

Love Island and its Influence: an exploration of the interplay between technology and sociology.

Executive Summary

Since the invention of the wheel, technological developments have influenced societal structures time and time again. The development of the internet and associated platforms in the modern era is no different, except the speed at which change can occur has increased, which poses challenges for sociological understanding.

A case study for these developments can be found in the television series Love Island, which has proven extremely popular in recent years. The programme, and the waves it causes on the internet and social media, illustrates three key changes that technology has had on society. First, the ease with which selective presentation of information to individuals can create online echo chambers, perpetuating potentially misleading ideas, or “fake news.” Second, the online reaction to the show shows how the internet has moved the boundaries of what is and is not acceptable speech, liberating many from what could be considered as the shackles of “polite society” to verbalise (or more accurately, type) what was once taboo. Third, the show, its sponsors and related tropes on social media and online, shows how ripe these technological developments have left society for behavioural manipulation. Relatively harmless when used to flog consumer goods such as clothing to viewers, but with a much darker potential, the scope of this potential influence on individual thought is one which needs to be researched by sociologists.

The extent of the influence may be addressed by certain policy changes, if this is deemed to be something that would be beneficial to society, but regardless, society in the modern era cannot be understood without a comprehension of the influence technology has had and continues to have, how this has changed and is likely to change in the future, and the increased volatility that could potentially affect societies as a result.

Introduction

In the modern era we often think of ourselves as at the pinnacle of technological development, looking to the future for the next life-changing thing. Along with this teleological viewpoint, there is often an assumption that technology, and its impact on society is something new. However, in 1938, William Fielding Ogburn was highlighting the need for sociology to consider the impact of technology, stating that “the relation of sociology to technology has been given little attention by students of sociology.”ⁱ As Ogburn argued, there is a “close connection between sociology and technology, quite comparable in scientific importance with the relation between sociology and psychology or biology.”ⁱⁱ This paper will consider the impact of technology, in particular the development of the internet and social media, upon individual freedom of thought, the wider implications of this, and possible policy reforms to address issues raised.

Let’s take Love Island as a case study. A vastly popular television show, whereby a number of young people are put in a villa in order to find love, a journey which is broadcast to the nation in nightly television programmes, and is constantly at risk thanks to both public votes, which can see either couples or individuals leaving the villa, and intra-villa votes, which can see couples leave. How is this somewhat inane television programme relevant to the sociology of technology? It illustrates three key

themes, which indicate how technology influences individual freedom of thought, and sociological schools and methodologies must adapt in order to factor these elements into research, thus allowing better sociological mapping of future developments in society. These are: (i) selective publishing or broadcasting leading to essentially purposeful creation of echo chambers online, (ii) the removal of taboos, and (iii) behavioural manipulation by advertisers. Each will be addressed in turn below.

Selective broadcasting and echo chambers

It is a common belief that the development of technology, in particular the internet, but also televisions before it, and the printing press before that, has liberalised information and knowledge. Previously the purview of the rich and privileged, almost anyone is now theoretically able to access whatever information they want, literally at their fingertips since the development of smartphones. It is plausible that this belief is true, to an extent, in that these developments have increased the accessibility of information. However, on the flipside, as broadcasting and internet publication have become more sophisticated, the risk of manipulation of individual thought, leading to a 1984-esque “groupthink” in society, has become more and more evident.

A clear example in this case study is the relationship between Frankie and Samira. For those who did not watch the programme, Frankie and Samira were a seemingly quite dull and not particularly serious couple. Following a public vote, Frankie was kicked out of the villa, leaving a very upset Samira behind. The reaction on social media: why is Samira overreacting, they barely even spoke. A few days later, an episode revealed that Samira had decided to leave the villa of her own accord, in order to pursue things with Frankie. Again, the reaction on social media was one of confusion. There had been no indication that the pair had much of a relationship, commenters indicated that it was strange for Samira to act in this way, some jokes went as far to call her a stalker and warn Frankie to hide. However, it has since come to the fore that the relationship was much more serious than the broadcast programmes indicated, with Frankie meeting Samira at the airport and the pair seeming to be the perfect couple since.

This example above may seem flippant. How is it important that (a considerable) proportion of the public’s opinions were manipulated through the selective broadcasting choices of the producers of some reality television programme? The issue here is the ease with which “public opinion” was influenced through the broadcasting of the show. The impact of this was then amplified via social media, where the repeated sharing of “memes” on the topic flooded both the Instagram and Facebook feeds of millions. This developed into conversations around the UK on the topic, and thus the groupthink developed on the relationship’s lack of gravitas. That this happened is evidenced by the ensuing shock online at Samira’s exit, as the viewers struggled to understand why she would forego the possibility of winning the Love Island prize money to chase someone who didn’t seem interested in her.

