

SUNY Purchase

Fake News

Media's Devaluing of Time

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Time is a social construct. Its definition is based on the existence of events in the past, present and future collectively; if time is defined by these moments, how can we formulate an all inclusive idea on time that takes into account each individual moment? This equivocal structure of time is not made for the individual, yet is only experienced by the individual. Social media has worked to devalue said social construct, because by nature, media is rapidly changing and encouraging it's users to move onto the next passing moment. In that next moment is this facade of the next best thing. The need for news media to fill a 24 hour news cycle leaves little room to appreciate the smaller moments in between. Artist On Kawara teaches his audience that while technology encourages us to move quickly, we can still value those less significant, slower moments. His collection known as the Date Paintings or the *Today* series (1996-2014) aids the idea that time is a social construct through his simplistic documentation of the date. On the other hand, artist Siebren Versteeg shows his audience just how fast paced our society is today. In his computer programmed piece, *Fake News* (2016) there is only one minute to enjoy the continuously changing collage. Once the minute is up, it moves onto the next best thing. One minute is not enough time to understand the impact of it's content. Their pieces are timeless, as their subject is of an indefinite and continuous human construct that is losing its value to the convenience of social media.

On Kawara, a Japanese conceptual artist, established an algorithm for creating his date paintings. This algorithm contrasts that of Versteeg's, however, in that his are handmade pieces that have a strict set of rules Kawara follows himself. There is no reliance on technology for this code. His definition of a Date Painting was strictly a monochromatic canvas of red, blue or gray. The date was painted in white with regard to the location in which the painting was created. With

respect to the date and time, the painting had to be completed within the construct of the day. Otherwise, it was destroyed (“Paintings” 1). This series focuses on time as a human construction, emphasizing that these dates are only as relevant as Kawara makes them out to be. His simplicity emphasizes the bigger idea, that time is based on experience. The uniqueness of the experience is that his work is a preservation of “today,” that will be experienced by the viewer as “yesterday” (Weidemann 47). Weidemann elaborates on this experience, calling it the “in-between” (47). This undefined space holds an array of paradoxes that are neither slow nor fast: “life-death, logic-process, existence-nothingness...On Kawara’s time resembles something like this dash (-) seems true, but following Kawara’s logic, we could be more specific” (Chiong 51). The dash is symbolic of the moments that cannot be contained by the structures of time, as it’s meaning is ambiguous. Under Weidmann’s evaluation, this ambiguity makes the inscribed mark of a date as timeless as a dash.

Within a biography on Kawara, it is expressed that “the date painting is a patently coded image that nevertheless insists on existing as if it were an Imaginary object, the registration of a particular presence...the most obvious presence would be the physical passage of time...” (Chiong 52). This criticism of Kawara’s work refers to it as a coded message. Author Kathryn Chiong, a historian and scholar who has worked at Columbia University and now the MoMA, questions the significance of a piece with subtitles that only hold significance to the artist. If the moment behind each date piece is not clear to the viewer, it is practically “imaginary” and insignificant. She refers to this work as “a message without a code” (Chiong 52). The hazy intentions of the piece are “refusing naturalistic or iconic reference[.] The paintings are never shown with their corresponding news clippings, but hover in ambiguity” (Chiong 52). In

avoiding any “iconic” reference, Kawara manages to leave the viewer with an open ended understanding of what the date means to them. Whether that be a significant moment or not, for the artist it is simply documentation that such a moment happened. To some like Chiong, the lack of a narrative lessens the value of such a series. To Kawara, this is exactly the point. His paintings are a documentation of his valued moments. The date and time is only significant to those who also value that moment. Time is individual.

Fake News (2016) is an internet connected algorithm of images from media networks. It’s constantly changing manor incorporates news images from various sources to create a new collage every minute. The artist, Siebren Versteeg, is well known for probing the digital world to create the subject of his works. Essentially, this piece from 2016 an internet connected computer program that generates popular media from social networks. Each minute the collage is updated, and a new piece of prominent imagery makes its way onto the digital canvas. This is a continuous process that advanced every sixty seconds. So in this sense, media users are equally the artist, in that they have full control of what content is worthy. The traditional aesthetic of his work is engineered through programmed abstractions. His work has been characterized with “notions of agency, choice, and chance, and how they intersect with digital streams of information” (“Siebren Versteeg” 1). Through his piece, contrasting with Kawara’s non-technical coding, Versteeg manages to inform his viewers on the news of the moment; his artwork is constantly in motion, keeping up with the endless 24 hour news cycles that cover entertainment and politics alike (“Fake News” 1). This piece can be found in both New York and Los Angeles. Its publication date and equally opportune title speaks to the 2016 election results. *Fake News* exposes the terrors that unfold from the 2016 election, live through his artistic

algorithm, utilizing pop culture images and news sources as the basis of his expression. This continuous collage parallels the timeliness of media networks as a news source.

