

Seizing the Means of Prediction: Interrogating Populist Technologies in the Emerging Asocial
Society

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TITLE: Seizing the Means of Prediction: Interrogating Populist Technologies in the Emerging
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Abstract

By enabling the compilation of ‘big data’ from which knowledge of our patterns of thought, consumption, and action can be drawn, social media platforms give state and non-state actors private access to our political imaginations and thus expose the fault lines within our collective consciousness. This paper investigates how emerging and disruptive populist technologies automate the manufacturing of consent on social media platforms and the impact these technologies are having on our civil discourse and democratic sovereignty. Populist technologies can be understood as the dialectical Other of techno-neoliberalism. Where techno-neoliberalism functions as an assemblage of the political power of the state, the market power of corporations and the scientific know-how of technocrats, we can see populist technologies suturing old hatreds with new technologies. While populist media technologies have been analyzed as software and engineering technologies, they have yet to be considered from a psychoanalytic political theory perspective. The socio-cultural effects of the changing nature of digital propaganda are only just beginning to be understood, and the advancement of this understanding is complicated by the unprecedented union of the social and the technical that the internet has enabled, and which has subsequently resulted in the erosion of democratic practices. Given the competing needs of security and privacy in an increasingly datafied asocial society, the need to understand how big data analytics shape contemporary electoral dynamics has taken on a new level of urgency. Using the lens of psychoanalytic political theory, this paper engages in a critical analysis of the implications of emergent digital technologies for public discourse and political practice in the age of (a)social media.

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Introduction

By enabling the compilation of ‘big data’ from which knowledge of our patterns of thought, consumption, and action can be drawn, social media platforms give state and non-state actors private access to our political imaginations and thus expose the fault lines within our collective consciousness. This paper investigates how emerging and disruptive populist technologies automate the manufacturing of consent on social media platforms and the impact these technologies are having on our civil discourse and democratic sovereignty ([MacLeod 2019](#); [Morelock 2018](#); [Pedro-Carañana et al. 2018](#)). Populist technologies can be understood as the dialectical Other of techno-neoliberalism. Where techno-neoliberalism functions as an assemblage of the political power of the state, the market power of corporations and the scientific know-how of technocrats, we can see populist technologies suturing old hatreds with new technologies (Bloom and Sancino 2019; [Jacob 2017](#); [Pellizzoni and Ylönen 2012](#)). While populist media technologies have been analyzed as software and engineering technologies, they have yet to be considered from a psychoanalytic political theory perspective. The socio-cultural effects of the changing nature of digital propaganda are only just beginning to be understood, and the advancement of this understanding is complicated by the unprecedented union of the social and the technical that the internet has enabled, and which has subsequently resulted in the erosion of democratic practices. Given the competing needs of security and privacy in an increasingly datafied asocial society, the need to understand how big data analytics shape contemporary electoral dynamics has taken on a new level of urgency. According to new media theorists, a dire threat to democracy is posed by the covert misinformation campaigns that

politically-motivated actors employ using troll armies and non-human actors such as bots. Such campaigns manipulate public opinion to erode trust in the political and legal establishment ([Boler and Davis 2018](#); [Boczkowski and Papacharissi 2018](#); Elmer, Langlois, and Redden 2015; [Gillespie 2018](#); [McKelvey and Dubois 2017](#)).

I propose that, in order to comprehend the workings of trolls, one must parse the complex relationships between the world of politics and the inner world of the polity's psyche. I begin my paper by first unpacking how the ideological hegemony of neoliberal post-politics set the table for the rise of antagonistic populist politics. I then trace the media genealogy of the populist rhetorical attacks on actors in the media and political institutions to explain how right-wing exclusionary populist political rhetoric was animated by the Trump campaign. Finally, I unpack the mass psychology that sustains such populist technologies and how the 'persuasion architecture' ([Tufekci 2014](#)) of social media platforms were leveraged to contour to the political economy of Trump. Given the rise of what Wooley and Howard ([2016](#)) characterize as “computational propaganda” — the assemblage of social media platforms, autonomous non-human agents, and big data tasked with the manipulation of public opinion — there is a need to engage in an analysis of both the content that flows through social media platforms as well as the algorithms that permit the circulation of these emerging forms of public discourse and propaganda. Yet this dire threat cannot be grasped with a singularly technological approach. This paper, therefore, intervenes to analyze this phenomenon as both technological and cultural phenomenon.

My research will critically analyze how populist technologies were deployed by both state and non-state actors to exert control over political discourse. Drawing from psychoanalytic political theory, critical internet studies, new media studies, and digital humanities, my project will treat political trolls as vectors of power, exploring crucial questions about what their adoption by political actors means for public confidence in the fairness of the electoral process. The project combines what could be called as non-human social media studies (Karppi), platform studies (Nieborg) and psychoanalytic political theory (Stavrakakis) with the emerging research that looks at the social effects of online misinformation campaigns and digital propaganda ([Boatwright, et al. 2018](#); [Boyd et al. 2018](#); [Caetano, et al. 2018](#); [Spangher, et al. 2018](#)). To engage in a nuanced reading of populist technologies I will be drawing from Erich Fromm's Marxist psychoanalytical concepts to delve into the libidinal structures of digital society and Byung-Chul Han's idea of psychopolitics, the politics of the psyche, mind, and affect under neoliberal capitalism is the dominant technology of power. Acts such as self-optimization, submission, freedom and exploitation, converge into one self-exploiting stack, in which power has to do more with persuasion than with disciplinary ways of exercising control. Under the diktat of psychopolitics, individuals strive for limitless achievement, internalizing power relations and interpreting it as freedom. Gaining an understanding of the risks, opportunities, and ethical questions raised by the political use of disruptive populist technologies, requires us to revise and rethink how we conceive of elections as the baseline for democratic participation in the psychopolitical era of digital post-politics and, more importantly, for the governance of democratic societies ([Baldwin-Philippi 2017](#); [Baldwin-Philippi 2018](#); [Ford et al. 2016](#); [Gorwa and Guilbeault 2018](#); [Obar and Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018](#)). Psychopolitical culture has reformatted the

polity to identify themselves primarily as consumers, who are primed to opt for the goods, services, and leaders that populate their screens. To critically engage with the cultural logic of psychopolitics requires that we historicize the current political uses of social media within the broader history of propagandistic discourses while problematizing the unprecedented union of the social and the technical that the internet has enabled.

I. Post-politicization and Its Discontents

What is post-politics?

The research question that drives this paper, is tracing how the logics of neoliberal consensus-based politics have ruptured giving way to the rise of far-right populist politics in the United States and uncovering what are the algorithmic logics and media technologies that are driving the engine of the populist political machine? After almost forty years of the 'shock and awe' of asset stripping the commons, responsabilizing the individual, individualizing risk, 'privatizing profits and socializing losses'; the neoliberal project of vapid 'accumulation through dispossession' and 'disenchantment of politics by economics' had reached the [mountaintop](#) under the Obama administration. As Obama's post-racial politics was being lauded, the centrist democrats kept pushing for liberal social policies and neoliberal economic policies, rejecting ideological divisions and the particularity of universal political demands. The domain of politics was being evacuated of antagonism, being terraformed by consensual governance structures and operationalized by policy wonks adept at technical, new-managerial administration of social, cultural, economic, environmental and various other domains ([Žižek and Hanlon 2001](#)).

In the post-political paradigm, the economy is cultural i.e. culture has become an economic and technical relation, one in which class and identity constitute each other ([Beller 2018](#)). Post-politicization prompts and promotes the ourboric relationship between culture and politics, i.e. the culturalization of politics and the politicization of culture happen in tandem. 'Commodity activism' has supplanted authentic social activism as the vehicle to communicate one's political positionalities ([Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012](#)). Designer water bottles brandishing activist™ messages, metal straws, burlap tote bags, and athleisure wear are semiotic shortcuts used to concomitantly convey one's class and 'woke' politics ([Mull 2019](#); [Thomson 2018](#); [Wiggins 2019](#)). The commoditized iteration of activism is evacuated of any and all of the vagaries that inscribe political activism in the material reality. The virtual iteration of commoditized activism takes on the labour responsibilities of being a 'message force multiplier' ([Dean 2010, 99](#)) as well. i.e. The influencer is always-already once removed from authentic political activism in their real commodity activist iteration, and in their virtual influencer avatar, signalling their 'woke' politics includes using the grammar of e-commerce. Commodity activism conducted online has depleted activist politics of its antagonisms and replaced it with the concerns of identity politics in media representation. This signals the event horizon for what is possible with commodity activism under the diktat of neoliberalism where culture has been functionalized by the political economy ([Beller 2018](#)).

Post-politics implicitly relies upon the financialization of culture, which in turn requires the informationalization of social politics and social metabolism ([Beller 2018](#)).

