

The Long Tail: A Postmodern Critique  
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### **Introduction**

Given the subject matter of both *The Long Tail* and Postmodernism, it is appropriate to define these concepts using a source that represents both concepts succinctly. That source is Wikipedia, which defines *The Long Tail* as a term “coined by Chris Anderson to describe certain business and economic models such as Amazon.com or Netflix. Businesses with distribution power can sell a greater volume of otherwise hard-to-find items at small volumes than of popular items at large volumes” (“*The Long Tail*, 2007, para. 1). The rise of niche culture has the potential to reshape the cultural landscape (Anderson, 2006, p. 184). Postmodernism, which eschews objective truth claims and grand narratives is defined by Wikipedia as a “term applied to a wide-ranging set of developments in critical theory, philosophy, architecture, art, literature, and culture, which are generally characterized as either emerging from, in reaction to, or superseding, modernism” (“*Postmodernism*, 2007, para. 1). Postmodernism is a complex body of often conflicting agendas, methods, and subject matter. There is no true objective definition of what Postmodernism is, but its general tendencies can be summarized to help alleviate some of the confusion. Postmodernism would encourage the lack of an objective definition, and in a strange way the refusal of an objective definition is one of its defining characteristics. Some of the key tendencies of postmodernism are: everything and everything is a text and must be understood in context, knowledge has historically been controlled by power and authority, subjectivity in everything, and radical currents of democracy and diversity in “truth” are elevated when analyzing issues (Tweeten & Zulauf, 1999, p. 1169). Miller and Real discuss three important aspects of postmodernism: the breakdown of “grand narratives”, the central importance of communication technologies and media, and the significance of consumer culture

and the behavior stemming from it (Miller & Real, 1998, p. 17). It can also be argued that postmodernism is defined by celebration of skepticism, subversiveness, irony, anarchy, playfulness, paradox, style, spectacle, self-referentiality, and hostility towards generalizations (Brown, 1992, p. 21).

The Postmodern era dawned following World War II, with the production of new forms of science, technology, bureaucratic control systems, and revolutionary computer and information systems (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 7). The Postmodern era is driven by electronic media, computers, and even biotechnology (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 149). Miller and Real agree that “saturation by communication technologies is a central feature of the postmodern landscape” (Miller & Real, 1998, p. 30). The Long Tail signals the merging of the cultural and the economic spheres (Kumar, 2005, p 139). In many ways, we have moved beyond merely consuming physical goods, and we have replaced the old modes of consumption with the consumption of culture.

### **History of the Information Revolution**

These radical transformations in economy, technology, and information did not occur in a vacuum. They stem from trends that have been evolving since the beginnings of human civilization. In ancient Egypt, the aristocracy and religious institution had a stranglehold on information. Thousands of years later, the Roman Catholic Church had a similar grip on knowledge and information. The Gutenberg printing press provided the grounds for the first information revolution that in less than one hundred years resulted in the Protestant Reformation. Later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, film, radio, and eventually television had significant cultural repercussions. The Internet, which today is synonymous with the World Wide Web, is the latest evolution of the information revolution. The Long Tail is the latest

symptom of the Internet's contribution to the information revolution. This is the history of the democratization of information.

Access to information/knowledge has historically been tied to coercive forms of power. The history of the Roman Catholic Church is a clear example of this tendency. The Church was responsible for the sacking of the Library of Alexandria, and maintained a monopoly on literacy and information for hundreds of years. The name this era is given further illustrates its significance, The Dark Ages. Then technology, specifically, the Gutenberg press allowed for a step towards democratization of information. Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation would not have been possible without the Gutenberg Bible. These developments have been some of the most important cultural forces in the history of Western Civilization. The Internet has arguably ushered in the most significant cultural transformation since the printing press. The potential of a decentralized communications system is so immense that it deserves ample analysis (Poster, 1998, p. 263). Best and Kellner argue that changes arise from material transformations in science, technology, and economics (2001, p. 7). They define this phenomenon as technocapitalism (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 213). It has liberated the means of production in a way that is simply unprecedented. Chris Anderson states that, "Once, the power of newspapers came from their command over their tools of production" (p. 185, 2006). Now with the power of the computer and the Internet, those tools are available to nearly everyone. Bloggers and podcasters are altering the structure of the news industry. Chris Anderson feels that "the blogosphere is the greatest vector for new voices ever created" (2006, p. 190.).