The key consideration here is that, if this can happen with regards to a relatively unimportant (in the grand scheme of things) television programme, it can happen to anything in society. This is particularly the case given the reduction in television broadcasting and news publisher plurality over recent years (see, for example, the prevalence of Rupert Murdoch-owned newspapers in the UK press, or the debate around Sky News in the Sky/Fox merger considerations). The lack of competing news sources gives those that are in the market a considerable amount of decision-making power, as their audience is unlikely to know when they have not communicated an event or issue, and thus unlikely to register their discontent with the service by switching to another news source.

The impact of the echo chamber is increased risk of fragmentation in society; not only are individuals not being exposed to a range of viewpoints, but they are being given the impression that the rest of society thinks in the same way that they do; this is exemplified by the shock registered by “remainers” at the result of the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016. The relation this has for sociology is as follows. Sociologists will not be able to understand and systematically study social relationships or societal structures in the modern era without understanding the acceleration these echo chambers add to the polarisation of thought.

Removal of taboos

Television programmes with similar concepts to Love Island are not particularly new; Big Brother, for example, was a very similar concept, minus the “finding love” aspect – a reality game show which played to the public’s voyeurism. However, a key development which can be witnessed over the three seasons for which Love Island has been broadcast, is the interdependence between television broadcasting and social media. During and after every episode, social media lights up with memes and commentary, jokes and insults about the participants, their appearance, their voices, their relationships, their outfit choices, their catchphrases, their activities, and so on.

There are endless pages on Facebook dedicated to the programme, and the memes it inspires, thousands of posts shared on Instagram, and countless tweets under the hashtag #LoveIsland. Many of these are comedic, many are supportive, but many are also incredibly negative, racist, or sexist. Take, for example, online support for Adam and Alex. Again, for those that did not watch the programme, an explanation is required. Adam was essentially a lothario character, who switched from girl to girl in the villa, much to their distress. After being “coupled up” with Rosie for a certain amount of time, he left her for someone else, and proceeded to essentially ignore her in the process. This behaviour prompted warnings from domestic violence charities in the UK that his behaviour was showing clear warning signs of emotional abuse.ⁱⁱⁱ Despite this, some online commentary refers to him as the “King”, thoroughly approving of his behaviour in the villa. Alex, a seemingly shy, awkward doctor, essentially a “nice guy” character, has reportedly become an “incel” hero for his participation in the villa.^{iv}

It is not unlikely that a proportion of viewers would have held such thoughts about these participants if social media didn’t exist. It is unlikely, however, that they would have felt comfortable sharing those thoughts with many others. The apparent anonymity of the internet and social media allows for the publication of comments and thoughts which would have been unlikely to have much impact otherwise. The echo chamber effect referred to above means that these comments can have significant impact, particularly where a comment or a meme “goes viral”, meaning that it is shared again and again, so as to be seen by thousands and thousands of social media users.

Again, the question has to be asked, what is the significance of this?

In many ways, society rests on an assumption that the majority of individuals will essentially self-censor their behaviour in ways that lead to greater cohesion. Without this, societies can develop in two ways: they can become fragmented, or they can become repressive, as further security measures are taken to control behaviour so that it remains within whatever is viewed as acceptable within the societal norms in place.

This is a trend which can be observed in both gender relations and political comment online.

With regards to the former, the development of the so-called incel movement, with those holding misogynist views emboldened to share them online in a self-perpetuating community and echo chamber, has led to mass shootings and attacks.^v

With regards to the latter, the end of taboos has seen increased political polarisation. This is the case both in the increase in the popularity and visibility of the polar extremes of the political spectrum, such as the rise of the “alt-right”, and the normalisation of polarising views in mainstream political dialect. A clear example is Boris Johnson’s comments on women wearing the burka.^{vi} As a former foreign secretary, and key member of the governing party in the UK political system, this type of comment would have been shocking a decade or so ago, when to an extent those in power were not expected to stray too far from the centre ground, at the risk of alienating voters. With the emboldening influence of social media and the internet, however, it is very possible that these comments, while alienating some voters, will also play strongly to a different group of voters who share such opinions and are now feeling more at liberty to express them. The recent and ongoing rise of the so-called “alt-right” has been attributed by many to the spreading of comments and fake news online and via social media. At this point, many would argue that there have always been these opinion sin society, and that such political polarisation has taken place before without the existence of the internet, such as in various twentieth-century European nations. This is undeniably the case, but as Jessie Daniels highlights, “we have to understand both” the impact of internet culture, and its impact on what is and is not taboo, and the underlying societal issues which would be present without it.^{vii}

For there to be any understanding of the development of politics in the modern era, and by extension the impact upon the structure of societies that this will have, it is important that methodologies are developed which incorporate an awareness of this breaking of taboos into research and analysis. It is not necessarily the case that the breaking down of taboos is, *ipso facto*, a negative thing; the value judgement is not important here, simply that it is possible to comprehend the trends which such development will lead to.