Post-politicization, feeds off digital social metabolic activities, digesting social relations that have expanded outside the sphere of capitalist production to the metadata society as a whole. By

drawing from capitalized and technologized social differentiations that have been collated, correlated, calibrated, and concatenated across micro, meso and macro computational stacks, the post-political apparatus acquires its logistics of extraction and control for data-driven decision making and cybernetic governance from transnational information capitalists ([Beller 2018](#), [Fuchs 2009](#)). The post-political turn in politics was hypernormalized in part thanks to new media extractive industries and data refineries occupying the commanding heights of the political economy. As post-politics leveraged new media technologies and their computational affordances to mobilize cybernetic governmentality, the table was being set for the libidinal Other of the hyperrational techno-solutionist discourse of big-data to take centre stage. The centrist-democrats had foreclosed upon the antiquated press-the-flesh mode of electoral politics, in favour of a techno-solutionist alternative, a post-political machine that privileged data-driven decision-making systems. With the egalitarian radical inclusionary populist discourse of Bernie Sanders eliminated from the U.S. presidential race of 2016, the slate had been cleared for the Republican campaign apparatus to double-down on the valorization of outrage and stoke the nascent flames of far-right populism that has always-already been a part and parcel of online culture ([Rich 2018](#)).

Yoking the political logic of populist hype to populist media technologies

I will be arguing that one need not look outward for an external agent provocateur as being responsible for the rise of populism and populist rhetoric online, rather I will be arguing that it is by combing the nooks and crannies of the cultural record, studying the low-culture communicative exchanges and analyzing the popular culture texts that one can decipher and

prognosticate the emergence of disinformation, misinformation, in and through these spaces. The rise of populism, can be best understood as a result of the neoliberal programmatic that has become a part of the contemporary polity's psyche, i.e. the solipsism and narcissism that have emerged from selfie culture, manifesting itself in the political domain as 'selfie nationalism' ([Giroux 2015](#), [Rao 2018](#)), the climate of austerity and precarity has bred a particularly virulent strain of hyper-competition among workers, where solidarity and camaraderie has given way to 'single-serving friendships' in gig-work. The vacuous and empty interpersonal relationships that are built on algorithmically mediated ratings rather than mutual understanding and trust make workers experience chronic fatigue and exhaustion because they are always performing emotional labour in their effort to promote a culture of extreme positivity (Han 2015). Customer interaction metrics are calibrated to measure how smoothly and effectively the customer was placated by feigning relatability over rationality. This aesthetic of relatability has crossed over from retail consumer culture into the political domain as well. In political communication, personality politics trump policy positions, campaign slogans like Drill Baby Drill, Yes We Can, Love and Courage, Make America Great Again, convey more affective intent to the voter base through the mediated and mediatized performances of these slogans, in their various iterations than any well-argued public policy position ([KhosraviNik 2018](#)).

The rise of social media influencer politics is only possible because the affective engagement strategy is predicated upon the notion that the visibility that comes with hawking 'comments, likes and shares' on social media platforms and the popularity that ensues from it is a form of legitimate re/connection with the polity. The design affordances and value-generation model of social media technologies are predicated upon the Californian ideology, i.e. a heady

mix of cyber-libertarianism, techno-solutionism, and hippie antiestablishmentarianism.

Suggesting that the social media technologies that arrive from Silicon valley, the birthing canal of new media technology, contain within the primordial soup of its being certain distinct social, cultural, political and economic values. Planned obsolescence, agile development, concurrent engineering, mass customization, etc. are all ethos that has borne fruit in Silicon valley, and been exported across the globe to much fanfare. The platforms, apps and tools, developed and disturbed by technology innovators and media entrepreneurs are all for the most part conceived and configured to micro-target users, mine user behaviour data and keep the user base enthralled in the attention economy with regular hits of network updates from other users in their social networks.

What is psychoanalytic political theory?

I will be employing a psychoanalytic political theoretical framework to develop an understanding of the political thoughts and discourses that were in circulation on social media platforms. To appreciate how the digital political machine was able to mine people's passionate attachments to social and cultural institutions, political ideologies and hegemonic ways of life. Using the psychoanalytic lens I will be focusing on aspects of both the individual person as a reasoning, desiring, and socialized subject who is also discontented, as well as the groups, institutions, and other collectivities, that emerge as powerful influences on human subjectivity. My goal is to critically engage with populist technologies *qua* psychoanalytically enriched political philosophy to perform an ideology critique through critical engagement with popular culture. I believe that to intervene in the digital political formations and the discursive strategies

that were at work in the Trump campaign of 2016 employing the Žižekian short-circuit approach to critically read and evaluate the text is paramount. The short-circuit approach analysis enables one to interrogate the cultural and discursive logic of populism. Ernest Laclau describes populism as “a way of constructing the political on the basis of interpellating the underdog to mobilize against the existing status quo” ([Howard 2014](#)). The short-circuit analysis will be mobilized to deconstruct the spectral elements that animate the ideological kernel of the digital political machine, to unearth the connections between political power structures and reveal the hidden underbelly of the discursive regime which enables the populist political apparatus to function. The rationale behind adopting this methodological approach is to position myself and my work within the neoliberal working order that maintains a stranglehold on the kinds of academic discourses and research praxis that get funded and championed in the contemporary university in the Global North. I am of the opinion that radical theoretical critic has given way in cultural studies and political science disciplines to research endeavours that focus on identity politics, affect theory, various micro-level analysis and hyper-individualistic pursuits. Even though there are several critical research projects being produced, given the lack of appetite for critical theoretical engagement with macro-structural issues I was compelled to follow this line of engagement.

In order to produce a short-circuit analysis, one cannot simply interpret the discursive field. Rather, as Yannis Stavrakakis ([2007](#)) suggests the role of critical discourse analysis is to deconstruct the fantasmatic background that holds together the social facade. By leaning in on the ticks, quirks and symptoms that signal the chaos that lurks beneath the surface, symptomatically reading the text to locate the event horizon of the imaginary, which in turn

unravels to discern valuable psychoanalytic insight. Drawing from Eric Fromm's concept of "the libidinal structure of a society" and extending it to the digital mediascape I will be investigating how the polity's sadomasochistic desires are being transformed into authoritarian/fascist ideologemes. Adopting this theoretical lens I will be crafting an ideology critique that will attempt to build off of the questions that Chiara Bottici, Christian Fuchs and Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou posed at the 'Populist technologies and the New Spectacle of Finance' symposium, namely, "How do new media and technologies shape the political economy of Trump? What is the mass psychology that sustains such populist technologies? And what are the risks and possibilities of radical political engagement with the 'digital'?" ([Bottici et al. July 3, 2019](#)).

Contemporary scholars who study populism and populist technologies divvy up the political realm, into the domain of rational institutional politics which is governed by civility, rationality, enlightenment ideals, political grammar and deliberative logics, populist politics on the other hand is understood by and large as low-brow, irrational, emotional and unworthy of the investment of scholarly energies ([Salter 2016](#)). I would argue that this dialectical understanding of populism, echoes Matthew Arnold's Victorian concerns of politics and society. Arnold's 'sweetness and light' conceptualization of culture, as a way to regenerate civil society, veiled his contempt for working-class agitation. By quarantining affective elements from the political sphere, one is hamstrung to the idea that voters are pragmatic subjects who act in their own rational interests. This Arnoldian idea when extended to information and communication technologies makes it clear how the internet was prefigured and touted only for its emancipatory potential while ignoring the low-brow and low-culture popular use cases which was widely in

use by the masses. By critically reading the low-brow political and low-culture social media texts with a hermeneutic of suspicion while paying attention to the manipulative, propagandistic, persuasive discourses that push populist political agenda within liberal democracies by deploying populist technologies, the cultural logic of populist technologies and how organized persuasive communication and propaganda operates begins to unearth itself ([Bakir et al. 2019](#)).

Understanding how organized persuasive communication stokes populist antagonistic politics

Bakir et al. ([2019](#)) argue that in liberal democracies there is a blind-spot in how organized persuasive communication is studied. When public relations scholars study persuasion it has a neoliberal market-orientation to it, i.e. communication as is understood by management and in service of management. When scholars of propaganda study how manipulation and coercion operate in communicative spaces it almost always has an orientalist bent to the discourse. Solidifying the hegemonic sentiment that manipulative propagandistic discourse does not emanate from contemporary liberal democracies, on the contrary it is the kind of communicative discursive strategy deployed by authoritarian states, even though over the years, Watergate, Iran-Contra, Weapons of Mass Destruction, etc. have all been case in point examples of western media manipulation techniques working dandily. The lack of occidental scholarship on how manipulation and propaganda operate vis-a-vis new media technologies, limits our understanding of how coercion, deception, and incentivization strategies are deployed through the mediascape and by extension how power is exerted across social, cultural, political and economic spheres of society ([Bakir et al. 2019](#)). The flattening of the new mediascape takes away “reflection time,

critical distance, political space, and access to alternatives” for the polity resulting in a context collapse where advertising, public relations, and propaganda all co-exist in a continuum, in a liquid modernity, occupying the same space/time and employing the same social media lexicon of 'like, share, comment' social media ([Gerbner 1993: 137](#)).

The essence of power, in this communicative paradigm, is not one that prescribes violence and/or subscribes to coercive domination, but rather power is derived from tapping into the datascape and feeling the pulse of the psychopolitical community. Psychopolitical culture, as Byung Chul Han, theorizes it, is a culture that circulates via the mediated and mediatized realities as depicted on screen. There are no clear referents, only simulation and simulacra, consumed in these networks of *jouissance*. Confined in these digital pleasure palaces, users convey their psychopolitical culture affective traits through memes. The meme is an example of the genre of low-culture texts that are exchanged on social media platforms writ large just for the purpose of immediate gratification and surplus enjoyment. Memes as cultural texts, have extremely short life spans and spread through networks with great velocity on account of the viral nature of their content. Psychopolitical culture, as a result, is not a culture based on myths, mythologies, stories and legends, rather it is one that is fueled by a rapid-fire succession of images which stimulates and excites the audience for an extremely short duration of time providing them with a dopamine rush and perform as empty floating signifiers. In the psychopolitical cultural exchange, it is not the content of the message itself that matters as much as the affinity groups through which the message propagate, and the metadata about the transmitters and receivers of the message that can be extracted by the operators of the digital

political machine. In the psychopolitical digital ecosystem, coherent narratives are supplanted by yellow journalistic content, lügenpresse, click-bait, conspiracy theories and such.

II. Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Kayfabe (But Were Afraid to Ask Žižek): Technological Performance of Trumpian Populism

Tracing the media genealogy of Trumpian populism

My analysis of the rise of Donald Trump and his virulent brand of right-wing exclusionary populism will sidestep the argument that it is the economic insecurity faced by the working-class voters which Trump exploited with promises of bringing back manufacturing industry jobs that propelled him to victory. Trump's foray into politics is relatively unique in that it did not happen after a stint in military service, academia, and/or public office. Trump's predecessors had been, by and large, encultured and accultured in the discipline and punishment regimes of these Foucauldian institutions, whereas Trump's disciplinary training or bag of tricks rather was tempered and forged in the realm of real estate hucksterism, tabloid journalism, and reality television. From being a reality TV star on network television, and World Wrestling Entertainment ([WWE](#)) hall of famer, Trump had garnered quite a lot of semiotic tips and tricks of the trade that translated extremely well in his crossover into populist politics ([Peck 2018](#)). The logics of reality television were seeping through into electoral political news coverage where Trump was able to generate enough 'Bayesian surprise' through the nomination process and the campaign cycle ([Patterson 2016](#)). The 2016 U.S. election news cycle had been warped by Trump's candidacy, his media savviness and know-how of the lay of the land. The reality television to electoral politics cross-over episode framing of Trump that presidential candidate

ensured that he received the most media coverage by operating at the tabloid journalistic and reality television register ([Boydston and Van Aelst 2018](#)).

Reality television was able to reformat television as television without actors i.e. 'decaffeinated television' so too was Trump able to reformat the political campaign apparatus using the schematics from that media genre to suit his electoral campaign ([Žižek 2006](#)). The 1988 Writers Guild of America strike set the stage for television networks to develop television shows without writers i.e. reality television, is a genre of television that is devoid of the working people, i.e. writer's guild, various unionized production and post-production workers, etc. that have been the mainstay of scripted television dramas keeping the television industry operational ([Pozner 2016](#); [Taberski 2019](#)). The genre of reality television usurped this unionized, collectivist infrastructure and replaced it with a globally dispersed non-unionized workforce, with a television media format that is easily tweakable and replicable around the globe, one that does not need a cast of performing artists and a leading actor to succeed. The genre of reality television can be understood through the lens of media franchising and platformization. A media platform that can be customized to suit the local tastes but operationalized from afar ([Miller 2018](#)). The military analogue and media genealogical ancestor of this sort of media platformized endeavour would be the First Gulf War (1990-91), a war waged using the [Powell doctrine](#), a war without casualties, fought from afar using technologies, by outsourcing non-essential services to third-party contractors, and more importantly as Jean Baudrillard remarks "a programmed and melodramatic version of what was the drama of war" ([Baudrillard 1995](#), 72). By recognizing the media savviness of Trump, and how he partnered with tabloids and various media actors to generate a brand identity in the media industry when he made the career switch from Manhattan

playboy, casino mogul and real estate developer to reality television star. It is once again the media actors that power his operations that are doing the heavy lifting for him ([They and Melling 2018](#)).

The paradigm shift that reality television brings to the television industry has taken place in the political campaign machine as well. The political machine of the welfare state that needed union bosses to engage in press-the-flesh politics to get out the vote has given way to the digital political machine. Software updates the political machine and campaign apparatus from an earlier political paradigm. Where Obama was an academic and community organizer, John McCain was a decorated soldier and senator, Mitt Romney was a missionary and governor, George W. Bush served in the military and as governor, John Kerry was a decorated soldier and Congressman, Al Gore served in the military and Congress before their foray into presidential politics in the twenty-first century. The brand identities of these twenty-first century presidential candidates and presidential campaigns still adhered to modernist registers and disciplinary regimes. The Trump campaign in comparison was untethered and unmoored from any and all institutional legacies and dynastic practices. Just as these candidates before Trump leaned on the brand identities that they had cultivated in their own domains of expertise, so too did the reality television play-up the media celebrity persona. Being a media personality who did not have to adhere to conventions and decorum of the establishment candidate, the political campaign apparatus drew upon the media genre most suited for a media celebrity to mobilize his voter/fanbase.

Trumpian populism and the Kayfabe Aesthetic

To historicize Trump's populist performances goes back to 1988-89 where he parlayed his realtor playboy persona for a soirée with celebrityhood by having the Trump Hotel Casino, Atlantic City, sponsor Wrestlemania IV and V. Trump's business partnership with World Wrestling Entertainment, culminated in several guest appearances on WWE. Several of Trump's signature moves, on display in his reality television career and on the political campaign trail, can be traced back to what he had remixed from the professional wrestling entertainment sub-culture. Trump's much-ballyhooed line 'You're Fired!' on his network television show 'The Apprentice' (2004-2017) was used to great effect on World Wrestling Federation by Vince McMahon since the 1990s, Trump mimics McMahon's style and delivery of the line in the wrestling ring and co-opts it in his delivery of the line in the mise-en-scene of board room on his reality show. There are several other rhetorical moves that Trump largely borrows from the professional wrestling entertainment lexicon, including the tradition of name-calling and insulting one's opponent, exhibiting hyper-masculine bravado, putting a bounty on the opponent's head and role-playing storylines to rile the fans ([Beekman 2006](#); [Graser 2009](#); [Harder 2016](#); [Nessen 2016](#)). Trump's appearances on WWE's sports entertainment have imbued him with ready access to certain voting publics that were engrossed in his 'kayfabe' performativity and invested in the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.

Trump brings to his political performativity the kayfabe aesthetic, the idea that the bravado, performance and performativity in the wrestling ring and on-screen carries over to real-life even after the match is over and the cameras have been turned off ([Smith 2006](#)). Kayfabe is the illusion of realness, that comes with its own internal logics of prearranged kerfuffles written into the narrative and promotional developments that build upon the narrative

([McQuarrie 2006](#)). These *mano a mano* feuds are a part and parcel of contemporary celebrity culture. Celebrity skirmishes are intertextual discourses that pan out across several media platforms and receive continuous transmedia coverage from media outlets, thereby establishing a virtuous and endless promotional feedback loop ([Litherland 2014](#); [Jones 2019](#)). Donald Trump's kayfabe campaigning strategy borrows quite extensively from his tenure in professional wrestling and reality television, socially constructing reality to produce changes in public opinion ([Francisco 2017](#)). Trump leverages his knowledge of how wrestling fan performances are an integral component of the wrestling match's performance and channels that performativity in his campaign appearances and rallies ([Kelly and Wetherbee 2017](#)). Trump was able to get his fanbase to become his political supporters, much like WWE CEO Linda McMahon who had parlayed her WWE fame to run for the United States Senate, representing the state of Connecticut ([Lockhart 2010](#); [Keating 2010](#); [WWE 2009](#)). Trump was able to distill the wrestling match backstory trope into the 'Make America Great Again' slogan. The wrestling fan's knowledge of the genre, informs them how to behave, love and adore their favourite wrestler and they are cognizant that their crowd performance is an integral part of the wrestling match's narrative. Moreover, the wrestling fan community is a very active online community who actively participate in the social media narratives of their favourite wrestling characters. The virtual fan engagement and online feedback drive the narrative arc on WWE, which is the largest social digital sports property in the world ([WWE 2018](#)). The Trump campaign was able to get the wrestling fan sub-culture aesthetic suffused into the political campaign, thereby moving from the fringes of mainstream culture to become a central tenet of the Trump media campaign.

How Trumpian populism morphed and mutated through social media technologies

Trump's political advertising campaign devoted most of its advertising energies on social media platforms in general and Facebook in particular. It is on Facebook where the campaign saw the largest return on investment to its advertising buys ([Frier 2018](#)). Brad Parscale, the digital media director for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign and the Trump 2020 re-election campaign manager was heralded as the wunderkind who used innovative media technologies to propel the campaign to victory. This American tradition of naming a genius who propels the political candidate to power can easily be traced back to at least half a century or so. Patrick Caddell was named the genius behind Jimmy Carter's campaign, [Lee Atwater](#) steered Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush to victory, James Carville led the Clinton campaign to triumph, Karl Rove catapulted George W. Bush to success and David Plouffe steered the Barack Obama campaign to the White House. Each of these campaigns engineered novel and innovative media strategies and emergent technologies that connected with the electorate which in turn got their candidates into the presidential office. Technologies such as voter micro-targeting were used to great effect in the 2012 campaign by Obama's team and iterated upon in the Trump campaign ([Issenberg 2012](#)). The 2016 U.S. election cycle saw how social media firms were engaged as active agents in political processes, hand-holding high-spending advertisers like political campaigns through voter targeting efforts, suggesting unconventional strategies to target hard-to-reach voters cementing the symbiotic relationship with technology companies and political campaigns ([Kreiss and McGregor 2018](#)).