### **Globalization as Vehicle for the Long Tail**

Globalization is an important force that is linked to these massive cultural and societal shifts, including The Long Tail. Capitalism is being restructured globally, which includes

production of a networked society that is mediated by computer and communication technologies (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 205). The rise of global capitalism and networked societies paved the way for the evolution of The Long Tail. As the means of production spread across the world, The Long Tail only gets longer and fills more niches.

### **Language and Hyperdifferentiation**

Language is a system of difference, which means that we are defined by what we are not. In today's hypercommodified culture, our consumption defines us by being an extension of language that differentiates us. We are surrounded and immersed in segmentation. Human Beings are segmentary animals, and we structure our realities through language. We are composed of segmentarity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 208). The Long Tail lends itself to this concept; it allows us to consume niche products. The growing number of niche products available due to the new economics of The Long Tail further allows us to define ourselves by what we consume. Baudrillard argues that what we consume are not simply commodities, but signs. Commodities are not defined by their use, but by what they signify. An infinite range of difference is available, and thus we are never able to satisfy our need for commodities, and ultimately for difference (1998, p. 7). The Long Tail facilitates the niche search for difference by offering an almost infinite number of commodities, which are considered texts.

### **Bringing Down Big Media**

The Long Tail phenomenon has the potential to upset the mass-media oligopoly that has concentrated media ownership even further than it had initially following the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which relaxed media ownership restrictions. This deregulation created massive consolidation in the media industries. Clear Channel gobbled up radio stations across the country, and in so doing created bland radio. Luckily, mp3 technology

evolved; Apple's iPod exploded the popularity of mp3 and placed the music industry on the brink of disaster. Peer-to-peer software also contributed to the decline of the music industry. Peer-to-peer file swapping, though illegal in terms of licensed music created a black market for music, except that the music was free. In the old days of the mass media, the mass media essentially acted as an institution of the state. The mass media did this by disseminating advertising. Advertising fuels consumption, and consumption is what a capitalist economy relies on. This model was so successful that the amount of time allocated to commercials on television grew, but they continued to get our attention despite offering less content (Anderson, 2006, p. 165). Not only did the mass media begin to offer less content, the content they did offer was designed to appeal to the lowest common denominator. As Anderson noted, "The costs of production and distribution are too high to let economics take a backseat to creativity. Money drives the process" (2006, p. 74). The democratization of the means of production has created a new cultural space that has liberated us in terms of free expression. The new communication universe relies on connection and feedback (Miller & Real, 1998, p. 30). The shift to a decentralized communications network makes senders receivers, producers consumers, rulers ruled, which supplant the logic of understanding of the first media age (Poster, 1998, p. 264). In the old media days, senders needed to construct their own information infrastructure by broadcasting at a specific frequency or building wire networks, there were necessarily few distributors (Poster, 1998, p. 257). In The Long Tail era new cultural forums have many more voices and people participating than during the Era of Big Mainstream Media, in which giant corporations controlled both the form and content of what could be spoken and shown (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 242). The burgeoning cyberculture is more interactive and involving than the earlier dominant form: TV culture (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 217). Anderson agrees that the

“once monolithic industry structure where professionals produced and amateurs consumed is not a two-way marketplace” (2006, p. 84). The development of podcasting further illustrates these trends. The revolutionary aspect of podcasting involves the ease with which podcasts can be created and distributed. Not only is the creation of podcasts easy, but distribution of them is just as easy. Each podcast can find an audience, no matter how large or small that audience may be (Bull, 2005, p.24).

