

**Ask A Genius 50 – The American Election 1**  
**Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Rick Rosner**  
**January 6, 2017**

**Scott: What was this election? We have talked about this being science fiction election. How is it a science fiction election?**

Rick: The presidential election in 2016 can be seen as the first science fiction election. In some obvious ways, in the late 60s, a writer named John Brunner wrote the books *The Sheep Look Up* and *Stand on Zanzibar* in which the president is a figurehead, an advertising icon, called Prexy.

You can see that with Reagan. A movie star becoming president. Not the brightest guy, but the guys around him running the show. Then with Trump being a reality star, among the other reasons that Trump wouldn't be president without is *The Apprentice*. His 10 or 11 years on *The Apprentice* and being on TV, being America's boss.

So, in a superficial way, we have that, and then you have *Idiocracy*. The president being a goofy figurehead. That doesn't fit Trump exactly, or Reagan, in that they made decisions, have opinions, act on those opinions, and are not simply puppets. Although, they are more media focused than previous presidents. They are more created by the media than previous presidents. I think there's a deeper sense in which this was seen as the science fiction election because it showed trends in our relationships with AI and computation that will become more and more apparent and more and more important in the future. To set it up, I have to set up like 3 or 4 periods of human existence.

Let's call Period Zero humans trying to survive like other animals on the savanna and other areas, where they tried to survive as small packs or tribes without much language, technology, or tools - scrambling to survive in the natural world and having no special sense of themselves.

But Period One is humans separate, beginning around 10,000 years ago when humans start to have language, toolmaking ability, and civilizations, and start to see themselves as special and different from the rest of the world. Until you have language, you can't see yourself as much of anything except the way animals see themselves as individual operators, but not subject to even that much introspection because you're trying to survive all of the time.

Period One as humans as separate and their own story, and narrative. It goes on for thousands of years. Humans interacting with the gods, and not wanting to anger the gods. They have their stories about the world, which, at least according to some religions, is made for us, specifically. Period Two is human dominion, where we get the idea over the last thousand, and especially the last few hundred, years that we can do anything, solve anything, given technology and science and the world is ours to figure out, and that we're not functioning at the whim of gods, which is the science point of view.

I would say that is the majority opinion right now. Yea, you can do a survey and find most Americans believe in angels, but most believe if you want to get something done it takes human action and planning, and technology, instead of prayer and gods.

I think there's a further period that we're entering into, which is the rise of computation external to human thought. A rising tide of computation, of information processing, in which we're beginning to be immersed. There's that old saying that no man is an island, which is similar to that Hillary saying, "It takes a village." No one exists in isolation.

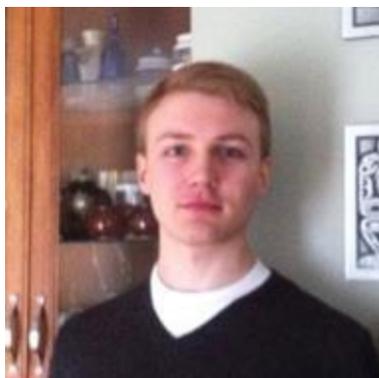
Or when Obama said, "You didn't build that." Which was purposefully interpreted by Republicans as Obama denying individual entrepreneurial spirit in some collectivist way, that is Obama saying, 'Yea, you built your business, but you could not have done it without some things external to your business. With the rest of America, your business could not have been built.' But, computationally, we have all been, largely, islands for all of human history.

Where almost all of the computation we do, all of our understanding and perceiving the world, takes place within our brains, the means that we have of sharing information are much more narrow-banded than the information streams within our individual heads, but that is changing. The 2016 election was different from every other presidential election in human history for reasons we are still trying to figure out. One reason is you had two non-incumbents. Both of them flawed and not real popular compared to the 2012 election, which was Obama Election Part 2. Obama Election Part 2 had a lot to do with Obama Election Part 1. For the first time in 8 years, you have 2 non-incumbents.

For the first time in more than 30 years, you had 2 super unpopular non-incumbents. So, those things alone would make 2016 different, but in science fiction ways. 2016 is different because you have social media influencing people's voting behavior more than ever before with the step up being huge, where 2012 was still about a charismatic known candidate versus a non-charismatic and bland candidate. Those issues overshadowed technological issues in the election, though technology played a big part. Mitt Romney's speech about the 40% of takers, which cost him. It was caught on somebody's cell phone, but that's somebody happening to have a video camera in place when Mitt Romney said something unfortunate said between him and a bunch of his donors.

But in 2016, not only do you have the election influenced by the steady stream of ugly information about the Democrats obtained by hacking, you have people's opinions and voting behavior being influenced by their relationship with social media, which is this giant external wad of computation and interaction. With certain upshots, certain consequences, one thing is everybody feels super actualized and more important than they would feel otherwise. Hillary's slogan was "stronger together." But what you have with voters, thanks to their personal relationships with social media, feels more important than people felt 10, 20, or 30 years ago because everybody has a personal voice in social media, a personal megaphone.

You can talk to anybody on social media. You can comment on any story. You can get a personalized feed on the social media you participate in: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, which leads to a feeling of entitlement. It is consistent with Trump's reality show entitlement. Trump is this guy of no special ability. He is not a trained actor. He is not a beautiful actor. But through reality television, he has been able to convey his...being for more than a decade. He's a skilled exploiter of media including social media.



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