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Introduction

This essay aims to discuss whether the virtual experience in the digital age is real or unreal. Internet voting will be used as an example to illustrate the blurry borderline between the two realities, and to highlight some of the challenges we as users face in the virtual world. The essay will begin with a short prelude on postmodernism and its role and impact on our perception of the society. Then the discussion will put emphasis on the virtual environment and our virtual identity, and how these two aspects interplay so to give a better understanding of virtuality and its complexity. This essay does not aim to discuss the philosophical issues concerning virtuality, but rather the current implications it has on our daily lives, and whether it is real or unreal based on how it inflicts on our lives and the society that we live in.

Postmodernism

In today's modern society the Internet is playing an increasingly important role as the nexus for our daily routines in life. Through a various set of devices such as laptop and tablet computers, mobile phones etc, we are constantly connected to a reality that is mediated through a terminal. In this computer mediated reality we have access to a plethora of networks such as computer games, discussion forums and social websites where we interact and build relationships with other participants. We are no longer alone with the computer, but an intrinsic part of a fabric of relations that are now more complex and mobile than before. (Deibert, 1997; Turkle, 1995) Baudrillard observed that 'the subject has become a terminal of multiple networks' (Bukatman, 1993), indicating that we are part of a pluralistic and fragmented community. This notion supports the postmodern epistemological view where the subject consists of decentred selves in a hypermedia environment of multiple realities. (Deibert, 1997) This complex and intricate connection between human and computer which the postmodern society entails, force us to look at technology as more than just a tool. Gillian Youngs makes a distinction between the exogenous view which means that we look at technology as mere gadgets, and the endogenous view which takes into consideration the impact that technology and society, and subsequently us the citizens, has on each other. (Youngs, 2007) "Communication technologies are unique insofar as they are implicated in all spheres of human interaction – from production to security to knowledge and culture" (Deibert, 1997 p. 11).

One of the key arguments for the Norwegian government to run a pilot project on electronic remote voting in 2011 is that they believe the younger generations will demand to have the opportunity to vote online through their personal computer. Since they have grown up with internet banking, online shopping, e-petitions etc they will see it as a citizen's right to vote via the Internet. Post modernity encompasses all aspects of society and our daily lives, and the lines between reality and virtual reality are

becoming more and more blurred. Internet voting is the next frontier for the virtual reality to conquer, though Estonia has already carried out remote internet voting, first time in 2005 and recently in February 2011. The following chapters will look at the virtual experience of Internet voting and how it might be different from traditional voting with pen and paper. Is it possible that our virtual self votes differently than our real self? Does the virtual environment change the way we think about voting? The next chapter will discuss how the virtual environment might be different from the “real” environment when we vote online.

The Virtual Environment

The discussion about the philosophical differences between “actual” reality and “virtual” reality is beyond the scope of this essay, but to continue exploring the virtual environment we shall start off by looking at the characteristics of the virtual. The virtual has always existed (i.e. the Pieta by Michelangelo), and is normally understood as something that is almost real, i.e. “The laptop is virtually new, “There is virtually no time left”. Etymologically the virtual is; what something is in essence but not in form, meaning that it refers to an ideal quality that is the opposite of concrete. (Shields, 2003) With computers and mobile devices, such as smart phones, the distinction between the real and virtual has become more blurry than ever before. By applying McLuhan’s theory of hot and cool media, the “virtual media” has become increasingly, both, hotter and cooler with the recent technological improvements of computers and their mobility. While the Internet has made the interaction with the computer more interactive and consequently cooler, the high definition computer screens and 3D games such as the World of Warcraft and Second Life, has made it hotter. The effect of this simultaneous increase in both hotness and coolness is that the medium and the simulation of the real become even more real. “Baudrillard argues, ‘the more closely the real is pursued with colour, depth and one technical improvement after another, the greater does the real absence from the world grow’.” (Merrin, 2005 p. 52-53) McLuhan’s and Baudrillard’s theory suggests that the more real the virtual environment becomes, the less connected it get with the real.