### **Postmodern War: The Long Tail of Power**

The Long Tail is evident not only in the media, but there is also a long tail of revolution. Anderson further illustrates this point by referring to John Robb, a military analyst who operates the Global Guerilla Web site. Robb points out those nation-states have had a monopoly on war. He illustrates that the tools of war have been democratized, and that the Internet has facilitated the growth of these groups (Anderson, 2006, p. 50-51). The Long Tail of revolution began with the first postmodern war, the Vietnam War. The conflict epitomized the failures of a modernist state. The best minds committed to rational thinking and with access to the best information and sophisticated systems available, blundered into a war it would not win (Tweeten and Zulauf, 1999, p. 1170).

In the past, specifically in the context of Marxist revolution, revolutionary movements had to mimic the structure of the powerful nation-state. They had to use the same mechanisms of hierarchy and organization of power (Gordon, 1980, p. 59). Al Qaeda is a prime example of the revolutionary group of the postmodern age. It is decentralized and fragmented, with cells crisscrossing the globe. The Zapatista movement in Mexico is another example of the Long Tail of revolution. The movement used computer databases, guerilla radio, and other forms of media to circulate their ideas and promote their causes. When attacked by the Mexican government,

the group deployed computer networks to inform and mobilize individuals and groups over the world to support their struggle against repressive government action. As a result of the attention accrued by these methods, the Mexican government was forced to back down (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 243). Al Qaeda and the Zapatistas have been labeled as terrorist groups, so it must be clarified that terrorist methods of violence are not advocated, but the way in which these groups have utilized the new communications technologies that the Internet provides is an important phenomenon to analyze. It must also be pointed out that words like “terrorist” typically are used by those in power. By the current definition in the US, the founding fathers would have been labeled as terrorists. Indeed, King George would have gladly had many of them executed had they been caught. What these important examples do is underscore the ability for those in the long tails of power to resist the often coercive power at the head of the curve. Political struggle is now mediated by media, computer, and information technologies and will be so increasingly (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 248). The new media have provided citizens with unprecedented access to government and each other (Merelman, 2000, p. 188). The message is clear, if those struggling for democratization and social justice want to be effective in the cultural and political battles of the future, they must use new technologies to advance a democratic agenda and the interests of the oppressed (Best & Kellner, p. 243).

The success of these revolutionary groups parallels the ways in which companies taking advantage of The Long Tail effect are being successful as they compete against companies like Wal-Mart and Blockbuster. From the perspective of the mainstream media, this appears to be a battle between traditional media and the Internet (Anderson, 2006, p. 180). The battle metaphor is apparent, and illustrates the wide ranging effects of The Long Tail. Those in The Long Tail of power outnumber those at the head of the power curve, just as the media in The Long Tail

outnumber the hits at the head. Those in The Long Tail of power can combine to rival or even overcome the power of those at the head, in exactly the same way all of those niche products in The Long Tail can combine to create a market equal to or greater than the hits.

The nation-state is beginning to lose its supremacy as the preeminent organizing principal of the human race. The Internet undermines the territoriality of the nation-state by rendering the traditional concept of physical borders ineffective (Poster, 1998, p. 260). As these undercurrents progress, and as mass culture continues to fragment, a neo-tribal culture may evolve. The Long Tail forces and technologies that are leading to proliferation of variety and infinite choice in content tend to lead us into tribal eddies. When mass culture disintegrates, it re-forms as a million microcultures (Anderson, 2006, p. 183).

#### **Wikipedia: Knowledge by Consensus and the Long Tail of Knowledge**

Wikipedia is the one of the most important examples of The Long Tail. It is the quintessential postmodern encyclopedia. It is decentralized, democratic, and dynamic. It democratizes knowledge and wrests some of the power away from elites who have held sway over such enterprises since the inception of the encyclopedia. While its accuracy is often questioned, we must remember that all knowledge is provisional. In addition, some have voiced concern about and tested the accuracy of basic entries. This concern may have been valid in the past, but at this point it is misplaced (Greenstein, p. 79, 2007). Postmoderns argue we should accept that knowledge is bounded, and rather than seek universal truths, we should learn to live without definitive explanations and be comfortable in the absence of certainty (Brown, 1993, p. 21-2).