By looking at the Trump campaign apparatus' digital political machine and parsing the cultural registers in which the political discourse was taking place helps us comprehend how the media persona that Trump had cultivated through his days as real estate mogul and reality

television star persona was being mobilized through the 'pathogenic social media' ([Alvari and Shakarian 2019](#)). In the process of crossing over to politics after being a celebrity and entertainer for the better part of his career, Trump and his brand were also subsequently undergoing an ideological and mythological reconfiguration. The Trump brand is an exemplar of how the 'culturalization of politics' and the 'politicization of culture' operates in the contemporary political landscape ([Žižek 2008](#)). Trump's capacity to project identification with power, decisiveness, and wealth were all part and parcel of his kayfabe aesthetic which synthesized the ourboric relationality between politics and culture. The work of translating Trump's brand identity into politically charged discourse, fell upon the campaign team led by campaign CEO Steve Bannon, campaign manager Kellyanne Conway, senior communication director [Jason Miller](#), press secretary Hope Hicks and various other media stalwarts that the campaign deployed to great effect. The Trump media campaign's full-court press included deploying the vocabulary and rhetoric that was forged in Bannon's digital media company, Breitbart and sharpened in the transnational computational media operation that Bannon oversaw, namely Cambridge Analytica. In the trafficking of rumours, hoaxes, clickbait and various other media stunts that borrowed heavily from the genre of professional wrestling and reality television Trump and his communication team of 'message force multipliers' were able to forge a message that resonated with the fan-turned-voter base. The Trump campaign's strategy of tapping into the rural consciousness by resonating with low brow culture, exploiting racial animus, and enticing extreme feelings of anger and sadism, paid off in spades as Trump sold himself as an antidote to their economic anxiety and crisis of white masculinity ([Berlet and Sunshine 2019](#); [Kaplan 2019](#); [Rudden and Brandt 2018](#); [Zannettou et al 2018](#)). Trump's campaign team weaponized the

insecurities of white men, presenting Trump as the guardian of the 'cis-hetero-patriarchal gender order' in the process successfully yoking alt-right politics with 'networked misogyny' ([Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016](#); [Richardson-Self 2019](#)). The campaign traversed the mediascape spanning cable and network television, talk radio, social media, including the fringes of the media rhizome to attract conspiracy theorists and alt-right commentators to tout Trump as the preferred candidate to Hillary Clinton ([Jutel 2017](#)).

Unpacking how Ideologemes and Mythologemes are disseminated

With the pairing of online misogyny and alt-right politics, it becomes clear how the media-savvy and technologically adept Trump campaign was micro-dosing the polity with fascist rhetoric circulated via benign forms of cultural and political exchange such as memes, conspiracy theories, viral videos, etc. ([Koulouris 2018](#)). In attempting to critically interrogate how conspiracy theories like reproductive irrelevance, demographic displacement and white genocide circulate among the conspiracy theorists online communities; it becomes evident that these conspiracy theories draw from certain myths, mythologies and ideologies that undergird contemporary culture. Culture in the contemporary context is much less the Habermasian idea of communicative culture and much more so in line with David Golumbia's concept of 'computational culture' ([Golumbia 2009](#)). Culture in its computational avatar is always-already digital, transnational, informationalized and networked. In turn, warranting digital cultural studies scholars to pay heed to the ideological underbelly of the media content that traverses new media ecosystems, especially low brow cultural texts such as popular culture memes ([Lylo 2017](#)). Building upon Michael Holquist's notes ([1981](#)) in his glossary to Mikhail Bakhtin's *The*

Dialogic Imagination that the Russian word for 'ideology' does not carry any of the semiotic baggage that English word carries. The reason for this Holquist writes is because "Every word/discourse betrays the ideology of its speaker; great novelistic heroes are those with the most coherent and individuated ideologies. Every speaker, therefore, is an ideologue and every utterance an ideologeme" (Holquist [1981: 429](#)). The ideologeme is an ideologically saturated generalized word that has a strong suggestive force. The ideologeme sets the ideological modality of the text.



Figure 1: *Fight Club* (1999) Dir. David Fincher

For example, *Fight Club* (1995) and *The Matrix* (1999) memes do not function merely as popular culture memes; they are ideologemes and mythologemes as well. Within these memes, in their iterative visual form and their literary iterations, the reader is being invited into the ideological and discursive constructs of the primary text. The provenance of the alt-right insult '[snowflake](#)' can be traced back to Chuck Palahnuik's 1996 novel *Fight Club*, and the term '[red pill](#)' which has been co-opted by men's rights groups online can trace its lineage back to the Wachowski siblings'

1999 film *The Matrix*. These popular primary texts serve as the canonical backdrop for traffickers of digital hate culture to attach their coded messages. Popular culture ideologemes are, by extension, the most efficient and effective ways for the Trumpian 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) ideology to be disseminated in the shortest duration of time. These canonical texts are informative insofar as they are a window into the wounded psyche of white heteropatriarchy. The spreadable and virulent quality of the text, the memetic and symbolic energies that are stored within it, the capacity to go viral and in turn be discussed ad nauseam in the popular press makes the use of by a presidential candidate and campaign rather unique. Digital hate culture relies on a canon of popular culture texts from which to draw its lexicon, imagery and vocabulary. Using discourse that is laced with pop-culture references makes the text have much more currency on social media sites, where the texts are likely to be iterated upon with each new user interaction. Digital hate culture is not transmitted to the masses via the traditional hypodermic needle model; rather the medium enables content to mutate and shape-shift itself to blend in with mainstream online popular culture ([Klein 2017](#)).

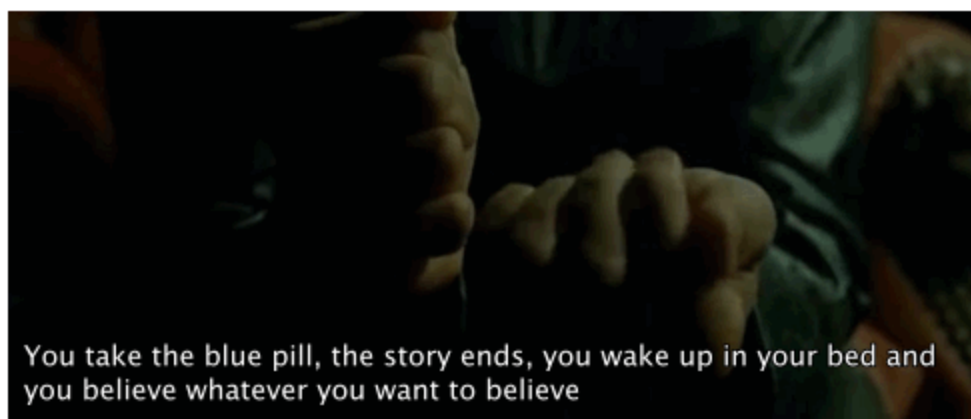


Figure 2: *Matrix* (1999) dir. Wachowski siblings

When Trump tweeted "My use of social media is not Presidential - it's MODERN DAY PRESIDENTIAL. Make America Great Again!" ([Trump July 1, 2017](#)) He had not as of then [tweeted](#) out the doctored video of his appearance on [Wrestlemania XXIII](#) in 2007. These texts are evidentiary of the metatextual, intertextual, paratextual and transmedia nature of Trump's discourse. In these discursive outbursts not only does Trump's kayfabe aesthetic become apparent but more important so too does the authorial intent become recoverable ([Kelly 2017](#)). Trump amplified Reddit user u/HanAssholeSolo's GIF that was posted on the subreddit /The_Donald. This user was known to have posted several racist and anti-Semitic imagery on the social media site ([Kaczynski 2017](#)). The meme was posted by the aforementioned user on the largest alt-right forum on the internet ([Romano 2017](#)). By giving credence to a right-wing extremist user on a social media website who spouts extremist and vitriolic comments the Trump is fanning the flames of violent extremism.



Figure 3: Reddit user /u/HanAssholeSolo's GIF version of President Trump's 9:21 am July 2, 2017 tweet.

I would opine that there is merit in recognizing these deliberative exchanges to be acts of 'stochastic terrorism' ([Woo 2002](#)). If and when an individual in a position of immense power and privilege uses communication technologies to deliver messages that can be read, understood and interpreted by the polity to be giving them the seal of approval to engage in violent acts of aggression that are "statistically predictable but individually unpredictable" ([Anonymous 2011](#); [Hamm and Spaaij 2017](#)); then we have a fiduciary responsibility as public scholars to recognize that the person occupying the seat of power is indeed a "hostile witness". By amplifying content that was hatched in the back alleys of the internet, (i.e. 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, daily stormer, so on and so forth) Trump gives aid and comfort to proprietors of digital hate culture, trafficking their weapons of mass demoralization, namely, conspiracy theories, disinformation and misinformation. As these conduits of organized chaos engage in information warfare, we must examine how the internet fosters a digital ecosystem that is conducive to fascists, misogynists, racists and white supremacists ([Klein 2017](#)).

