protecting the integrity of elections should be urgently developing a new generation of safeguards.’ The curious thing is that I

remember using this *precise* example to demonstrate another principle altogether: that the form of a question in a questionnaire can radically skew the resulting answers. The implications of *that* are very different indeed. They are not about actual persuasion, but about the problems of establishing what will count as ‘public opinion’ on a topic.

Questions of ontology and methodology are not popular. They are difficult, apparently abstract, and easily filled with rhetoric. But they are, from time to time, very important. And it is for this reason, surely, that a growing number of researchers have been taking note of their operation, both in specific situations and in general discourse. At the end of this Editorial Introduction we offer a short bibliography of some of the most interesting work we have come across, looking at what people variously call ‘figures’, ‘myths’, ‘images’, or etcetera of the audience.

But we are not ourselves free of such commitments. And it is for this reason that as a Journal we are in this issue trying to open up some of these topics for debate. Alongside five individual essays and two Themed Sections, we have created a new – and hopefully regularly recurring – Section entitled ‘Debates and Responses’. Among the topics we hope to see debated, in a friendly and informed manner, are the ways in which we find methodological and ontological issues interwoven and active in the work of our field. Here, the focus and opportunity for the ‘opener’ is an important book, reporting a major research project into the reception of the films of *The Hobbit*, on which we publish a substantial review essay. The book’s authors have been invited to respond in our November issue, and we very much hope they will.

Finally, and on a very different note, we are delighted to welcome two new members to the core team who produce *Participations*. Following a strong field of applications in response to our open invitation, Celia Lam and Renee Middlemost are joining Martin Barker, Ernest Mathijs and Sue Turnbull in the day-to-day work of the Journal (see the Editorial Board listing for details). We are sure that they will help us strengthen and develop the Journal into the next phase of its work. Welcome, Celia and Renee.

A short working bibliography on ‘figures of the audience’:

Barker, Martin, Jane Arthurs & Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception*, London: Wallflower Press 2001 (especially Chs. 1-3).

Barker, Martin, *From Antz To Titanic: Reinventing Film Analysis*, London: Pluto Press 2000 (especially Chs. 1-2).

Butsch, Richard and Sonia Livingstone (eds.), *Meanings of Audiences: Comparative Discourses*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Carleton, Greg, ‘The figure of the mass reader in early Soviet literature: artificial interpretive communities and critical practice’, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12:1, 1995, pp. 1-22.

- Cronin, Theresa, 'Media effects and the subjectification of film regulation', *Velvet Light Trap*, 63, 2009, pp. 3-21.
- Hagen, Ingunn, 'Slaves of the ratings tyranny? Media images of the audience', in Pertti Alasuutari (ed.), *Rethinking the Media Audience*, London: Sage 1999, pp. 130-150.
- Maltby, Richard, 'Sticks, hicks and flaps: classical Hollywood's generic conception of its audiences', in Melvyn Stokes & Richard Maltby (eds.), *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, London: British Film Institute, 1999, pp.23-41.
- Nelson, Robin, *TV Drama in Transition: forms, values, and cultural change*, London: Macmillan, 1997 (Chapter on 'Heartbeat')
- Schoenbach, Klaus, 'Myths of media and audiences', *European Journal of Communication*, 16:3, 2001, pp. 361-76.
- Schiappa, Edward, *Beyond Representational Correctness: Rethinking Criticism of Popular Media*, New York: State University of New York Press 2008, esp. Ch. 2.

Notes:

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- ¹ In the UK, Briant has been one of the major sources of evidence on CA and its sister organisations, through publication of her interviews with key figures within them. These can be accessed through evidence published via the UK's Parliament (<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/news/fake-news-briant-evidence-17-19/>), or via a contribution to *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/cambridge-analytica-and-scl-how-i-peered-inside-the-propaganda-machine-94867>).
- ² See Martin Robbins, 'The myth that British data scientists won the election for Trump'. Found at: <http://littleatoms.com/news-science/donald-trump-didnt-win-election-through-facebook>.
- ³ George Monbiot, 'Big data's power is terrifying. That could be good news for democracy', *Guardian* (UK), 6 March 2017.