

THE ‘OOBAH PHENOMENON’ AND THE POST TRUTH GRANDEUR

Lakshmi K. Babu

Research Scholar

St. Xavier’s College for Women, Aluva

Abstract

The networked society is the present and future ecosystem that can bring transformative changes in the reception of truth. A freelance writer turned a public persona, Oobah Butler sheds light on how information can be controlled, mutated and employed in electronic media. The ‘Oobah phenomena’ experiments the idea of reality by introducing new notions of realism in a popular space sponsored by social networking websites. The paper attempts to trace Butler’s endeavour to challenge the traditional understanding of truth while he misrepresents data to attract emotional validity. Butler demonstrates the countless ways in which truth functions in a networked society, and how it can be manipulated in the public sphere. Information in the networked public sphere attracts user attention and enables messages to be sent and received from multiple interfaces. It shapes and spreads critical discourse regardless the authenticity and credibility of the data. The paper argues that the networked society is a popular concourse of Post truth, where a new form of power decides and controls the consumption of reality. The domain can also function as a space for the counter production of data.

Keywords: Post Truth, Networked society, Simulacra and Simulation

“The true courage is to admit that the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us ” (Zizek “The Courage of Hopelessness”)

Identity, like culture, is one of the most difficult words to be defined and circumscribed by language. It is one of the most important logic upon which the everyday existence of human life is constructed. Yet it has been a subject of debate and the reason for many serious upheavals and life threatening interventions. The human understanding of identity transforms according to the social-political-historical context of the discussion.

Parallel to this focus is the perception and reception of truth, and hence, reality. In a postmodern platform, any discussion on the three (i.e. identity, truth and reality) should inexorably ruminate the contribution of the mass media and the screen culture. The advent of the world-wide-web gave birth to a network society where key social structures and activities are centralized around information networks. Since then the platform has provided unprecedented opportunities for the dissemination of creativity and thought. It also offered the space for its users to participate in social dialogues, craft a public image, voice opinions, express dissent, and remain anonymous, if necessary. At the same time it has blurred the distinction between 'the public' and 'the private' in individual lives.

Oobah Butler is a freelance writer who turned into public persona. In 2018, he conducted a social experiment in seven months where he opened a restaurant named, The Shed at Dulwich, and brought it to the Top 1 rated restaurant in London on TripAdvisor. The real side of the story reveals that the restaurant never existed. In his vlog, "How to become TripAdvisor's #1 London's Fake Restaurant" he unfolds the reason why he conducted the research and how he arrived at the result. In the video, Butler exhibits the small house where he lives and describes his job as a writer who wrote false interviews for restaurants that transformed the fortunes of businesses. According to Butler, his profession compelled him to contemplate on how the word written online came to revise the fate of many individuals and their dreams. He became curious on the false realities upon which people fashioned their lives and devoted themselves. In the first few months of the experiment Butler invested on 'consistency'. He created a website (theshedatdulwich.com) and bought a new contact number. On the website he posted sophisticated photographs of objects that resembled food arranged on a table in a small garden. He posted pictures of the Menu that provided dishes under the title of Moods (Happy, Contemplation, Comfort, Empathetic, Love and Lust). The photographs portrayed that the restaurant is themed in a homely style where customers could dine in the garden surrounded by nature. But it was an 'appointment only' place where interested people had to reserve a table before they actually experience it. 'The Shed at Dulwich' was officially verified on TripAdvisor as the 18,190th restaurant in London.

For the next few months Butler demanded his friends and relatives to write reviews on the restaurant under the pretence that they had visited it. Some of the reviews happily commented on warmth rendered by the place, the quality of food it served and its overall ambience. In time, the number of reviews and ratings increased, and phone calls flooded for appointments. But Butler disappointed each caller saying all table were booked for a week or two, and that he would return a call if there was an availability. Three months later the comments on the website were: "Worth the wait" and "the best shed I've been" and it was ranked the 1,456 restaurant among the 18,190 in London ("How to Become TripAdvisor's" 00:05:18). In five months, it reached the top 10, and in six, it became the No. 1. And as