III. Who let the Trolls out: Nerd Masculinities, Network Misogyny & the Feminist Wellness Industrial Complex

Bazinga!: The wounded psyche of nerd masculinities

To comprehend the schema of contemporary troll culture, one must invest time and scholarly energies to parse how media and technology interface with nerd subcultures. Particularly addressing how masculine nerd subcultures buttress hegemonic masculinity ([Ging 2017](#)). Nerds are the socially challenged, cerebral subjects that traverse the outer orbits of hegemonic masculinity. These neurodiverse subjects have use-value to techno-neoliberal society insofar as they are productive technical experts, passionate early adopters of technologies and obsessive consumers of media, technology, and culture. As the technological savviness of socially maladjusted nerds is duly extracted by technocapital, they are concomitantly responsabilized to deal with their social isolation, cultural ostracization, sentiments of societal rejection and the mental health issues that stem from the acute loneliness they experience. Nerds are emasculated social pariahs who do not possess the corporeal traits, the social capital, cultural etiquette and economic privilege to challenge hegemonic masculine order and heteropatriarchal hierarchy ([Pascoe and Bridges 2015](#)). The semiotic baggage that one readily attaches to the cultural stereotype of nerds as introverted, socially inept, "bookish, awkward, and either asexual or pathetically lascivious" ([Huynha and Woo 2014](#)) reveals how gender, privilege, power and technology operate in contemporary culture. Understanding nerdiness as a particular performance of identity, reveals the position occupied by male gender identifying nerds in the violent hierarchy of toxic masculinity ([Salter and Blodgett 2017](#)). By being perceived in society as uncool, infantile, effeminate, and inept, the nerd sub-cultural groups cede the privilege of being visible in social spaces where observable hypermasculine gender practices are performed and celebrated. Male-identifying nerds not in possession of the desirable masculine bodies, took up communication media and information technologies to create spectacular virtual bodies for

themselves, engage in discursive practices that placated their wounded psyches and facilitated their wish-fulfillment ([McCain, Gentile and Campbell 2015](#)). They formed cultural affinity groups, they grew and nurtured communities, forming a fledgling digital ecosystem of bulletin boards, user groups, video games, science fiction and fantasy fan groups, etc. As nerd culture gained more traction the mainstream culture, the user base on the mediascape grew rapidly, bringing in subjects with positionalities previously not represented on to these media platforms. Nonetheless, the cultural ecosystem that grew out of media and technology was not one in which the gender disparities and gender hierarchies of the meatspace were addressed, rather these cyberspaces were always-already misogynist, racist and fascist. The nerds that flocked to the digital *terra nullis* retained their wounded masculine identities which morphed and mutated through the cultural practices that were naturalized and incorporated into techno-culture and social media network communities often at times baking these cultural biases into the primordial soup of the infrastructure.

Corollary to Godwin's Law

Taking up the popular maxim of internet culture, Godwin's Law, which states that, "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one." I would propose a corollary to Godwin's law that suggests, "Since we are certain that the longer an online discussion proceeds, a techno-fascist will interject, then the ubiquity of fascists on the internet is always-already known." Godwin's law conditions internet users to deal with techno-fascists by adopting a policy of isolationism and neutrality. By pursuing an isolationist doctrine of filtering one's social media engagement from the affairs of

techno-fascists, by choosing not to enter their domains, designated online spaces, social networks etc. The governing dynamics of the internet suggest that techno-fascists are free to engage in their hateful discourses online among themselves just as long as their hateful discourse does not bleed into mainstream spaces of online engagement. Godwin's law as a text is an ideologue that prefigures the internet to be understood as a Jeffersonian space/place. Thomas Jefferson in his first inaugural address champions "peace, commerce, and honest friendship" as one the core principles of U.S. foreign policy, Jefferson cements this central tenet by highlighting that the United States ought to strive not entering into "entangling alliances" with anyone ([Jefferson 2006](#)). The isolationist and non-interventionist ideologues from Jeffersonian politics are self-evident in the 'cash and carry' online retail spaces and the 'lend-lease' web services that cater to contemporary techno-fascists. For example, Cloudflare founder Matthew Price decided that he didn't feel comfortable his company Cloudflare was providing its services to the neo-nazi website Dailystormer and the controversial social network 8chan, but just as soon as Price pulled the plug on the websites, another web service company took it upon themselves to restore services for the websites bringing them back online ([Robertson 2019](#); [Salter 2019](#)). The hegemonic cultural paradigm on the internet has been in synchronicity with the communication media technologies that are used by the majority of the users, i.e. as users migrated from the bulletin board system (BBS) to Usenets and then to social media networks. I would argue that the cultural paradigm can be mapped onto the political ideologues that have been in circulation as well, namely, it is possible to trace how the major internet players have moved from the isolationist and non-interventionist practices to an era where they are championing confinement. I would opine that by confining techno-fascists to particular platforms, domains, fields of interest, the

techno-fascist bedrock of the internet is never quite altered and/or disturbed. Thereby maintaining the primacy and validity of Godwin's Law.

Understanding the Feminist Wellness Industrial Complex

Critically reading the ideologemes and mythologemes that male-identifying geeks circulate in the zeitgeist makes evident how geek masculinity and misogyny have always-already consummated their relationship. I propose that to understand how toxic geek masculinity is able to energize and mobilize the user base of networked misogyny; one must look at the how the dialectic Other of network misogyny works, i.e. understanding how ['hashtag feminism'](#) operates. The fourth wave of feminism is defined by the technologies and the social media tools that are bringing contemporary feminists together ([Cochrane 2013](#)). By surveying how neoliberal feminism ([Rottenberg 2018](#)), celebrity feminism ([Hobson 2017](#)), popular feminism ([Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017](#)), postfeminism ([Gill 2007](#); [Rivers 2017](#)), and toxic femininity ([Risam 2015](#)) cohabit feminist discursive spaces online, one begins to notice how contemporary feminism is 'Ofmedia' and 'Ofcapital'¹ functioning under the eye of neoliberalism.

The feminist wellness industrial complex that indoctrinates the apolitical consumer feminist in the Global North through [juice cleanses](#), [self-care colouring books](#) and [yoga detoxes](#) has turned feminism into a brand identity that can be performed. Corporate feminist wellness has

¹ In Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel and Hulu streaming media series by the same name *The Handmaid's Tale*, the women who are forced to become handmaids are stripped of their identities in every possible way. In the dystopian world of Gilead, the handmaids have lost their families, jobs, homes, and their autonomy including their names. The handmaids take on the names of the men to whom they belong, e.g. the protagonist [June Osborne](#) is known by her patronymic name Offred which she acquires because she is Commander Frederick Waterford's handmaid. The handmaids greet each other 'Under his Eye!' when they intend to say goodbye, suggesting that a patriarch is always watching them. I use the terms 'Ofmedia' and 'Ofcapital' to signal to the reader the Atwoodian aesthetic.

denatured, deodorized, and sterilized Audrey Lorde's clarion call that self-care is political warfare ([Carraway 2019](#); [Sharma 2018](#); [Som 2019](#); [Ziwica 2019](#)). The FWIC has capitalized on the decline of symbolic efficiency to evacuate the political and ideological impetus of feminist wellness, replacing the restorative practice with an empty floating signifier that the narcissistic, solipsistic, female consumerist subject can connect with to leverage their hyperindividualist brand narrative ([Dean 2010](#)). The consumer feminists who comment, like and share selfies of themselves and their posse wearing pink [Pussyhats™](#) while checking in to women's marches using the location-sharing services on their smartphones may be performing politics on media platforms with their open-source symbol of resistance; but Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman's craftivist symbol, the pussy hat, is easily discoverable via a search query looking for the colour code #ff69b4. By adding geographic coordinates, hashtags, keywords, timestamps, facial recognition, so on and so forth make the search query all the more accurate and precise. This example reveals how the ecologization and environmentalization of the media infrastructure stacks the technological affordances of social media networks against feminists ([Feenberg 2019](#), [Hörl 2018](#)).

It is possible that fourth-wave feminism facilitates females who gamify their engagement with the hashtag. There may be hashtag feminists who have no ideological commitment to the social, cultural, economic or political cause that is at stake, who perform allyship to extract value from the cause for their personal gain. There may be hashtag activists who are acutely aware of the optics of being seen as engaging with a hashtag, and how it would positively impact their socially-conscious image. These feminists are '[doin' it for the gram](#)' i.e. their engagement is devoid of any feminist ethic of care, or feminist politic of care, it is not solidarity with other

feminists that is attracting the consumer feminist to the activist hashtag. The cultural logic of social media demands that social media users gain popularity and/or influence in their social networks, through their mediatized actions. As responsabilized subjects who have internalized the neoliberal entrepreneurial ethos and its cost-benefit calculus adopt this *raison d'être*, it reincarnates itself in the domain of feminist allyship as performative allyship. I argue that in performative allyship, we are witnessing people's inability to context switch from being a good feminist ally and being a good social media subject. Social media is an image based practice, where one is expected to maintain a consistent brand image, gain followers and influence the online conversation. If one is able to achieve these metrics, by performing one's commitment to a social cause and accruing the social capital of being “woke”, one has acquired the activist image persona. Activism, on the other hand, is neither a brand nor an image, in order to be an activist one has to yield space/time, courage, love and respect to marginalized people, whose voice one consensually champions. The context collapse that happens when it is the paradigmatic logic of social media that drives feminist activism rather than activist politics driving social media interactions that leads to much feminist ally theatre. Performative feminist allyship is decaffeinated allyship, it is allyship without any of the arduous unlearning and re-evaluating of privilege activist allies must engage with.