But how does that relate to the fact that when we vote online it will have direct consequences on the politics in the real world? Baudrillard argues, similarly to McLuhan, that semiotics takes former symbolic as content, and then replace it with their simulacra. This hyper reality, as Baudrillard calls it, which Internet voting is in the centre of, is misleading us away from the real. It is not a mirror of reality, but a new reality. This means that the virtual environment that we vote in is like a black hole where information is drawn in, and no information can reliably emerge from it. (Bukatman, 1993; Merrin, 2005) In a similar fashion hypertext is altering time and space online, and empowering us with a false illusion of total information in a world where knowledge can be accessed through a few commands on the computer. (Heim, 1993) In other words, our vote online is not real in the sense that it is taking place in a different reality, which is not connected with the real, and the information in this new reality cannot be trusted –

more precisely, it is for sure deceiving the voter, according to Baudrillard. Though it is tempting to look at the personal computer simply as a tool for carrying out a vote, the theories mentioned above indicate that the virtual environment, where the computers bring us to vote, is different from the environment we traditionally vote in. How these differences impact the actual vote is a question beyond this essay, but it seems fair to argue that by voting online we do so in a different environment than usual. The next chapter will look at how the individual experiences this virtual environment, and whether or not it is the same person voting online as the one voting offline.

The Virtual Identity

The ways we interact with computers has changed rapidly over the last years, and will increasingly continue to do so. Its interactive features and mobility makes it possible to be connected to the internet at all times. Richards (1998) illustrates this by arguing that we are moving from a 'culture of calculation' to a 'culture of simulation'. This indicates that we, in the postmodern society, no longer use the computer merely as a tool, but as an intrinsic part of how we live our lives through simulation. So how does this simulation culture impact the lives of people? Victor Turner's dictum on liminal moment explains the role of liminoid spaces, such as the web, vacation resorts, theme parks etc. They function as moments between stages in the life process, and computer mediated forms of virtuality are continuations of long running processes. It is a moment of passage when new cultural symbols and meanings can emerge. (Shields, 2003; Turkle, 1995) As Turkle (1995) observes, these liminal moments are becoming permanent through the constant interaction with the virtual. Our lives online are becoming increasingly important and our actions in the virtual has implications in the real world. Cyber crime can result in imprisonment in the real world, and, likewise, online voting can result in a new government in the real world.

The question is how does this virtual reality, that finds itself in this constant liminal moment, affect people and consequently the voter? Turkle (1995) argues that "Liminal moments are times of tension, extreme reactions, and great opportunity" (p. 268). These characteristics are similar to how we experience the Internet today, and our online presence somewhat fills these spaces through for example online dating, social websites, video chatting, online (university) applications, online gaming, porn websites etc. The virtual environment attracts us because it is a space where we can spend our liminal moments and to some extent decide how our experience should be. This control we have over our virtual life, which Turkle refers to as the "Thirty Degree Rule" (Turkle, 2005), can be experienced as a comfort – a micro-world within the real world, where we design and choose the premises for how to interact. So when we vote online, it will have impact on our real lives in form of politics, but what about the actual online voting process, is it real? While the final result, counted in number of votes is real, the actual process of voting is perhaps unreal. As the previous chapter outlined, the virtual environment has different characteristics from the real environment, and as shown in this chapter we perceive this environment in a different way from the real. Explained figuratively; "Internet voting is moving the voting booth to the

theme park or vacation resort”, simply indicating that it is taking place in an environment we usually associates with other activities, and where we perhaps find ourselves in between our normal lives. In this liminal space we have different expectations and priorities which can ultimately affect how we vote.

Who are we online? Who are we when we vote online? The first question has been widely discussed in recent years, and scholars already cited in this essay are continuing this very topical debate. Voting online through our own computers on the other hand is a fairly new possibility, and as mentioned earlier in this essay Estonia is the only country to date to have implemented this in full scale in official elections. So is our online identity different from our real identity, and is it possible that they can have different political preferences?