Behavioural manipulation

The third factor which Love Island exposes is the influence that (notably online platforms) and advertisers can have on our behaviour. There are two clear examples in the programme which I will discuss. Firstly, the outfit choices of contestants, and secondly, the line “I’ve got a text.”

With regards to clothing. The television programme was sponsored in part by Missguided, a mostly online clothing retailer. This is detailed at the start of each episode. It is also clear from the Love Island App, on which viewers and fans can find the product codes for the items each participant wears. However, the way the show is broadcast makes it seem that each participant has brought their own clothes to the villa, arriving and leaving with a suitcase, asking to borrow each other’s belongings, and seemingly having their own individual sense of style. As such, viewers feel they are being inspired in their fashion choices by emulating their favourite participants, rather than specifically targeted. The result for Missguided? A considerable increase in sales of up to 40% during each episode.^{viii}

With regards to texts, the line “I’ve got a text” is one which was repeated over and over throughout the show, as information about competitions, tasks, dates, and elimination votes were conveyed to participants via mobile phones (although not their own mobile phones, which they were not allowed

to access during their time in the villa). Superdrug, the main sponsor of the show, announced the launch of its new mobile phone network during the series. Superdrug, as a brand, is not one that would likely be linked with mobile phones.^{ix} However, through the exposure gained on Love Island, particularly via the prevalence of “I’ve got a text” repeated again and again on social media, it is entirely possible that this will be a very successful step for them. That advertisers seek to manipulate our behaviour is nothing new, indubitably. However, the advent of social media and viral culture has enabled the development of incredibly sophisticated methods for doing this, in a way that often goes unnoticed by consumers. When one watches an advertisement on television or sees a billboard, one’s behaviour may be changed, but ultimately there is an awareness that the advert is there, what it is trying to do, and why it has been placed in that location or broadcast during that programme. Social media has allowed ever more subtle analysis of consumer behaviour and algorithm-based advertisement placement, which means that consumers may still realise they are viewing an advertisement, although at times this in itself is tricky, when the hashtag #ad is hidden at the end of a long list or where Instagram advertisements look almost identical, at first glance, to normal posts. However, it is extremely difficult for consumers to understand why it is that they are seeing the particular advertisement. This is particularly so when digital marketers are using smartphones to tap into individual’s conversations in order to target particular brands to them; if this seems unlikely to you, read through the Terms and Conditions of every App on your phone, and take a look at digital marketing services’ explanations of what they do on their websites.

Again, the point could be raised, how does this matter for sociology? It is hardly a matter of serious gravitas that consumers are being subtly manipulated into buying certain products or services – this has been the purpose of advertising for hundreds of years. However, the scope for manipulation needs to be considered in studies of political and cultural movements. Here it could also be argued that politicians and cultural leaders have always sought to manipulate human behaviour in order to vote or act a certain way, which is true. However, the issue that arises in the modern era is that it is often unclear that this manipulation is taking place; individuals do not have to actively go to a political rally or see a political poster to be influenced by a particular element of the political spectrum. They do not need to choose to read a partisan newspaper. They need simply use their computer or smartphone as they would every day, and thousands of algorithmic choices will have this effect, either through the personalised search results that appear on Google, or the items that make it to the top of their Facebook newsfeed. As currently stands, this sort of manipulation has been attributed as a root cause of growing political polarisation in the Western world, through the infamous “fake news” motif. For example, Jessie Daniels argues that “the rise of the alt-right is both a continuation of a centuries old dimension of racism in the U.S. and part of an emerging media ecosystem powered by algorithms.”^x

This in and of itself raises questions about the legitimacy of democratic votes centred on whether voters really had a true choice in their decisions. However, yet more concerning thoughts arise when one considers the sheer power that monopolistic or duopolistic online platforms have on a global scale. As highlighted in *Technopoly*,^{xi} various issues in the application of competition law to the technology sector has allowed for the accumulation incredible scale by a small number of tech giants – Google, Facebook, Amazon, etc. The result is that these platforms hold a considerable amount of power over our individual lives through the algorithms they choose to deploy. Thus far this has not been too much of an issue for society, subject to the occasional hiccup such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, but despite mottos like “do no evil”, manipulation of individual thought and limits on individual freedom are not outside the realms of possibility. This needs to be taken into account in sociological studies; the unpredictable and seemingly unlikely have become genuine possibilities. Clear examples can be seen across the world: the election of Donald Trump, the Brexit vote, the recent

Italian election, the popularity of the far right in Hungary, the platforming of right-wing extremists in Australia. The realms of the possible have been expanded, and we must be aware of this.