Fourth wave feminist women who engage in self-objectification and conform to feminine beauty norms are not championing intersectional technofeminist values or adequately challenging the scopophilic male gaze and its more potent digital iteration, the computational gaze. For example, the internet trend #A4WaistChallenge was a viral beauty meme which got women to vertically hold up an 8.5" x 11" piece of paper up against their waist and show that

their bodies conformed to the normative ideas of beauty and body image ([Tatlow 2016](#)). Social media influencer [Julia Sherman](#) posed one of the several feminist responses to the body-shaming and fetishizing of the unhealthy ideal of female attractiveness by holding up her BFA in Drama from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. Sherman's selfie that she had posted on [Instagram](#) was reported as a critical response to the trend where one ought to value women's professional and/or academic achievement more than their spectacular bodies. I would argue that if one assumes every challenge on social media platforms as attempts at acquiring particular data sets. The A4 waist challenge is a puzzle for an algorithm to solve, where the A4 piece of paper is a mathematical constant in every image. Each individual photograph will have a quirk to it, in terms of how the people are holding the piece of paper. Nonetheless, the algorithm can use the A4 sheet of paper as a point of reference to engage in the computational processes needed to resolve other details from the image. In this case, the data gathered from the challenge can be used by application developers who are interested in figuring out how auto-detection of the dimensions of objects, augmented-reality measuring tape apps, real-time measurement tools that use smartphone camera, etc. are devised. It does not concern the data collection apparatus if Sherman's selfie included her academic credential, although materially her action is a critical feminist response it is not a critical technofeminist response. Sherman is holding up an expensive 8" x 11" piece of paper that is blessing the digital machine with fruit.



Figure 4: Instagram user Julia Sherman holding up her college diploma as a challenge to the #A4waistchallenge

Socio-economically and culturally affluent new mothers who diligently post images of their babies every month on social media, art directing the images with toy building blocks that double as both props and descriptors, spelling out the age of the child with the letters and numbers, post these photographs with a catchy description along with a hashtag denoting the age of the child for a torrent of likes and positive comments. As much as these performative acts on social media are meant to be ways for new mothers, to bond and share the joys of digital maternity they are primarily ways for algorithms to figure out how to auto-generate facial ageing algorithms based on an easily available dataset of neatly labelled and sorted photographs of babies, posted at regular intervals, diligently documenting the landmarks of child development. Tourists who take selfies in front of recently erected large colourful signs that spell out the name of the city in sans serif font are generating large datasets of faces for facial recognition algorithms to iterate upon. The sans serif font sign hastens the optical character recognition work for the surveillance algorithm. Digital cultural practices such as taking selfies in front of a city sign ([Rider 2017](#)), instagrammable museum exhibits ([Haubursin 2018](#)), seated on a park bench next to a [bronze statue](#), so on and so forth, these cultural practices are obfuscating and subverting how the digital speech acts are always-already working for the digital surveillance apparatus. Just as how [hostile urban design](#) deters the urban dweller from engaging with urban space we must understand how hostile digital design practices are employed by social media companies culturally programming people to willingly participate in social behaviours to extract information from them ([Waters 2017](#)). Intersectional technofeminist interventions must be cognizant of the operational ethos of hostile digital design in the attention economy and devise appropriate activist strategies to educate, agitate and organize the polity.

Say Goodnight to the Bad Guy: Network Misogyny and the Manosphere Practice of Recreational Nastiness

I am acutely aware that to question if the fourth-wave feminist who is actively engaging with their feminist fan base, co-creating media content communally in their social network is doing authentic feminist work; to raise the question if it is beyond reasonable doubt that fourth wave feminism which is uncritical of corporate power be engaged in consciousness-raising and organizing work; or to dismiss the popular media iteration and consumer culture expressions as faux feminist because they are not anticapitalist is being made from a position of male privilege, one that prioritizes front-line, direct action tactics and strategies. While virtue signaling brocialist, brogressive, manarchist, and mactivist commitment to challenge systems of oppression like capitalism, heteropatriarchy, white-supremacy, sexism, and ableism I can be accused of mansplaining the flaws and follies of fourth-wave feminism. To which I would like to point out how unlike fourth-wave feminists whose capacity to mobilize and activate their feminist base on social media platforms is marred with the struggles; online misogynists' commitment to their cause is neither questioned nor are they ever labeled faux misogynists. On the contrary, online misogynists are fluent in social media marketing discourse and are quite often able to navigate the corporate mediascape to champion their cause expertly. The coherence of the misogynist message and the adherence of misogynists to their cause indicates that misogyny is a grand narrative. Misogyny, defined as an ineradicable prejudice against women, is at its ideological core men's desire to assert power and dominance over women ([Manne 2016](#)). Tony Montana, the gangster, played by Al Pacino in Brian De Palma's cult classic film *Scarface* (1983) provides us with the algorithm that misogynists aspire to follow to obtain capitalist

success. In Tony Montana, a Cuban refugee who came to the United States seeking political asylum, and wrecked havoc in Miami, Florida smuggling cocaine into the country, we see the 'bad hombre' that Donald Trump alluded to in his 2015 campaign speech ([Hughes 2017](#)). Oliver Stone had penned a character that exemplifies the libidinal Other of conservative Reagan era heteropatriarchy. In one of the pivotal scenes in the film Pacino's character dutifully explains to his sidekick how the misogynist triumvirate of success works in America; the acquisition of capital enables one to access the levers of power, which engenders one desirable to women in America. It is worth noting how closely Donald Trump's career trajectory adheres to Tony Montana's recipe, including his hypergamic selectivity of partners.



Figure 5: *Scarface* (1983) dir. Brian De Palma



Figure 6: Scarface (1983) dir. Brian De Palma

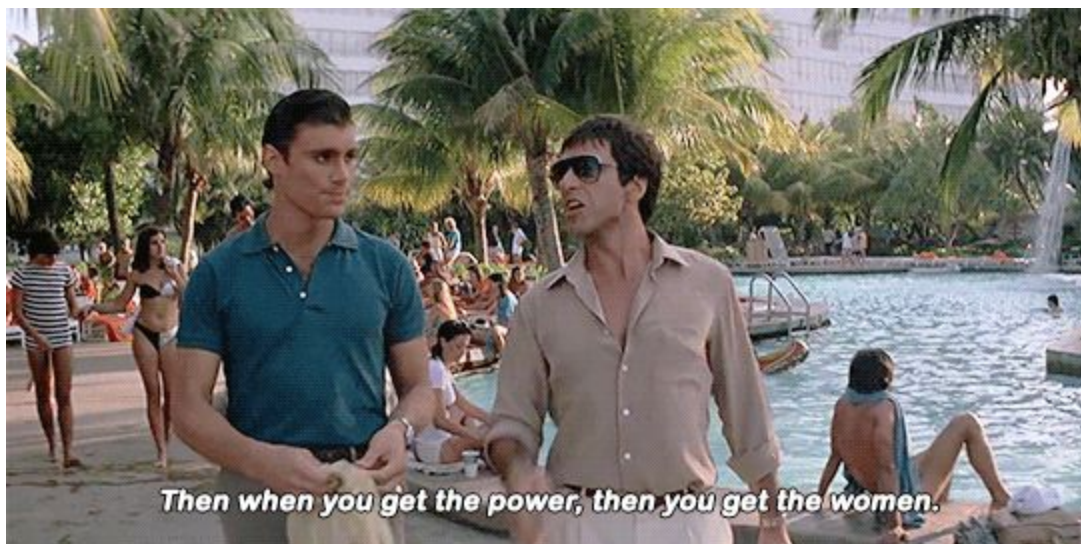


Figure 7: Scarface (1983) dir. Brian De Palma

Tony Montana's philosophy when it appears in the Graphic Interchange Format (GIF) on 4chan, 8chan, Reddit, Facebook, and the comments section of political news articles transgresses space/time to ignite a virulent strain of anti-feminist discourse as well as including the necessary ideologemes that signal the looming immigrant crisis, the threat of the Other who steals jobs, the Other that poses a threat to white spaces, and the Other that undermines white masculinity by having their way with white women. Popular television series like *Weeds* (2005-2012) and *Good Girls* (2018-) have parlayed this particular strain of the libidinal of angst white masculinity into media success. But, it is not merely in popular media texts that one can see the lingering traces of the libidinal angst of cis-white heteropatriarchy. Aaron Sorkin mentions in a media interview after he had penned David Fincher's Academy Award-nominated film *The Social Network* (2010), the fictional retelling of Facebook's origin story that, "Facebook was born during a night of incredibly misogyny. The idea of comparing women to farm animals, and then to each other, based on their looks and then publicly ranking them. It was a revenge stunt, aimed first at the woman who'd most recently broke his [Mark Zuckerberg] heart (who should get some kind of medal for not breaking his head) and then at the entire female population of Harvard. More generally, I was writing about a very angry and deeply misogynistic group of people. These aren't the cuddly nerds we made movies about in the 80's. They're very angry that the cheerleader still wants to go out with the quarterback instead of the men (boys) who are running the universe right now" ([Sorkin 2010](#)). Sorkin's description explicates how folded into the primordial soup of Facebook's social media infrastructure is this virulent strain of its nerd masculinity and misogynistic attitude. To understand how the ideologies baked in these algorithms of oppression and its aesthetic of programmed inequality that has laid dormant for so long got activated and

crossed over into the political sphere I propose critically reading the gamergate incident with a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Ready Player One: Unpacking the *Longue durée* of #Gamergate