#### **The Long Tail: Cunning Capitalism?**

The Long Tail must be analyzed dialectically. While The Long Tail has the promise of providing freedom in myriad ways, there is also the potential for it to further entrench the current hegemonic corporate and government institutions. Anderson states that hits have become the lens through which we observe our culture and that we define our age by celebrities and mass-market products (2006, p. 1). This idea is not limited to consumption. We have come to rely on government, which is situated at the head of the power curve, to protect us from everything. We expect government to keep us safe and secure, much in the same way media outlets have relied on hits to sustain them. The logic that we have grown accustomed to in judging hits as the best media has to over can also be used to legitimate governmental power. That logic being that there must be a reason why people in power are in power. Certainly, they must be the best people for the job. The case may actually be that they have been able to use the tools of Big Media to gain power.

Since its inception, the mass media have served the interests of the state and its capitalist dogma. One must recognize that this is not an overt form of power. Foucault points out that power would be very fragile if all it did was oppress, but power produces effects at the level of desire and at the level of knowledge. Power does not prevent knowledge, in contrast it produces it (1980, p. 59). Foucault further clarifies this point by stating that power is not localized in the State, and that society will not change unless the mechanisms that function outside, below, and alongside the state are not also changed (1980, p. 60). Mass culture can be viewed as an instrument of the ruling class that maintains political and social control through false consciousness. Media industries are an institution that dominates class-specific perceptions of reality. What this amounts to is industrial control of consciousness (Gottdiener, 1995, p. 167-8). Capitalism is astute, it realizes that youth wish to buy the illusion of freedom, but these choices

are prescribed within the space already mapped out for the young (Fiske, 1998, p. 169). Information technologies can be complicit with tendencies towards totalitarian control, and not towards a decentralized postmodern culture (Poster, 1998, p. 269). Some scholars argue that the new technology is being applied within a framework that confirms and accentuates existing patterns instead of creating new ones. They argue that while the instruments and techniques may change, but the goals and purposes of capitalist societies remain the same. It is important to note that information technology has not progressed in a neutral way; it has been selected and shaped in conformity with social and political interests (Kumar, p. 58-59, 2005). In this model, consumption is institutionalized and forced upon us as a duty; we are trained to consume (Ritzer, 1998, p. 4). One may ask what significance all this theory has in terms of The Long Tail. Ritzer explains that in the act of differentiating oneself, you are ultimately conforming to the dominant code (1998 p. 8). Voting for the MTV Music Video Awards does not mean that we have social or political power. Interactive mainstream media do not necessarily constitute a democratizing, empowering, or interactive culture (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 234). Ultimately, the danger is that the Internet is being colonized by corporate forces that are using it as another domain for further capitalist spectacle and commodification (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 237).

The question of whether or not The Long Tail will further the causes of freedom and democracy, also must be addressed in pragmatic terms. The culture of technology can also decenter and deconstruct citizenship. If we lack a single, stable viewpoint from which to observe the political system, we may find it difficult to evaluate and promote political action. Our relationship to the political system may fluctuate depending upon which of our fragmented identities we choose to emphasize at a given moment (Merelman, 2000, p. 185). Will niche culture destroy the efficacy of our political system? Merelman argues that we will probably not

be able to reinvigorate American democracy (2000, p. 189). Ritzer, in discussion of Baudrillard states that “managed possession of consumer goods is individualizing and atomizing, and it leads to distinction and differentiation, not to social solidarity” (1998, p. 4-5). It is possible that The Long Tail will result in hyperdifferentiation. People may become so segmented that they will not coalesce and form powerful groups. What if The Long Tail allows capitalist firms new opportunities to exploit and expand markets (Kumar, 2005, p. 68)?

