

The Media's "Repetition Compulsion" in Coverage of the Presidential Primaries

The Unspeakable Truth

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"And all the news just repeats itself like some forgotten dream we've both seen." John Prine "Hello in There"

There is no doubt that the repetitious coverage of the presidential primaries keeps people entertained and focused. Attention deficit disorder is on vacation.

In a high-tech culture of the copy such as ours, repetition is an art form, a method to distract, and the air we breathe. Everything is repeated, except life. But they are working on that. Reiterate, repeat, replay, rewind, retrieve, replicate, echo, copy, parrot, ditto, yakety-yak. We even have a relatively new word to capture this phenomenon – a meme. No doubt we will soon have an official mental disorder called "Mental Carpal Tunnel Syndrome," mental breakdowns caused by repetitive motions of the mind. Then the media will report the news of a new drug to treat it – something with a catchy name like "Reptiva" or "Captiva." The ads for it will run in endless loops.

It is touching to hear the non-stop commentaries about the American people making their voices heard by supporting one candidate or another: the woman, the rebel, the reality television mogul et al. – stock characters from a long-running movie. It is uplifting to think that this matters and a contested, vigorous democratic process is underway. It's just not true. But what's new?

In his ground breaking 1965 book, *Propaganda*, the French sociologist Jacques Ellul makes it clear that propaganda is a normal part of a technological world; that they go together of necessity. It would be a mistake, he argues, to think of propaganda as just lies or the use of specific techniques to control people's opinions. It is this, but, more importantly, it has a sociological component that is ongoing, insidious, and all-inclusive. "Propaganda is not the touch of a magic wand," he writes. "It is based on slow, constant impregnation. It creates convictions and compliance through imperceptible influences that are effective only by continuous repetition. It must create a complete environment for the individual, one from which he never emerges."

And in that complete environment there are certain truths that become "unspeakable," to use the word James Douglass borrowed from Thomas Merton and used so brilliantly in his book, *JFK and the Unspeakable*. The unspeakable is a "collective denial of the obvious....a kind of systemic evil that defies speech," writes Douglass. Merton says, "It is the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said; the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss."

But there are intermediate truths that can be spoken and that shed light on a mass media that echo deceptive banalities and use techniques to manipulate public opinion, often by repetition.

Let me mention three recent speakable revelations in descending order of darkness. They are good work that stops short of an invisible taboo, and in doing so inadvertently illuminate the penumbra of the unspeakable.

In a fine review article in the New York Review of Books (2/25/2016), "We Are Hopelessly Hooked," Jacob Weisberg explores the ways our technology has created a society of electronic addicts obsessed with keeping up and afraid of missing out (FOMA: fear of missing out). He explains how successful apps are based on repetitive hand movements and create a "persistent routine" that triggers needs that they momentarily satisfy in an endless loop. He tells us about the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford University where students are taught to use fear and "hot triggers" to build habits and "change people's thoughts and behaviors in predictable ways." This is termed "captology," for computers as persuasive technology, academic bullshit for propaganda via computers. This is helpful to know, and exemplifies Ellul's linkage of propaganda with technology and the repetition compulsion integral to both.

Then there is Neal Gabler's March 4th article published on the liberal website Moyers & Company, "How the Media Enabled Donald Trump by Destroying Politics First."

Drawing on Daniel Boorstin's prescient book, *The Image* (1961), and his idea of "pseudo-events,

" Gabler clearly shows how the media that bemoans candidates like Donald Trump created the conditions for their rise by turning news reporting into entertainment.

Everything the mass media now touch has an unreal quality to it – show business for the masses. "Having given us nothing in election after election but a show," Gabler writes, "we expect nothing but a show." Gabler is correct, of course. The media are hypocritical in their pious protestations of outrage at a condition they created. This too is a speakable truth.

Lastly, in a darker uncovering of the onion skins, Robert Epstein has written about important research he has done with his associate Ronald Robertson. In "The New Mind Control" (Global Research, March 3, 2016) he reports that they discovered that the internet, especially Google's search engine, can control people's thinking on everything they think, say, and do. By far the most popular search engine, Google is using its technology to invisibly control the minds of its users. Epstein and Robertson call this the Search Engine Manipulation Effect (SEME).

"We now have evidence suggesting that on virtually all issues where people are initially undecided, " he writes, "search rankings are impacting almost every decision people make. They are having an impact on the opinions, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of internet users worldwide – entirely without people's knowledge that this is occurring."

Epstein reports that in the 2012 U.S. presidential election Google donated \$800,000 to Barack Obama and \$37,000 to Mitt Romney. He sees clear signs that Hilary Clinton is receiving Google's backing this time, and through her hiring of Google's Stephanie Hannon, and the work of Eric Schmidt, the chairman of Google's parent company, in setting up a semisecret company – The Groundwork – Google has become Clinton's "secret weapon," as Julian Assange puts it.

These are fine articles and the authors are to be commended for their truth-telling. They help us comprehend the invisible power and repetitive machinations of the media and the technologists. While important, these truths remain within the bounds of acceptable analyses. They disclose the methods of public relations and propaganda, while eliding propaganda's deepest power: To set limits to the permissible. In Orwell's words, to make a heretical thought literally "unthinkable."

Yet if we are to fully understand the repetitive reporting on the U.S. presidential horse race, we need to look further and explicate the unspeakable.

Here again are James Douglass and Thomas Merton:

" 'One of the awful facts of our age,' Merton wrote in 1965, 'is the evidence that [the world] is stricken indeed, stricken to the very core of its being by the presence of the Unspeakable.' The Vietnam War, the race to a global war, and the interlocking murders of John Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy were all signs of the Unspeakable. It remains deeply present in our world. As Merton warned, 'Those who are at present so eager to be reconciled with the world at any price must take care not to be reconciled with it under this particular aspect: as the nest of the Unspeakable. This is what too few are willing to see.' "

That nest is our current resting place where we hatch our ongoing denials under the tutelage of the corporate media. It is the warfare state, the conjoined power of big business, media, intelligence agencies, the Pentagon, Wall Street, etc. It is the secret government spawned by the likes of Allen Dulles and his ilk whose rise and current power David Talbot meticulously chronicles in *The Devil's Chessboard*. It is the "deep state" that Peter Dale Scott dissects in *The American Deep State* where he explains how these secret dark forces have controlled or eliminated U.S. Presidents since their murder of JFK and how that assassination is linked to Watergate, Iran-Contra, and 9/11 in a progressive growth of repressive secret power at the expense of democracy. It is Americans' refusal to come to terms with these events by not going beyond conventional political thinking and assuming such forces don't exist today. It is the protective stupidity of making believe that presidents and presidential candidates are unaware of the message sent from the streets of Dallas on November 22, 1963.

These are the issues that the corporate media – and a lot of the alternative online media – refuse to broach as they bombard us with non-stop news and commentary about the presidential primaries. Hilary, Bernie, Donald et al. – the parade of first-name personalities who say this and pledge that, as if real power resided with them and they were our friends.

If it sounds old, it is. We hear it every four years ad infinitum. It's the news that just repeats itself.

Maybe someday we'll get beyond our repetition compulsions and spotlight the

unspeakable. If we don't, we are in for more of the same.

To repeat an endlessly repeated misquotation: "Play it again, Sam."

It's still the same old story.

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