Western University
Scholarship@Western

Huron1Read | Huron University College

2015

The Perpetuation of Pundits: My Reflection and Response to Chapter Four "Public Opinion," from the Book The End of Absence by Michael Harris

Elise Geschiere

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/huron1read

 Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons

Citation of this paper:

Geschiere, Elise, "The Perpetuation of Pundits: My Reflection and Response to Chapter Four "Public Opinion," from the Book The End of Absence by Michael Harris" (2015). *Huron1Read*. 2.
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/huron1read/2

Elise Geschiere

Sociology 1020-550

The Perpetuation of Pundits:
My Reflection and Response to Chapter Four, "Public Opinion," from the book *The End of Absence* by Michael Harris

The Perpetuation of Pundits

Michael Harris's book *The End of Absence* raises a fascinating and informative argument regarding the position of our society amidst the ever growing strength of technological influence. The particular chapter that I will be discussing in the following pages is chapter four, "Public Opinion," where Michael Harris explores the evolution of our internet world into a place where there is an abundance of "uncredentialed, ambivalent plenitude[s] of opinions" (Harris 81). The central discussion in this chapter concerns the transitioning on the internet from professional dialogue to a medium that is attuned to the amateur critic.

To begin, I would like to discuss the aspects of this chapter to which I felt I had a particular connection, as well as discuss the themes that Harris asserts with which I found myself agreeing most strongly. On the whole, I felt that this chapter identifies an obvious issue that has arisen with technology providing the masses with an endless supply of information. The platforms allow for self-promotion and the ability to boast one's supposed knowledge. I feel that one of the over-arching themes of this chapter highlights this shift from the quality of information made available to the masses, to the quantity of misinformation and what Harris defines as "opinion glut" (Harris, 88). I believe that this is, and has the potential to become, a detrimental element of the internet in our society. I recently encountered an example of the quality of information exposed to us being overshadowed by the quantity of mass input when I was consulting websites on a topic I was researching for a paper. I realized very quickly that choosing sources to cite in my paper was tedious, because a large number of the sources dealing with my topic were so-called "popular sources", and not "scholarly sources". Popular sources are blogs and other discussion platforms in which unqualified individuals who may have a limited realm of knowledge write about topics that, in my opinion, require an expert angle of understanding in order to be properly analyzed. This goes

to show that everyone has an opinion, and in fact many opinions. This is not something that is negative, and I feel that Harris would agree. However, when uninformed opinions begin to overcrowd the informed and valid knowledge to which we have access, there could be detrimental consequences. Harris says that "sometimes we do need to quiet down the rancor of mass opinion and ask a few select voices to speak up" (Harris 87). When those select voices can be heard, truth and clarity in our discussions can prevail.

In addition, what I noticed when reflecting on this chapter is that there is an interesting tie between the issues that Michael Harris raises and an article we discussed in class, "the McDonaldization of Society" by George Ritzer. I believe that one of the key elements of the rationalization concept is reflected in Harris's arguments in this chapter, and that element is *efficiency*. One of Harris's examples of "amateur" critics gaining prominence on the internet is the example of the website Yelp. Yelp is a large corporation that acts as a platform for crowd-sourced reviews of restaurants, theater performances, movies, other businesses, etc. Yelp is accessible online, and by phone app, making it an easy resource for fast, to the point, non-complex reviews on the go. Harris says:

> In the flood of rating systems and collectivized percentage values, which guide us toward TV shows on Netflix or songs on iTunes, we don't register the loss of that less aggressive suggestion system we always relied on before: face-to-face encounters and singular critics (Harris 89).

Face-to-face encounters and singular critics become increasingly less efficient in a world where the ability to access quick, impersonal, and mass amounts of reviews and information are available at the click of a button. Harris's claim regarding the dwindling need for face-to-face interaction proves the correlation between his ideas and Ritzer's theory of the rationalization of our society. I

felt that it advanced my understanding of rationalization and the desire for efficiency that plays out in our current societies, which has potentially damaging effects.

Another particular area of this chapter that I would like to discuss in this response is the small but profoundly important paragraph that addressed the so-called "filter bubble". I wanted to concentrate on this section of the chapter because it demonstrated something that is happening on the internet of which I was unaware. In short, the filter bubble means that, "Google has been anticipating the search results that you would personally find more interesting and has been promoting those results each time you search, exposing you to a narrower and narrower vision of the universe" (Harris 91). Our Sociology class had also briefly touched on this online occurrence. This topic of the filter bubble really piqued my attention because of how Harris illustrates the consequences of Google taking this action to "personalize" our web browsing experiences. Harris says, "Personalization – the glorification of your own taste, your own opinion – can be deadly to real learning" (Harris 91). The best way for me to depict my reaction to this revelation would be disgust. I am fascinated by the idea that with technology we can feel so powerful and knowledgeable yet we are being fed exactly what we desire: beliefs, values, and experiences we already know.

A final reflection that I have on this chapter in Harris's book takes a more critical aim at the method of Harris's writing. In this chapter, the examples that Harris draws upon to support his message are overly descriptive. I find myself getting lost and confused through his examples and unnecessary details. Sometimes Harris's real world examples, like the work of James Heilman and the editing of Wikipedia pages, overburden the chapter with details, facts, figures and dates that I feel dilute the impact of his argument rather than strengthen it. It may have to do with my attention span as a reader, but when the author goes on with heavy details and dates it is harder to follow

closely. Throughout the entirety of the book, Harris does this as well. I am not sure if these reflections are pertinent to any other readers of his book, but for me, the amount of superfluous writing and detail deteriorates my focus on its main points.

To conclude, I would not claim that this was my favourite chapter in Harris's book; I felt it was bogged down by details that were uninteresting to me and took my focus away from the central arguments. However, in the context of the rest of the text, I think this chapter presents another aspect of our former culture that is withering away: an appreciation for a "singular subjective viewpoint" (Harris 89). When reading this chapter, as well as the rest of the book, I find myself repeatedly having a sort of an epiphany. Harris does very well at inducing those kinds of moments through which the reader comes across new and disquieting information that awakens a further sense of curiosity. I feel that Harris was successful in creating a book that awakened a questioning attitude in his readers; I know for myself that this is the effect that his writing has had on me.

Works Cited

Harris, Michael. *The End of Absence*. Toronto: HarperPerennial, 2014.

Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society.* Los Angeles: Pine Forge Press, 1993. Print.