Deadspin writer, Kyle Wagner presciently leaves a message in a bottle forewarning us in his writing how Gamergate is likely “a rehearsal, where the mechanisms of a toxic and inhumane politics are being tested and improved” ([Wagner 2014](#)). Gamergate is the petri dish from where the phenotype of harassment influencers emerged from ([Warzel 2019](#)). As the extreme right exclusionary populist 'alt-right' jumped from the geekier edges of the entertainment industries to the centre stage of political discourse and political culture in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election, some journalists suggested that geek and nerd culture has become a way for young men to be radicalized into a particularly toxic form of misogynist and racist masculinity ([Dewey 2014](#); [Hudson 2018](#); [Nagle 2017](#); [Urquhart 2019](#)). The alt-right movement views draw on the men’s rights movement, which views men as victims of female equality, and it has a strong internet presence in gatherings of the far-right online like 4chan and 8chan. The Alt-right also depicts people, a view that in the American context attracts religious extremists, Tea Party advocates, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theorists' among others ([Thompson 2018](#)). If we understand the Gamergate incident as the *casus belli* of the Internet culture wars. I argue that it would be prudent to put the Gamergate incident in conversation with another historical account. Although it is the young Serbian radical Gavrilo Princip who pulled the trigger to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo in 1914, the imperial masterminds that were readying the plans to attack Serbia and capture the whole of the Balkans for the Austria-Hungary

Empire in retaliation for the Sarajevo assassination have much to answer for as well (Butcher 2014; [Dzidic et al. 2014](#)). In the story of how Princip went from being a model student to becoming a disaffected teenager, militant nationalist and political assassin I find many of the same traits of the disaffected NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) white male youth who are radicalized online to take up arms ([Butcher 2014](#); [Krishnan 2018](#); [Wilkinson 2016](#)). The progression of how discursive acts of recreational nastiness made by involuntary celibates (incels), men's rights activists (MRA) and the anti-feminist community Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) that are meant to be read as virtual manhood acts progressively turn into violent outbursts as seen in the case of Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian begs the question *cui bono?* ([Beran 2018](#); [Jane 2018](#); [Moloney and Love 2018](#)).

Understanding Gamergate as the genesis of a greater cultural battle over the conversations around space, visibility, inclusion makes it clear how this was a proxy war being waged to redraw the borders of the hegemonic domain of culture. The sentiment that was being affectively communicated through social media technologies to fire up the manosphere was that the pole position of white cis-male hetero-patriarchy in the social order was under threat ([Van Valkenburgh 2018](#)). Gamergate was an attempt to radicalize a sub-cultural group that was grappling with the problematic promises that were prevalent in the mediascape. I believe by holding the misogynist internet trolls solely responsible for Gamergate we limit the scope of the inquiry, to who were the ones that pulled the trigger. Whereas, if we look at how those with political aspirations and political ambition activated the gamer user-base for their own personal gains, the layered narrative becomes much more nuanced. In 2005, Steve Bannon was the Vice-Chairman of a Hong Kong based gaming company named Internet Gaming Entertainment

IGE, a company founded by former child actor of the *Mighty Ducks* (1992) fame, Brock Pierce, as a gaming marketplace for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG). IGE employed low-wage video game playbourers in China who would play video games such as Blizzard Entertainment's game *World of Warcraft* to progress through the video game and acquire gaming credits, experience points and virtual goods. IGE's highly profitable service was offering these virtual goods to gamers in the Global North for a steep mark-up ([Boburg and Rauhala 2017](#); Green 2017). IGE's virtual sweatshop selling virtual goods for real money was an illegal gray market operation ([Dibbell 2008](#)). In light of the scandals, IGE changed its name to Affinity Media Holdings and dropped Pierce as the CEO in 2007 for Bannon to take over, a position he occupied until 2011 ([Scott 2017](#)). Under Bannon's stewardship, Affinity Media was engaged in operating the online communities, message boards and chat rooms of the MMORPGs ([Hughes 2017](#); [Swearingen 2017](#)). Bannon left Affinity Media to join Breitbart News in 2012, where he took the intimate knowledge that he had gained from his tenure at IGE and Affinity Media to transform gamer enthusiasm into political hay by forging political rhetoric, venue and ideology for disaffected white males online to express their anger and rage. It was under Bannon's stewardship of Breitbart news that technology blogger/editor Milo Yiannopoulos was able to upsell his flamboyant personality into becoming the alt-right's micro-celebrity influencer ([Bernstein 2017](#); [Woolf 2018](#)). Yiannopoulos' strategic use of anti-political correctness was prescient in attracting a right-leaning audience and capital for Breitbart News. Robert Mercer was an early investor in Breitbart News who was attracted to the ideological slant of the news organization investing 10 million dollars ([Darcy 2017](#); [Gray 2017](#); [Shugerman 2017](#)). Bannon's intimate knowledge of the gamer subculture was instrumental in shaping the media narrative

around Gamergate and elevating the topic from the gaming subculture to political mainstream, the networked misogyny and digital hate culture that lurked under the surface was stoked, energized by populist rhetoric and circulated by demagogues. Gamergate set tone for how the reserve army of trolls, nerds and geeks could be marshaled in from the digital sidelines whenever media texts of cultural significance to nerds and geeks underwent any changes that could be used to generate public outrage e.g. Ghostbusters reboot ([Blodgett and Salter 2018](#)), Star Wars VII: The Last Jedi ([Bay 2018](#)), Captain Marvel ([Salam 2019](#)), etc. The Gamergate incident provided the alt-right with a playbook that is being iterated upon and honed in every news cycle. The discussions about the next Little Mermaid being played by a person of colour, 007 in the next James Bond film franchise being portrayed by a black woman, all these discussions are generating outrage metrics for the digital political machine to re-calibrate how hate is trafficked online. The hateful, misogynistic, racist and sexist rhetoric that is being weaponized and deployed against the Squad, the four congresswomen elected in the 2018 United States House of Representatives elections, namely congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib is several orders of magnitude higher than the kind of digital hate culture that came out of Gamergate.

Call of Duty: Historicizing the Weapons of Mass Demoralization

To understand how it was possible for the digital political machine of the Trump campaign to be able to politicize nerds and mobilize trolls with such devastating effect one must understand that they were using weapons-grade political communication technologies, i.e. professional communication strategies that were designed and developed for military

psychological operations (PSYOPS) of the U.S. Army were used on an unsuspecting civilian population ([Cadwalladr 2019](#)). Rather than looking at the U.S. special counsel [Robert Mueller's report](#) and the media narrative that emanates from the special counsel's investigation which places the blame of the improprieties of the 2016 U.S. presidential election upon Russia and the meddling that resulted from the targeted advertising campaigns that were bought and paid for by the Russian active measures technology outfit, Internet Research Agency ([U.S. Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence 2018](#)). I propose that by looking into the regulatory erosion that led up to the U.S. electoral mishegas of 2016, we can historicize the contemporary electoral crisis and better understand the systemic shifts that led up to the regulatory frameworks to gave in and contemplate how we can rebuild the social institutions to protect democratic sovereignty. Much like how role the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933, in 1999, played a crucial role in the cause of the financial crisis of 2008 ([Crawford 2011](#)), it is the repeal of the Smith-Mundt Act of 1948, in 2012 that can be understood as one of the root causes responsible for the propaganda crisis of 2016 ([Hastings 2012](#); [Weinstein 2012](#)). The [Smith–Mundt Modernization Act of 2012](#) gutted a sixty four year old law that was in place to inoculate American audiences for the “government’s misinformation campaigns” ([Hastings 2012](#)). I read the Obama administration's decision to repeal and modernize the act as a techno-solutionist move. In a techno-solutionist paradigm, dogfooding, i.e. eating your own dog food, a software technology parlance that aptly captures how technologists advocate the use of one's own homegrown software product internally to work out and work through the glitches and kinks in the system before releasing the product for public consumption to be at work here. Dogfooding is considered a virtuous beta software testing practice in the software technology industry and I would suggest reading into the

techno-optimist mindset of the people, space/time from within which the Smith-Mundt modernization act emerged. The post-Cold War global power dynamics allowed for legacy communication media technology systems such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, assets in the psyops arsenal whose value was depreciating rapidly to be replaced with new media variants. Black psychological warfare radio stations such as Radio Free Iraq (*Sawt Al-Iraq Al-Hurr*) run by the Central Intelligence Agency were proven extremely useful to the U.S. army during the Gulf War of 1991 ([Taylor 1997](#): 172). The Gulf War of 1991 was the very first time the U.S. Army used electronic publishing systems to create and transmit propaganda into occupied Kuwait ([Taylor 1997](#): 175). A PSYOPS analyst terminal comprising of a personal computer, scanner and colour laser printer could produce propaganda leaflets in a matter of hours which was then sent over fax to the Kuwaiti resistance movement ([Taylor 1997](#): 175). This had made the propaganda campaign extremely expedient and cost-effective. The PSYOPS strategy of dropping leaflets on the Iraqi population and Iraqi soldiers intimidating them into surrendering was found to be extremely effective, 44% of the Iraqi army was persuaded by PSYOPS to discontinue fighting for 0.03% total operational cost of the war ([Taylor 1997](#): 170). In the U.S. War against Afghanistan, Operation Enduring Freedom, in 2001, the US Army would drop pamphlets that would demoralize the population, disrespecting the Islamic religion was one of the strategies to achieve this goal ([Faizy and Bengali 2017](#)). Other strategies included ridiculing Afghan masculinity, weaponizing humour, and shaming the Afghan people into submission ([Cohn and Sims 2010](#)).



