Reality Gap in politics and Casualties in Public Opinion

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"Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."
- George Orwell -

November 1st, 2012, and the United States was immersed in an electoral process which would give Barack Obama his second term as the President of the United States of America. Eight months of a campaign based on hard-working and volunteerism came to an end with fruitful results; and yet, this same date is also the start of a new trend which would be replicated in the following electoral processes across the world: the introduction of Big Data into politics, a not-so-known technology at the time, which proved to be a disruption factor when it comes to the victory of President-elect Barack Obama.

Under this context, I would like to start my essay, through which I will try to explain a current phenomenon which in the future will be repeated until it is taken as part of routinary tasks, a Business-As-Usual, in the political arena: the use of technology for winning the political race. But rather than just focusing in the use of technology, I will express my concern for the future of politics once it has touched the verge of innovation without a citizen-centered development. I will start by briefly explaining how Big Data works and is used in politics, so that we are able to set a solid background before taking off. Then, I will move towards the explanation of what was expected of the traditional design for a political campaign and what happens nowadays, once the political race has been disrupted. Following this, I will reveal my opinion about what I call the 'casualties' of this disruption, and what will happen in the near future if we don't act accordingly to this new technology.

How does Big Data work in politics?

Having one of the most important elections in the world as part of its portfolio of successful cases, Big Data would venture into politics in a fast paced rhythm. Simple support polls, used in the past for understanding the demographic composition and political views of a local community were in disadvantage against the use of massive sets of information gathered throughout intense periods of time and from different sources that Big Data had to offer. While pollsters counted between

some hundreds and maybe reaching a little over the thousand surveys, Big Data reaches the hundred of thousands of entries for an individual person in an extended region. Instead of simply showing whether someone would vote for one candidate or another, Big Data offered the chance to not only identify possible voters, but also understand how much they earned a year, their family composition, their favorite books and also which websites they read for getting the news (Buckley, 2016).

Big Data in Politics works by combining what is called two sets of data, or two categories of data with different sources as their origin: Sample Data and Population Data. The first is the information coming from Social Media profiles, advertising campaigns and Marketing agencies, while the second is the result of census and the use of Open data that the government of any country makes available for general citizenship, e.g. how many citizens have access to the power grid and water networks for each county or district. This 'Consumer Data' plus the 'Citizenship Data' map a big set of profiles of different people living in a specific region, for further analysis and accurate decision-making. (Mark van Rijmenam, 2017)

But what kind of decision-making are we talking about when we add Big Data into politics?

Because of the high investment required to access, use and apply data in politics, this instrument is used in scenarios where the Return of Investment must be exact and high in a specific period of time: the elections and, more specifically, the design and execution of political campaigns. But what can worry the common citizenship the most is not the use of Big Data itself, but the purposes of such utilization.

Politicians use this technology the same way that Marketers do when applying Big Data in a new product launch or service offer: isolating a desired group of people on the extensive population, a target in the market, and design the product or service for that specific target. In Politics, the product service would be the politician himself or his proposals, the target would be the Citizenship; and the Public Opinion would be the battlefield to fight for the placement of a product.

The most common strategy during a political campaign is focusing on building a strong electoral base, a group of people who could blindly support the candidate. From there, the candidate would flexibilize its speech in order to gain the support from a larger number of citizens, slowly moving towards the undecided electorate. Sooner or later, candidates would all reach a point in the race where they had to fight for the same amount of undecided voters: the swing-vote. Even though, this has changed with Big Data: now politicians are focusing on specific targets, foreknown to vote for the candidate once this person perceived the politician that supports certain political positions. The Campaign Manager knows what the candidate should say, when, where and to whom. The

battles in the political race are identified as possible victories and losses. This impacts the depth of political discussions since candidates stop presenting a political campaign under the premises of their ideals and proposals, because they don't need to do so anymore. Now, the focus lies on giving the "right" message to the "right people" and avoid or nurture conflict as long as doing so, he or she brings in more votes. They end up centralizing their actions into an empathy-model: "I act as the voters expect me to act like".

If the chances of having a true discussion involving a debate of projects and proposals were bare-medium, now they are almost non-existent. This was verified in the last presidential elections in the US, where the Republican Party candidate Donald Trump focused on specific conservative segments and a middle-class workforce aiming to spread the idea that Democrat Barack Obama's terms were inefficient and unproductive; while Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton focused on transitioning the support from Barack Obama's previous voters and volunteers to her own campaign. Under these two polarized strategies, there was no time nor space for the formal presentation of true campaign proposals. The actions of each candidate were following the patterns discovered through the use of Big Data. There is no longer a true approach to voters. No other action without the support of data would be taken. There is no place for intuition or humanism: only for decisions made under the analysis of a set of technicalities.

The final victory was for the candidate who showed a though profile and a critical position, sustaining the perceptions of their voters as well as the interests of their donors: Donald Trump.

How did the use of Big Data affect the Public Opinion, the war zone where the battles for the voters happened?

This is where I would like to explain what I personally call 'the casualties'. From a citizen's eyes, the appearance of a candidate which supported the common views is a confirmation of his thoughts,vision and ideals. Using Big Data for isolating the electorate and identifying the key message to win their vote created a feedback in which this perception of reality, this partial or misconceived truth was reaffirmed and introduced into massive media, both online and offline. In the meantime, the lack of exchange, debate and interception in a common place for all candidates destroyed the chance to interpolate each other's speeches and separate truth from lie, as well as facts from misperceptions. At the end, a story can be built after each political presentation, and the distorted facts keep accumulating, creating a reality which is augmented for a political show, where the candidate could be the hero and the situation, the fictitious bomb into which everything would be consumed and destroyed in a matter of seconds. Absence of truth, distorted realities and modified descriptions of scenarios are casualties, or unwanted effects of an action resulted of following a path in which no contempt was measured. There is nothing there to correct or verify the path.

This is the essence of the casualties: the lack of evidence looking to fact-check what is being told, its sources, and its counterpart. There is no objectivity, because everything is relative. The presentation of the results of a survey could have been modified in order to be more appealing to specific voters, or the support of several key figures in the media could have been bought because he or she was identified as an influencer through Big Data. The tool was, and will be used, for political reasons instead of pursuing objective and constructive goals. Innovation reached politics before politics could prepare itself for receiving innovation, and no law, bill or policy exists for the regulation in the use of personal data for partisan reasons. Still, there is no wide access to this information, nor public records to contrast what is being said, nor the necessary skills in the wide population to criticize and scrutinize the speech against other realities, and not just their own. Although the highlight should be that this is not a Reality Gap in numbers versus reality, but a Reality Gap caused by numbers for taking distance of reality.

Even with the evidence over the table, candidates count with the information for reassuring their voter's support by identifying what to say and do using Big Data. Campaigning through isolation has proven the negative effects on reality perception when using technology for marketing purposes, instead of the design for more efficient public policies.

So what are the next actions?

Big Data has disrupted the political race, and most politicians and voters are not ready to confront a strategy designed to conquer them by knowing in advance how they will behave. It demands changes in education, cross-check systems, policies and regulations towards an ethical use of data and forbid the construction of stories around distorted information. The complexity lies in the fact that the same politicians who make benefits from a changed reality is the one who has the power and authority to change. It seems Big Data is the perfect scapegoat for the same old political tactics. It could be used for prioritizing voters' infrastructure needs and feed policies and projects for improving basic services. But again, the investment needed for using this tool is increasing more and more according to its value, and the Return of Investment is more useful in the short term through Public Opinion, that on the long term through derived results.

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