promised, in the seventh month, Butler gives a call to few customers and informs them that on a specific evening there was an availability. Butler is then confronted with the task of creating a make-belief restaurant promised by his website and subsequent reviews. Few hours before the opening he constructs 'The Shed at Dulwich' in his garden with the help of some friends. With the service of a professional cook, Butler makes the shopping for the necessary items to the kitchen and begins the preparation. He installs an electric heater to make the place warm and appoints Trevor, 'the chicken man,' to fill the Wendy house with chicken. Butler then appoints Phoebe who had experience as waiter to attend the tables when the customers were inside. He then arranges the tables informally in the garden and on the roof top of the house. The professional DJ Sambience provides the auditory impression of a restaurant with his music: people talking happily, clinking of cutlery, and food getting ready to be served. When customers make a call asking for the exact location of the place, Butler politely asks them to wait in the neighbourhood. He then arrives at the location, presents each of them a piece of cloth and requests them to blindfold each other. Butler then takes them down the alley to his house and asks them to unfold the blind. At the restaurant customers enjoy a nice evening in a pleasant environment. They find the place interestingly novel and promises to return again. Though one of them complained that it was hard to get table, he declared that he would recommend it to people as he found it "quite cool"(00:16:18).

In the next experiment, Butler seizes a local brand of clothing to become a sensation in Paris Fashion Week. In "How I Faked My Way to the Top of Paris Fashion Week", Butler reveals the steps he formulated to ensure his success. Butler expresses his fascination to shop at markets and his obsession with local brands. One among his favourite brands were Giorgio Peviani which according to Butler had accomplished everything to be popular, but did not exist in the limelight. Therefore, Butler resolves to become the designer Giorgio Peviani and walk into Paris Fashion Week. As preparatory measures, Butler fashions a website (www.giorgiopeviani.com), print visiting cards that describe him as a market dealer, and buys a stack of Peviani jeans. Dressed in a jumpsuit, Butler acquires an entry pass after a casual conversation as Giorgio Peviani at the centre that issues it. On reaching Paris, Butler mingles with important people, models, and fashion-bloggers, and gets free drink. As a young thug of fashion, he even attempts the most expensive dress from a designer. Butler is then invited to a night party with a bunch of Italian designers where he meets Jean, a celebrated designer, who happily wears a pair of red Peviani jeans and models for a few photographs. Jean comments: "I loved the design, it is so populist" ("How I Faked My Way" 00:02:55). A designer from Milan promised that she would sell Peviani in her country. Later, Butler's email is filled with people welcoming Peviani to their events. He also secures an entry to the most sought after event, the After Party of Paris Fashion Week. Butler remarks that even without existing, Giorgio Peviani finds a place in parties, blogs, catwalk and many other influential events.

After Butler phenomenon comes into the limelight with ‘The Shed at Dulwich’ and becoming a star at Paris Fashion Week, he is endlessly contacted by the media for interviews. He spent twenty hours giving interviews back-to-back where all the interviewers wanted answers for same questions. So he decided to proceed with another experiment. For the next six weeks, he decided to send fake versions of himself on television, radio and public events. Butler raises a question that if individuals could perform with their fake versions online then why couldn’t they do that in real life. He hosted auditions and selected Oobahs’ to represent him: #Hot Oobah, #Charming Oobah and #Smart Oobah. For the first task, Butler trains the #Hot Oobah to answer questions on BBC Radio 2 with Vanessa Feltz which was a program that fetched almost 7 million listeners. When the interviewer is impressed by his answers, the same Oobah is sent on Indian TV to be interviewed. The interview fetches him tons of fan followers from India. For the second task, Butler coaches the #Charming Oobah who wears sunglasses for an interview on Bulgarian TV on Skype. In the third task, the #Smart Oobah (a real life journalist and anthropologist) is trained to go live on BBC Radio 5 on the theme, “The Morality of Fake Reviewing”. For the fourth task, Butler decides to give a makeover for his brother, by colouring his hair and giving a shave. Butler sends his brother to Australia’s biggest breakfast show and accumulates appreciation. “My team of Oobahs’ represented me for millions of people all over the world. I got follow up interviews, tons of new fans... and I could sit back and reap the benefits” (I Sent Fakes of Myself 00:10:17 – 00:10:49). In May 2018, he gets nominated for the prestigious award for journalists’, the Drum Online Media Awards, and another version of Oobah collects the prize. Butler questions: “If I can sent fakes to represent me, why can’t everyone else” (00:11:36 - 00:11:38). Therefore, he opens a website, www.oobah.com, with the subtitle, ‘optimise your identity’, according to which people around the world could apply for a look alike to perform their daily needs, whether it is an office presentation or to impress a date.