Another concern raised by Chris Anderson is that unlike powerful media companies, The Long Tail does not have a lobbying force. This is an important concern because what is good for large media companies is not always consistent with what is good for Americans, especially in terms of legislation that restricts technologies such as digital file copying and video transmission (Anderson, 2006, p. 167). Companies in the short head can use their lobbying influence to diminish technologies that support further growth of the Long Tail.

### **The Long Tail as Liberator**

The importance of the dialectical approach to analyzing the possible future effects of the Long Tail is that while the hegemonic forces are present and their potential impact is quite real, these forces are far less monolithic today than in the past. The Long Tail of revolution illustrates that power can and often is resisted successfully. The potential of The Long Tail provides hope for the future. Best and Kellner recognize this dialectic, and they note that a democratized and computerized society may provide opportunities to prevail over injustice (2001, p. 243,). Some hegemonists have recognized that the relationship between mass culture industries and the mass audience is more complex than was previously thought. The creation of alternative forms of culture defined in opposition to aspects of domination is precisely what The Long Tail facilitates (Gottdiener, 1995, p. 170,). Especially in the era of The Long Tail, ideological domination of the

mass culture industries is not guaranteed to control or affect an audience's behavior (Gottdiener, 1995, p. 176). The Long Tail further develops the information society, which enhances democracy, as it diffuses information, constituting a more alert and educated public (Kumar, p.. Computer-communication technology may make centralized politics and administration obsolete (Kumar, 2005, p.40-1,). In the days of Big Media, critical intellectuals were marginalized, rendering them unable to gain wide access to major sources of information and communication. However, with the decentralization introduced initially by the Internet, and now further developed by The Long Tail provide new possibilities for intellectuals to reach a broader audience (Best & Kellner, 2001 p. 248). Long Tail outlets such as blogging, podcasting, and Amazon.com via publishing on demand can provide the tools for these intellectuals to disseminate their ideas. As The Long Tail illustrates, it can at least almost be guaranteed that someone will consume what they produce. The future of democracy depends on whether new technologies will be used for domination or democratization, but ultimately, it is up to each one of us and whether or not we will actively participate in the development of new democratic public spheres (Best & Kellner, 2001, p. 248). While it is possible that hyperdifferentiation will segment society into shards that will solidify the power of those at the head of the curve, in reality this is probably too deterministic of a model. While many subcultures are unique, others possess amorphous boundaries, and any individual can participate in more than one subculture. Each subculture may seek its own ends, but these groups also interact with parent cultures, as well as the dominant ideology (Gottdiener, 1995, p. 177).

The Long Tail also extends to the current presidential campaign. Ron Paul is the quintessential Long Tail candidate. He and his supporters have relied heavily on the Internet, mostly through his website as well as Meetup.com. He recently set the record for single day

Internet campaign contributions at a whopping 4.2 million dollars. Not only has the campaign utilized the tools of The Long Tail, but Paul is actually somewhat of a niche candidate himself. Though Paul will probably not win this election, his example does provide hope for the future for less well-known candidates. As we have seen in media in The Long Tail, candidates such as Paul may be better than those at the short head. Being in The Long Tail does not necessarily mean that one's content is any less valuable. In the postmodern context, subjectivity is paramount.

### **Conclusion**

The Long Tail is the latest development in the evolution of the postmodern culture/society. The postmodern culture/society is dominated by infotainment and multimedia, and is fragmented and hyperdifferentiated. The democratization and proliferation of the means of production and distribution provide hope for a future that promotes freedom and democracy, and eschews coercive forms of power and oppression. It is also possible that these innovations will be assimilated into the hands of power, and further enslave us in the endless pursuit of difference through consumption of an ever-increasing amount of niche cultural products. It is each individual's responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities that The Long Tail offers, and use them in a way that fosters freedom. "The collective now controls the message" (Anderson, 2006 p. 99).

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