Technology is advancing faster than we can keep up with, and so is the news. This eagerness to move forward leaves no room to understand the present. Today, 68% of adults in 2017 and 2018 say they use social media to receive some of their daily news (Shearer 1). With a significant number of media users, it is clear to see how the 2008 and 2016 elections were so dependent on networking through *Facebook* and *Twitter* in particular. Versteeg's artwork, *Fake News*, elaborates on this idea of reliance on social media for information. His piece changes with the times, and it's up-to-date nature parallels the intensity of news through social media. There is an endless need to fill the day with new updates and information, leaving politics in nearly the same category to entertainment. In this same survey, research associates at Pew Research Center Elisa Shearer and Katerina Eva Matsa work to understand the demographic of people who get their news on social media platforms. American survey respondents reported that it is not the quality of social media news that draws them in, but the convenience (Shearer 3). This desire for convenience is a result of the privilege of having such accessible knowledge. Technological advancements have brought users to a point in which all their reliable news can be found on the internet. This privilege has brought about laziness in users, who find convenience in news that makes its way into social platforms. Convenience also refers to this same idea, that sharing the highlights of news allows users to view and scroll right past it, moving onto the next best thing on their feed. Social media news does not give enough attention to the issue, leaving viewers uninformed and uneducated on important current events.

For networks and corporations that put out this mediocre news, it is all about gaining prestige with the public. Nick Davies, a prominent UK journalist documents some of the frantic efforts that have come about from the desire to be the best, by being the first. He explains that at The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a British public service broadcaster, the guidelines made a significant shift in their standards. Such standards expressed, ““NEVER publish anything that you do not understand” (Rosenberg 3). And then, as if it were no contradiction at all, the demands became, “Get the story up as fast as you can...we encourage a sense of urgency-we want to be first” (Rosenberg 3). As seen here, this radical shift in the desire to get news out quickly is negatively affecting the official BBC guide that is shared with staff members. Reliable sources such as BBC are so focused on expediting their publications, that their viewers are likely getting less credible information.

In regards to the social media users having control over Versteeg’s *Fake News* piece, this can easily be compared to the control users have over the news. News’ infiltration within social settings has created an unclear divide between politics and entertainment. As seen with BBC, producers of media are working to get their content out as quickly as possible to gain attention from their audiences. This competition between such companies to gain validation from the people ultimately gives people more control over what it released. If studies show that American media users are looking for convenience, then politics will surely make its way to networks where all the action is. And in the process of transferring to a media based platform, the opportunity for stronger information and education is lost. 2008 could be argued to be the beginning of an age of social media elections. Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate found his audience on Facebook, and found success in utilizing such a resource. Researchers at AAAS,

Panagiotis T. Metaxas and Eni Mustafaraj, describe the social media manipulation that candidates utilize, and get away with. For example, “altering the number of followers can affect a viewer's conclusion about candidate popularity” (Metaxas 2). Society’s understanding of qualified candidates has been lazily skewed to how much attention they receive. It is assumed that a strong following on popular networks equates to a knowledgeable candidate to hold office. This has distorted where constituents place their values for politicians. Metaxas and Mustafaraj warn their readers, “We should be aware of how that works and be prepared to search for the truth behind the messages” (Metaxas 12). With the manipulation of media for hierarchical gain, society’s desire for convenience is working against the wellbeing of the people; the devaluing of time towards knowledge is working against us.

Versteeg’s digital piece *Fake News* is so timely, because as media progressed up until this Twitter election, the news became further distorted. The Journal of Economic Perspectives documents these findings, stating that “In the early 2000s, the growth of online news prompted a new set of concerns, among them that excess diversity of viewpoints would make it easier for like-minded citizens to form ‘echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’” (Allcott 211). Increased polarization emerged alongside the era of online news. The 2016 election in particular brought about the concern of false stories (fake news) being circulated on social media. With the idea of popular news being valid news, it creates for a dangerous political and social atmosphere. The study puts together the idea that, “many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them” (Allcott 212). Followed by the fact that, “the most discussed fake news stories tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. Putting these facts together, a number of commentators have suggested that Donald Trump would not have been elected president were it

not for the influence of fake news” (Allcott 212). Social media’s admired “convenience” leaves ample room for fake news to waste the time of its users, resulting in an audience that is genuinely uninformed.

The people have a right to the truth--the sound, unembellished truth--with the convenience of access as opposed to reduced information. And for social media users, time and truth have been lost in the glory of convenience and shared popular values. This desire to oversaturate an audience with cheap stories and news highlights mocks the very principles On Kawara speaks to. Kawara’s work is lacking in a “fake news” narrative because the truth speaks for itself, if you take the time to listen to it. His values are placed on time for the individual, as opposed to the construction of values that companies fabricate through false information. Siebren Versteeg artistically comments on the connections between the digital and political world, and how this corruption is fueled by their audience. Media users should not sacrifice their right to knowledge for the convenience that social media brings.

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