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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Self-Radicalization of White Men: "Fake News" and the Affective Networking of Paranoia

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This article examines how paranoia is affectively networked through digital technologies, political performances, and social media to radicalize white men. Using actor-network theory and affect theory, this paper analyzes how acts of domestic terrorism perpetrated by white men are triggered beyond rationales of self-interest through the circulation of paranoia as affective value. Specifically, this piece investigates connections between the online and offline violence spurred by #pizzagate and the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, by tracing relationships between U.S. counterterrorism efforts, the online proliferation of fake news, accusations of fake news lodged by the state against the press, Facebook algorithms, and agentive bots. This analysis argues that, rather than an individual pathology or self-contained anomaly, paranoia is an ecology that is affectively networked by state and nonstate actors, materializing in processes of digital communication such that the radicalization of white men has violent physical and structural effects.

Keywords: Alt-Right, White Nationalism, Masculinity, Conspiracy Theory, Alex Jones, Donald Trump, Twitter.

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On December 4, 2016, a 28-year old white man from North Carolina named Edgar Maddison Welch drove to Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington, DC, in possession of an AR-15 assault-style rifle, a Colt .38 handgun, a shotgun, and a folding knife. His aim was to self-investigate a worldwide child sex trafficking ring with ties to Hillary Clinton. Although he searched the premises, threatening an employee in the process, Welch found no children held captive in hidden caverns. Nevertheless, he fired the rifle inside the restaurant. Accounts concerning the shooting varied, including when, how many times, and in what manner the bullets were discharged, but it is their triggering without cause that is the focus of my analysis.

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Welch peacefully surrendered without physically inflicting harm; however, this story does not begin or end with him. James Alefantis, the restaurant's owner, as well as his employees and nearby businesses, were attacked on social media before Welch's arrival. Alefantis was forced to contact the FBI, local police, Facebook, and other social media platforms in an effort to remove the fake news articles that had gained traction online and identified his establishment as the center of a global pedophilic enterprise. However, when the police initially arrested Welch, they insisted that the incident was not related to #pizzagate.

The willingness of legal authorities to ignore evidence that linked the conspiracy theory to Welch's crime testifies to a general reluctance among government officials to identify white men as self-radicalized terrorists. Through profiling, including the data-mining of Facebook profiles and social media accounts, U.S. citizens quickly mutate into self-radicalized Islamic terrorists, killing on behalf of jihad, so long as they look the part. In the case of Welch, his radicalization was rendered invisible by his whiteness and was undersold given that no one was hurt when he shot his AR-15.

This essay demonstrates how self-radicalization is a misnomer. I argue that rather than pathology relegated to a specific subject or a particular form of extremism, radicalization is a social process of affective networking. In a rare interview, Welch shared that he listened to conspiracy theorist and Infowars.com host Alex Jones—a Christian who calls Hillary Clinton and President Obama demons—and enjoyed John Eldridge's *Wild at Heart*, a popular book on evangelical masculinity (Goldberg, 2016). His militarized sense of masculine duty to protect imaginary children from Satanic perverts speaks to the power of fake news to trigger real guns and calculatedly crowdsource paranoia.

Much news coverage of conspiracy theory discourse focuses on questions of belief, proposing that many viewers of Jones' Infowars, for example, disbelieve "wilder fantasies" such as #pizzagate and simply tune in for entertainment, "enjoying the ridiculous exaggerations and outright lies for the outrage they provoke in Democrats, liberals, intellectuals, and pompous commentators of all political stripes" (Kabaservice, 2017). Subsequently, "true believers" such as Welch are dismissed as brainwashed or mentally disturbed, although he also admitted that Jones "goes off the deep end on some things" (Goldberg, 2016).

While media coverage on the proliferation of conspiracy theory discourse today recognizes the obvious role that the Internet has played in attracting a wider audience, this recognition does not go far enough in assessing the agency and impact of digital technology in the visceral gut appeal of fake news in the United States during the Trump administration. What constitutes fake news is constantly cast into doubt by the president himself, further obscuring and complicating distinctions between facts and falsehoods as he unabashedly lies to the public and bullies the press, shouting "fake news" at reporters and lashing out against the "fake news media" on Twitter and at rallies.

Many studies have made convincing arguments concerning the cultural significance of conspiracy theory discourse historically and contemporarily in the United

States (Barkun, 2013; Braitch, 2008; Fenster, 2008; Knight, 2002). It is important to reassess this project in light of the ways in which entertainment and information are increasingly entangled by social media, whereby likes, retweets, and emoji have become arbiters of authenticity and audience reception on Facebook and Twitter, influencing news feed algorithms and the policing of user-generated content. Meanwhile, the president exploits such metrics of authenticity to manipulate optics so that his approval ratings seem higher than they are, retweeting or quote-tweeting praise from accounts with suspicious bot (automated) activity (Knight, 2002). It is impossible to distinguish the performance of the president during a press conference from his starring role as the surly boss on the reality television show *The Apprentice*. In effect, Trump's election has mainstreamed and legitimized conspiracy theory discourse, using the tactics of shock and awe valorized during Operation Iraqi Freedom at the outset of the global war on terror.

