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Why do we speak?

Humans are blessed with the gift of speech. We are the only creature alive on this planet able to communicate in a sophisticated manner. I mean speech in general, not necessarily talking, but communication, whether it be with hand signals or written words. Speaking is how we share our opinions, defend ourselves, and participate in society. By making ourselves heard, we are able to communicate injustice, and proclaim our victories. When we speak, we develop and put forth our own morals and ethics, and teach others rules of reason and rules of justice. The rest of nature is common. It is like a silent machine, it works on its own and it does not make any "noise." Hannah Arendt says that speech makes humans political, and Aristotle asserts that speech makes man human, and part of society. In his letter from the Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King Jr. shows his belief in negotiation, even with the enemy. With speech, we have created families, states, and governments. Unfortunately, this gift comes as a burden, too. In today's world, not everyone is able to speak - when a single person takes control and gains too much of the public eye, he or she dominates the tubes and airwaves, discouraging others from speaking their mind. For instance, the people of China have only restricted access to the Internet - the government shows them only what they should see - and mainstream media only presents the views of few powerful people, and not the messages of millions of Americans. As the most extraordinary animal on

earth, why do we speak? Why is our speech necessary? And what happens when we lose the ability to communicate?

Politics can be defined as “social relations involving authority or power” (*Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*). Politics is a big part of society, decisions made by the government almost always affect society and culture. Aristotle says that “it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle 51). Aristotle also asserts that man feels naturally compelled to participate in politics and society, “a social instinct is implanted in all men by nature” (Aristotle 51). Aristotle goes on to say that, “justice is the bond of men in states, and the administration of justice, which is the determinations of what is just, is the principle of order in political society” (52). This is the foundation of the United States Justice system; it is based on our need to share our political ideas, and our own morals, ethics, and rules of justice: “it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state” (Aristotle 51). Participating in politics makes one part of society, according to Aristotle, “he who is unable to live in society...must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of a state” (Aristotle 51). All of man’s desires, natural and exceptional, including active participation in politics and society, come from the ability to speak. “Nature...makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech” (Aristotle 51). Part of politics is expressing anger and dissatisfaction with the current state of politics. Through speech, man is able to persuade the masses, and convey important thoughts and ideas. Politics, by nature, is vocal.

Hannah Arendt agrees with Aristotle. In her book, *The Human Condition*, she says that “speech is what makes man a political being” (Arendt 40). She continues on to say that common language is actually what makes us political. Arendt points out that the political assessments of scientists are often untrusted because they “have been forced to adopt a ‘language’ of mathematical symbols which...now contains statements that in no way can be translated back into speech,” and they operate in a “world where speech has lots its power” (Arendt 40). Scientists are no longer able to be political, according to Arendt, for they have been stripped of their speech.

Martin Luther King Jr., someone who was stripped of his speech, believed first in negotiation, and only in action when talking failed to work. From the Birmingham city jail, he wrote about the four steps of a nonviolent campaign, the second step being negotiation. When in jail, King exercised his only freedom, his freedom to speak. In his letter, he shares his morals and ethics: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. 205). Even though he was physically separated from society, he was still able to be a “political animal,” by expressing his opinion. He was still able to participate in society, simply because he could speak.

Today there are people in the world who are not able to speak. Known as “The Great Firewall of China,” Internet filtering in China only gets worse every day. The Chinese government is known to prevent access to more than 18,000 websites, and monitors email, blogs, chat rooms, and Internet forums (Zittrain and Edelman). China even has an Internet Police force of at least 30,000, who forcefully patrol the Internet, seeking to neutralize critical voices (Watts). The people of China are not able to freely participate in society, and according to Aristotle, they would not be considered human.

People have an inherent need to share their opinions, and the Chinese are being deprived of this power. When one is without speech, he or she is alone - his or her thought becomes imprisoned.

Traditional, or mainstream media, only presents the opinions of few, powerful, and important individuals. Examples of mainstream media giants are CNN, MSNBC, Fox News, Time Magazine, and the New York Times. In all of these media outlets, there are editors who don't refer to the general public for advice, they act only on their personal beliefs. Some people believe that mainstream media is the only "fair and balanced" form of media, but how is that possible, when two or three people control what is being shown? Traditional media doesn't listen to others, it drowns out every-day people like myself.