The Oobah phenomenon demonstrates that every individual can find a replacement in the contemporary society. This problematizes the conception of identity and essence, upon which philosophies such as existentialism is rooted. Oobah deconstructs the metanarrative of identity by proving that an ‘n’ individual can be substituted by nⁿ individuals. Butler’s experiment expounds that the presence of an individual in the world can be altered, shaped and re-constructed by the actions of other individuals that resemble him. The information in the internet is also structured in a similar way and any number of people may contribute to modify and alter it. The concept of the ‘enlightened man’ which manifested as the pride of western philosophy is called to be re-examined when Butler raises questions like: what is ‘real’? Who is ‘real’? And how can one define ‘real’? According to Sara Mills, discourses are “sets of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals act and think” (55). In a network

society the flow of discourse materialises surreptitiously where it can originate from any IP address, or any version of android. Every information that is posted online assumes an audience irrespective of age/class/gender with an intention to influence. Paradoxically, the real world appears to be more real on screen. With his experiment Butler challenges the concept of reality that people invest in. He directly hints at the consumption of culture in a media generated reality where any information available in the internet database is consumed with the conviction that it is true, and verified. A major portion of the information available in the archive of internet is quilted to the interest of the consumers and to reinforce capitalism.

The traditional assumption of referentiality was deconstructed by the poststructuralists. In the *Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean Francois Lyotard postulates that the metanarratives of the past have collapsed, creating a new theoretical situation in which the concept can no longer pretend to control or grasp its object (Poster 2). According to Jean Baudrillard, culture is dominated by simulations where objects and discourses have no origin, no referent, no ground or foundation (1).

In the late twentieth century, signs become completely separated from their referents, resulting in a structure that resembles the signal: signifiers act like traffic lights, emitting meanings to which there is no linguistic response. The composite organisation of such signifiers is termed the code by Baudrillard...The code operates by extracting signifieds from the social, redeploying them in the media as “floating signifiers” (4)

The reality available in a postmodern world, interjected by media is bombarded with simulations. For Baudrillard, a new linguistic condition surfaces in the society called as hyperreality. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard exhumes a story by Jorge Luis Borges that describes how the imperial cartographers made maps large enough to cover the whole empire and its territory. With time the real map begins to fray, but the real territory under the map stayed. But the citizens considered the map, the simulacrum of the empire, to be the real empire.

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – precession of simulacra – it is the map that engenders the territory. (Poster 169)

In a media generated reality the participants process the simulations to be real. The simulacra then precedes the very existence of being and channel their actions. The process of simulation instigates the representation to replace any object or entity it represents. Therefore the representation becomes more real than the real.

Similar to the controversy of ‘the real’ is the controversy of ‘the truth’. Several philosophers have attempted to describe the word ‘truth’. According to the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, truth is:

A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms-in short, a sum of human relations that have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, translated, and embellished, and that after long use strike a people as fixed, canonical, and binding: truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors that have become worn-out and deprived of their sensuous force, coins that have lost their imprint and are now no longer seen as coins but as metal. (Carman 29-30)

For centuries philosophers have been in pursuit of truth, knowledge and certainty instead of giving importance to untruth, uncertainty and ignorance. According to Nietzsche, these realms have never been questioned, and that does not necessarily mean that they are not questionable.

The economist, Robert Proctor, gives the term ‘agnotology’ for the “deliberate propagation of ignorance to satisfy the biases of powerful economic interests in favour of a particular status quo” (19). In *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008), Proctor engages with the theme of ignorance after describing how the sciences have never done adequate research on the same. He proceeds to differentiate four major types of ignorance.