Policy considerations

Technological developments, such as the internet and social media, have been fantastic innovations, and without a doubt have considerable scope to be powers for good. However, the question has to be asked: at what potential cost?

Is it worth the risk to individual freedom of thought? Could this risk be mitigated by careful regulation of online platforms and social media? What will the impact of this be on the development of social institutions and cultures?

The implementation of certain policies could limit the influence of some of the themes discussed above, which would enable more predictable sociological assessment thereof. For example, online platforms such as Facebook could be regulated in a vaguely similar manner to the press, in order to ensure the presentation of a balanced range of viewpoints on an individual's newsfeed or home screen. This would help to limit the echo chamber effect, and combat the infamous issue of fake news. They could also be required to monitor content on their platforms to address the risk that the removal of taboos leads to the spreading of sexism, racism, or other damaging content online.

To address behavioural manipulation, the digital advertising ecosystem could be regulated in order to limit how targeted advertisements can be. Alternatively, or additionally, individuals could be given ownership over their personal data, and the genuine power to limit how much it is shared with online platforms – that is to say, the ability to use those platforms without necessarily sharing such amounts of their personal data, rather than the current essentially false choice exhibited in “accept” buttons on website and App terms of use.

Moreover, competition law reform could address the speed at which online platforms reach scale, which would help to limit the risk that a single platform accumulates adequate power to allow for manipulation of individual freedom of thought. This could be done by increased scrutiny of mergers in the technology sector, to take into account the speed at which scale can be achieved. It could also be done by scrutiny of data accumulation in mergers, as well as simply target turnover.

Alternatively, now that a number of platforms have reached such a scale, it may be that policy needs to turn towards regulation of those platforms, to ensure both individual freedom is maintained, and that there is a possibility that competitors enter the market.

Conclusion

Love Island may seem like an incredibly non-academic or low-brow case study, but as detailed above, it does demonstrate a number of developments, triggered or catalysed by technological developments, which sociologists must take into account, and potentially aim to counter in the interests of individual freedom of thought on a micro level, and on a macro and (hopefully) hyperbolic level, the perpetuity of democracy (if, that is, individual freedom and democracy are taken to be priorities in our society, which is in itself a value judgement that needs to be considered).

To return to the beginning, Ogburn ultimately posited that “changes in technology are particularly significant in explaining changes in social institutions, though not their existence.”^{xii} The themes highlighted in this report appear to support this statement, 80 years later. The themes of groupthink, abandoning of taboos, and purposeful behavioural manipulation have existed in society for a long time, but technology has revolutionised the speed at which the effects can be felt, which poses a challenge for sociology.

ⁱ William Fielding Ogburn, “Technology and Sociology”, *Social Forces*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Oct. 1938) pp. 1-8.

ⁱⁱ William Fielding Ogburn, “Technology and Sociology”, *Social Forces*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Oct. 1938) pp. 1-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gwilym Mumford, “Love Island’s Adam Collard accused of ‘gaslighting’ by domestic abuse charity,” *The Guardian*, 21 June 2018

^{iv} Sarah Manavis, “How Love Island’s Alex became an incel icon,” *New Statesman*, 3 July 2018

^v Zack Beauchamp, “Incel, the misogynist ideology that inspired the deadly Toronto attack, explained,” *Vox*, 25 April 2018 and “Elliot Rodger: How misogynist killer became ‘incel hero’,” *BBC News* 26 April 2018

^{vi} “Boris Johnson ‘won’t apologise’ for burka comments,” *BBC News*, 7 August 2018

^{vii} Jessie Daniels, “The Algorithmic Rise of the “Alt-Right”,” *American Sociological Association*, 18 April 2018

^{viii} Ellen Hammett, “Misguided sales boom following Love Island partnership,” *Marketing Week*, 28 June 2018

^{ix} Emma Munbodh, “Superdrug’s launching a mobile phone network – and it’ll cost just £10 a month,” *The Mirror*, 14 June 2018

^x Jessie Daniels, “The Algorithmic Rise of the “Alt-Right”,” *American Sociological Association*, 18 April 2018

^{xi} Tim Cowen and Phillip Blond, “*Technopoly*” and what to do about it: *Reform, Redress and Regulation*, June 2018

^{xii} William Fielding Ogburn, “Technology and Sociology”, *Social Forces*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Oct. 1938) pp. 1-8.