Figure 8: A leaflet distributed Sept. 5 by U.S. forces in Afghanistan shows a dog bearing the Islamic Shahada, or profession of faith, an image that many found offensive. (Image by: Sultan Faizy for The Los Angeles Times)

By the time the United States return to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom, the neoliberal operational ethos and a dependency on the private sector had become the norm for the U.S. Special Operations Forces. They were outsourcing non-essential services to private military contractors, who were performing tasks ranging from intelligence gathering and analysis, war zone supply chain management and logistics, training foreign fighters, on-the-ground combat etc. (McFate 2016). Since mercenaries on the battlefield are not accounted for in the metric that measures 'boots on the ground' the U.S. Armed Forces was able to 'juke the stats' reporting low troop deployment numbers to the U.S. Congress. During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, more than half of the personnel were private contractors supporting operations on and off the

battlefield ([Schwartz and Swain 2011](#)); Of which those performing intelligence gathering and analysis work constituted about 15 percent of all the contractors ([Frisk and Trunkey 2008](#)). Among the several private military contractors doing intelligence analysis for the U.S. Armed forces was a British company, named Strategic Communications Laboratories, SCL. SCL's psyops expertise and experience include "the creation and distribution of fake al-Qaeda videos in Iraq (including "beheading" videos)" ([Boyd-Barrett 2019](#): 44). SCL Defence took the communication warfare and information-psyops techniques and methodologies that had been battle-hardened to create a civilian spin-off company named SCL Elections ([Amer and Noujaim 2019](#)). SCL Elections marketed themselves to politicians and political throughout the global south as "experts in measurable behavioural change" ([Knight 2018](#)). Much like any other contemporary global operation that works out the kinks in the system in its foreign franchise chains before bringing the polished product stateside, SCL Elections too iterated upon its research to influence the behaviour of hostile audiences before entering the U.S. elections market ([Taylor 2018](#); [Tharoor 2018](#)).



Figure 9: The Great Hack (2019) Dir. Amer and Noujaim, Screenshot timestamped 1:14:10.

SCL's American political work began in 2013, with financial investments from Robert Mercer and Rebekah Mercer, incorporated as a Delaware company, named Cambridge Analytica ([Kroll 2018](#)). The Mercers would generate clients for Cambridge Analytica by getting political candidates to sign onto to SCL Election's American ancillary. Steve Bannon, was also a board member, vice president, and part-owner of Cambridge Analytica. In 2015, the erstwhile information psyops and communication warfare company was working for the campaign of Senator Ted Cruz using new and innovative data-driven electioneering strategies using psychographic data that had been acquired by Aleksandr Kogan who was working with Facebook data for their research ([Davies 2015](#)). After Cruz dropped out of the Republican

presidential candidate's race in May 2016, the Mercers traded in their Cruz endorsement to back Trump's bid to the White House. With Steve Bannon leading the charge as Trump's campaign chair, Cambridge Analytica's operation stewarded by Brad Parscale, the digital media director of the campaign led the Trump team to victory. If the Smith-Mundt act were in place, perhaps it could have been the regulatory bulwark the battlefield-tested psyops communication warfare.

Conclusion

Trompe-l'œil is a term used to describe a style of painting in which objects are depicted with photorealistic detail, creating the optical illusion that the depicted objects exist in three dimensions. The illusionistic technique used by artists to induce a 'forced perspective' I believe hints at how the cultural logic of Trumpian populism was operationalized through the mediascape and how it morphed and mutated into far-right populist politics vis-a-vis social media technologies. Walter Benjamin's old thesis "every rise of Fascism bears witness to a failed revolution" is what I found myself reminded of trying to locate a genesis of neoliberal fascism/authoritarian capitalism. I am of the opinion that it would be prudent to locate in the failure of the Occupy Wall Street movement the life force of the fascist tendencies of the Trump administration. The rise of authoritarian politics is the profound failure of the Left, but also simultaneously proof that there was a revolutionary potential, dissatisfied masses, which the Left was unable to mobilize. This moment in history can be read as a demonstration of how Fascism takes the place of the Leftist revolution. The inability of the Left to deliver revolutionary alternatives to people affected by the housing crisis of 2008 has, in turn, led to the 'Monstrous Other' of affordable housing, a real estate developer turned reality television star to take up

residence in the White House in 2016. The election of Donald Trump to the U.S. Presidency is nothing less than the failure of the activists in Zuccotti Park to spark the revolutionary potential of social democracy, and a triumph for the forces of authoritarianism, racism, tribalism, and misogyny. The Reality television star president is well aware of the operational logic of the ‘Society of the Spectacle’. Under Trump’s watch politics has mutated into a spectacle that feeds the data driven decision making algorithms of the media. The constant barrage of news coverage about the attacks on women’s rights, working people, people of colour, the sick, the poor, the dismantling of remaining social safety nets, etc. has brought the shock doctrine to Gringolandia, i.e. the divided states of America. The politics of fear and anxiety that the world is experiencing suggests that American democracy is spiralling out of control and in its place what is unravelling before the American people is what Hannah Arendt aptly described as the “dark times” associated with totalitarianism.

As the commons has been evacuated, civic organizations depleted, and the infrastructure of dissent disembowelled by more than four decades of neoliberal policies; working people have been experiencing a steady erosion of trust in public and private institutional actors alike. Building upon the conception that data provides data surveillance companies such as AggregateIQ, Cambridge Analytica, Palantir, etc. with access to the means of ~~production~~ prediction, which allows them to derive political value from the media infrastructure. Their practices and the analytics they perform cannot be abstracted from either information literacy as central to politics or neoliberal market-driven practices as the framing mechanisms that are now shaping politics and an emerging asocial society. For the digital political machine to organize, activate and politicize misogynists is a much easier task in comparison to the organizing task that

trans inclusive radical feminists have to undertake ([Williams 2016](#)). The difference between digital feminist activism and men's rights activists are that the technological affordances and platform power embedded within the medium enabled one kind of discourse to traverse the mediasphere friction-freely whereas the feminist messages were met with a lot of traction ([van Dijck et al. 2019](#)). Trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERF) who are openly hostile to trans people who take to social media to air their antagonistic attitudes take away energy and momentum from the political organizing efforts of intersectional feminists. TERF activists' sex-essentialist discourse highlight how the lavender liberalist twinning of sexual identity politics and liberal ideology can be cleaved to sow discord in the ranks ([Worthen 2019](#)). The online conversation that is happening between cisgender radical feminists who are trans-positive and/or trans-neutral and the sex-essentialist TERFs can be weaponized by political actors who are likely to gain from amplifying the dissenting opinions of TERFs. This example elucidates why Kai Green's argument for a trans* method that strives to move political organizers and activists to move past the infoglut of sameness and be able to champion a navigational mode that fosters kinship, not networks ([Green 2016](#)).

People's weariness of the performative ally engaged in trafficking simulacractivism on media networks is what is being challenged from the populist ends of the political spectrum and by men's rights activists and feminists alike. I propose retooling Zygmunt Bauman's question "what does the Holocaust ... [say] about us sociologists and our practice?" ([Bauman 1989: 473](#)) To ask, what does the 'performative ally' say about digital cultural studies and our collective media practices? reveals how the digital activist has failed the public sphere. The performative ally is engaged in the progressive politic iterant of the kayfabe aesthetic. In the vociferous

advocacy campaigns asking one to refrain from consuming the texts of Woody Allen, Bill Cosby, Louis C.K., R.Kelly, Kevin Spacey, Harvey Weinstein, etc. while no such prime directive being levelled against the texts of [Paul de Man](#), [Martin Heidegger](#), [Dragan Kujundžić](#), [Avital Ronnell](#), etc. exemplifies the chimeric glimmer of academic kayfabe performativity. To be clear, asking about the academic variant of kayfabe performativity is not meant to be read as a whataboutist strategy of establishing false moral equivalences. Rather it is an effort to understand how the 'persuasion architecture' of the discourses that circulate among people with ready access to power and privilege operates differently from those discourses that circulate among working people without access to power and privilege.

Under the Trump administration, we are clearly seeing how the conventions of liberal democracy are being hacked away as ethics and social responsibility are being lost as its guiding principles. The number of public servants who have left their jobs on their own volition, or otherwise under this president suggests that the culture, climate and values espoused by those in power are not grounded in the morality of common good and civic virtues. Political discourse has become one where trading insults, hostility towards the opposition and humiliating the other for political gains is the norm. In order for fascist tendencies to take hold, a culture of seething resentment and cruelty must be sowed into the public discourse. I would argue that it is worth interrogating how popular media discourses are acting as hotbeds for fascist ideas to take hold in the public imagination. The zeitgeist is rife with examples of how the culture of cruelty is ballooning, the logic of self-interest and anti-intellectualism are cherished, and how the politics of disposability and fervent fear of others accompanied by displays of resentment are sutured into the media narrative. What is most worrisome about the rise of neo-liberal fascism is the

capacity of fascist rhetoric to mangle the truth. The Trumpian post-truth narrative is the
'Monstrous Other' of consensus-based decisions made in general assemblies at Zuccotti Park.

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