To begin this chapter, Baudrillard’s quote from the beginning of this essay is the best way to introduce the idea of online identity. He argued ‘the subject has become a terminal of multiple networks’ (Bukatman, 1993), implying that we are becoming one with technology. Our identity has taken an additional electronic shape that is being mediated within the realms of the virtual sphere, and our identity is interwoven in the fabric of online networks. Deibert (1997) argues that “by encouraging participants to take on constructed characters in different virtual environments, hypermedia favour the idea of multiple self, one that varies with its social relationships, and is bounded only by imagination of the individual in different settings”(p. 186). This virtual reality, or hypermedia as Deibert calls it, facilitates and encourage the construction of multiple personalities – building up under the postmodern epistemology. Turkle (1995) however argue that the term multiple personality is misleading because the different parts of the self are not full personalities, and as Winder (2008) illustrates it, the personalities should rather be thought of as set of clothing that we wear for different occasions. Our identity is the sum these personalities, just as our identity in the real life is the sum of our family personality, work personality, friend personality, parental personality etc. (Turkle, 1999) So when we vote online, whether it is one of our multiple personalities or the sum of all of them together, the question is; are we the same voter online as offline? How disconnected are our identity in the virtual world with the one in the real world?

When in cyberspace we have access to all the information that is stored digitally, and the essence of knowledge is changed from something that is stored in our own memory to something that is available with the help of a click. In difference from a human brain, information online is stored in a network of servers, and is being retrieved through Boolean logics, meaning that terms and sentences are processed as data. Heim (1993) argues that this “... affects our mental vision just as long hours at the computer screen affect our eyesight” (p. 24). And the process of expressing thought through writing on a computer involves a different logic than traditional writing with pen and paper. By informational loop Heim (1993) claim that instead of having to think through the sequence before writing it down to paper, computerized word processing means that thought appear in head and on screen at the same time. It can be argued that this rapid way of accessing knowledge, and the intrinsic relationship between mind and computer, has the ability to alter our conception of reality. For example, when we turn on our computer and enter the

virtual polling booth, we expect that the information we need to decide on whom to vote for is accessible by browsing the Internet. Our virtual identity take it for granted that the knowledge is out there in cyberspace whether it is through informative websites that give valuable information or more interactive party calculators that tells you who to vote for based on a questionnaire. Heim (1993) support this argument by saying that:

Software not only accelerates our thought process, but also facilitates the birth of a new reality in which we think. We should not mistake the new digital reality for a neutral territory untouched by human intention. Software hides within it specific notions about how we do and how we should think within a digital environment. (p. 52-53)

The virtual experience takes place in an environment that is created to simulate the real, and the more advanced technology becomes the more difficult it will be to distinguish one from the other. It is important to be aware of the fact that this new reality, though it looks similar to the real, is fundamentally different from each other. When we enter cyberspace we should be aware that we act and resonate differently from how we normally would, and when we vote online we need to acknowledge that we cast our vote in a different reality. Technology is not a neutral tool that performs the tasks we program it to do, but an endogenous part of our postmodern society that is constantly developing and shaping the user and vice versa.

Conclusion

The virtual experience is neither real nor unreal, it is a new reality. The arguments in this essay have highlighted several factors that support this, one of them put forward by Deibert; that the virtual is a new reality in which we think. As the example with Internet voting illustrates, the virtual can have real implications on the real, but the actual process of voting might be fundamentally different in the virtual, and therefore unreal. The problem with voting online is that it takes place in two realities, but is designed and perceived to be taking place only in the real. Baudrillard elevates these two realities into what he calls hyper reality, which due to technological enhancements distances itself, even further away from the real. This gap can have implications on the voting process and consequently the result, by the fact that the connection between the virtual and the real grow more distant from each other. In that case the virtual experience deceive us by appearing to be a part of the real, while it is actually a new reality which is moving further away from the real along with the technological enhancements.

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