... ignorance as ‘primitive or native’, simply not knowing; ... ignorance as ‘lost realm’ or ‘selective choice’, a result of inattention, unavailability of information or even choice; ... ignorance as ‘strategic ploy’, as an act of secrecy or censorship, with the intent of withholding information; and ... ignorance as ‘active construct’, as the result of a concerted effort on the part of legitimised sources (e.g. scientists, pundits) to deceive, and to manufacture and manipulate individuals’ and collectives’ understandings of particular matters. (Block 35)

In Proctor’s *Cancer Wars: How Politics Shapes What We Know and Don’t Know About Cancer* (1995) he unearths the misinformation campaigns structured by the tobacco companies in the United States for forty years to obfuscate facts, and puzzle the general public on the relationship between cigarette smoking and lung ailments (35). According to Proctor, the attempts to find a cure for cancer would be constructive for business, but creating an environment that could prevent cancer, e.g. providing adequate working conditions for employees inside factories, will negatively affect the employer and will not contribute to the established industry on cancer. According to Proctor, cancer is largely about state power, control and regulation. In *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky analyses how advertising, state ideology and profit oriented business contour what

is reported as the news and how long it is reported (74). The book highlights the propagandist nature of censorship and truth which is manipulated at the hands of bureaucrats, corporates and political-military establishments. The practice of filtering information marginalises the reports that fall as a threat upon the governing elite and promotes the ones that willingly supports the status quo.

The question of truth in a hyperreal society deserves significant consideration and research. One of the central concerns is the availability of different versions of truth. Julian Baggini's *A Short History of Truth* provides suggestive ideas on the understanding of truth.

Truths do not stand or fall independently but are held in a network with other truths, all of which mutually support each other. Belief in the scientific evidence for evolution, for example, depends on belief in the general uniformity of nature over time and space; the ability of human beings to ... see reality accurately and to understand it properly; the integrity of academic science and scientists. We arrive at truth holistically. (25)

Even in the age of post truth, discussion of truth reinforces the idea that truth still matters. The term 'post truth' was named as 'the word of the year' by Oxford Dictionary in 2016. The age of post truth has witnessed an obfuscation of facts and abandonment of evidential standards in reasoning. It relates to or denotes circumstances in which the objective facts are less significant in modelling public opinion. The word 'post' indicates that truth is eclipsed. The consequences of post truth establishes that facts can be cautiously chosen, exhibited tactically and shaded ingeniously within a political context to favour one interpretation of truth over another. But post truth does not necessarily mean discarding truth and embracing lies; instead it refers to the blurring of the two.

The network society is one of the social implications of globalisation that widened the frontiers of communication. As a new form of social organisation in the digital age, it produces, processes, and distributes information on the basis of the accumulated knowledge in the nodes of the network. As a pervasive medium for political communication, the network society also shapes the formation of public opinion. Though Oobah phenomena was an experiment that shows that reality can be mediated by fake news, it also traverses the potentiality of post truth. Butler handles mediated reality to the best of its potential and exhibits that fake news can be augmented for any cause depending upon the person who utilises it. He also challenges the quotidian attitude to give credence to everything directed on screen while he points at the contemporary mutations in the semiotic construction of truth. Also, his experiments question the reliability on emotional competence in the era of multiple truths, and demand a new form of scepticism in conceiving reality.

WORKS CITED:

- Block, David. *Post Truth and Political Discourse*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-00497-2
- Carman, Taylor, translator. *Friedrich Nietzsche: On Truth and Untruth*. Harper Perennial, 2010.
- “How I Faked My Way to the Top of Paris Fashion Week” *YouTube*, uploaded by Vice, 25 June 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=jolbYvAMorY.
- “How to Become TripAdvisor’s #1 Fake Restaurant”. *YouTube*, uploaded by Vice, 22 Jan 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqPARIKHbN8.
- “I Sent Fakes of Myself to be on TV Around the World”. *YouTube*, uploaded by Vice, 17 Oct 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMZ7BsoUAG8.
- Mills, Sara. *Discourse*. Routledge, 2007. p. 55.
- Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. U of Minnesota P, 1984.
- Poster, Mark, editor. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. 2nd ed., Stanford UP, 2001.
- Zizek, Slavoj. “V for Vendata, Part 2” *The Courage of Hopelessness: Chronicles a Year of Acting Dangerously*, Penguin. 2017.