A new media movement and revolution currently taking place on the Internet, called "social media," makes it easier for the general public to get its message out. It attempts to change the power dynamic of society and politics. Social media is just the opposite of mainstream media; it "is the use of electronic and Internet tools for the purpose of sharing and discussing information and experiences with other human beings in more efficient ways" (Parr). Podcasting, blogging, and twittering are all popular, and free, social media tools that allow individuals to self-publish their ideas for the masses. Social media tries to let all people speak freely. People use social media to build digital relationships with the rest of the world. Though there are more popular podcasters and bloggers, social media is generally an even playing ground, where everyone can gain recognition. In an ideal society, everyone would have a podcast,

blog, or twitter account, and constantly share their morals, ethics, and rules of reason with the world.

While writing this essay, I asked my Twitter followers the questions presented at the beginning of this essay. Max Norman responded:

“The loss of communication in any format would lead to the eventual fall of society as we know it. It is unnatural not to communicate. In fact, it is un-evolutionary as well. Humans have evolved to have a communicative nature to survive.”

Social media enabled me to easily find out what others think. By finding out the opinions of others, my own beliefs are influenced, and I gain a greater understanding of the topic at hand. Humans alone are not all-powerful, but when in we work in cooperation, we can accomplish great things. Using social media, I was able to express my opinions, and obtain the ideas of others too.

Social media does not solve everything, either. Critics claim that social media and the social web in general is simply techno-utopianism bombast, and that putting so much personal information online is dangerous (Barbrook and Cameron). Michael Zimmer speaks on the issue:

“...[the social web] embodies a set of unintended consequences, including the increased flow of personal information across networks, the diffusion of one’s identity across fractured spaces, the emergence of powerful tools for peer surveillance, the exploitation of free labor for commercial gain, and the fear of increased corporatization of online social and collaborative spaces and outputs.”

Web 2.0, the umbrella term for social media and the social web, can turn into a breeding ground for substandard content, “clogging the tubes,” as Senator Ted Stevens puts it (YouTube is littered with videos of dull-witted activities). Today, corporations use the

content users generate on the Internet for their monetary benefit; Søren Mørk Petersen believes that Web 2.0 denotes an “architecture of exploitation that capitalism can benefit from” (Peterson). Even though social media can “foster democracy, participation, creativity, and joy” (Zimmer), answering the question “What are you doing?” on Twitter can threaten one’s personal privacy, online and offline. Though these critics do see the upside of creating community by using the Internet, and the importance of speech, they believe that the content we put online can and will be manipulated by the government and large corporations.

I tend to think more positively about Web 2.0; self-publishing our activities not only empowers us with speech, but engages us in the act of “sousveillance,” or inverse surveillance. Personal sousveillance eliminates the need for surveillance, and empowers us - instead of the “man” watching you, the people watch each other (Kerr and Mann). While the social web has its downsides, I believe, if used correctly, it presents a brighter future for every-day people. There are few prices too high to pay for veracity, and social media only lets more people distribute truth. Teachers have always told me one can never have too many sources.

Speech has allowed humans, over the centuries, to share ideas, create families, states, governments, and societies, and participate in politics. By nature, we have speech and are political, according to Aristotle. Humans have an inherent need to communicate, when that power is stripped away, one could go insane, as Timothy Treadwell, “Grizzly Man,” did - he isolated himself with only grizzly bears and a video camera ([Grizzly Man](#)). Martin Luther King Jr., while under arrest in the Birmingham city jail, used speech to communicate injustice, even though he was physically restrained.

Speech allows man to do good and evil. When a single person gains too much power and attracts too much public attention, he or she unconsciously eliminates the thoughts of others, by clogging the airwaves. Humans shouldn't be afraid to express their opinions, even when under persecution. Social media is one of the first modern attempts at changing the power dynamic, but it is certainly not the first time in history, when humans have felt the need to communicate. We speak because we need to speak. We are born speaking, crying out to our mothers.

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