At a time when technologies of state and corporate surveillance are routinized and always on by way of computers and cell phones, modulating habits of communication and gesture while tracking patterns of consumption and movement, trust in the media and government is at an all-time low. Such a political climate calls for a nuanced analysis of how conspiracy theory discourse has become normalized by reframing paranoia from the pathological to the ecological. By invoking ecology in this instance, I refer to its conceptualization apart from nature as such, what Bruno Latour has articulated as "a new way to handle all the objects of human and nonhuman collective life" (1998, p. 2). While situating conspiracy theory discourse as promoted and amplified through digital media leading up to and in the aftermath of the 2016 election, I examine paranoia as a networking process that radicalizes white men using social theory that disrupts, rather than reinforces, neoliberal logics of individual, human, and U.S. exceptionalism.

In actor-network theory (ANT), networks are not technical systems of transport, flow, or communication, but networking processes of movement, circulation, and connection. Latour writes, "An actor-network may lack all the characteristics of a technical network—it may be local, it may have no compulsory paths, no strategically positioned nodes" (1998, p. 2). Such an analytical approach is well suited to investigating the political mobilization of what has been coined by white nationalist Richard Spencer as the alt-right, a network which has no head or center but relies on human and nonhuman actors to bodily move and digitally connect men across the country as they enjoy lolz online. In the "Unite the Right" riots that ensued over a weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, common ground and ideological affinity among KKK members, neo-Nazis, militia men, Trump supporters, and alt-righters materialized in the affective networking of white masculinist paranoia. In ANT, there is no social or real space outside of associations, no a priori relation of scale or order according to binaries of macro/micro, local/global, individual/mass, or subject/society. Additionally, there is no inside or outside to a network. This conceptual frame is useful for questioning how radicalization happens not via the Internet, but through networking processes, such that singular acts of terror by

white men and structural terrorism by the state are in social relation without coordination.

Furthermore, ANT is analytically productive when examining the persuasive power of conspiracy theory discourse as it is communicated online, because it fuses "a semiotic definition of entry building; a methodological framework to record the heterogeneity of such a building; an ontological claim on the 'networky' character of the actants themselves" (Latour, 1998, p. 7). Latour posits this ontological orientation as the radical intervention of ANT, its "network tracing activity" (1998, p. 14). Analyzing Edgar Welch's "self-radicalization" using ANT means de-emphasizing psychological factors and individual motive, and troubling logics of human exceptionalism and rationales of self-interest, while conceptualizing social relations and political action in terms of networking processes that involve human and nonhuman actors. The term "actor" in ANT signifies an "actant" as something that acts: an agency that is not relegated to individual humans, or humans in general, but includes nonhuman life. According to ANT, "a network is not a thing but the recorded movement of a thing…what moves and how that movement is recorded" (Latour, 1998, p. 14). I trace the affective networking of paranoia such that conspiracy theory discourse not only politically mobilizes humans but also becomes mobile. Surplus affect is the recorded movement that signals the radicalization of white men. Thus, I investigate how paranoia moves and moves others.

Feminist affect theorist Sara Ahmed argues that "emotions play a crucial role in the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs" (2002, p. 117). Her theorization of affective economies concerns the circulation of emotion as affective value and resonates with ANT insofar as it suggests "that emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without'" and "do not simply belong to individuals," but rather "create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds" (Ahmed, 2002, 117). Accordingly, "in such affective economies, emotions *do things*, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments" (Ahmed, 2002, p. 119, emphasis in the original). While Welch denied that his actions were driven by any political motive, he confessed to praying for President-Elect Donald Trump to take the county "in the right direction" (Goldberg, 2016). Meanwhile, Trump's "Make America Great Again" campaign was precipitated by his own unflagging popularization of another conspiracy theory, that of "birthergate," which generated suspicion concerning President Obama's nationality and religion out of racial animus.

In her discussion, Ahmed examines the Aryan Nations' website to postulate that "white subjects claim the place of hosts [in the United States] … at the same time they claim the position of victim," a narrative that "suggests that it is love of the nation that makes the white Aryans hate those whom they recognize as strangers, as the ones who are taking away the nation, the role of the Aryans in its history, as well as their future" (Ahmed, 2002, p. 118). In this rewriting of U.S. history, the labor of migrants, slaves, and other non-white people is erased. Such erasure

justifies rallies organized by white nationalists to defend free speech alongside the racist Confederate heritage of statues celebrating generals such as Robert E. Lee, a landmark in Charlottesville connected to urban planning projects that displaced Black residents (Abramowitz, Latterner, & Rosenblith, 2017).

When Ahmed writes, "the reading of others as hateful aligns the imagined subject with rights and the imagined nation with ground. This alignment is affected by the representation of both the rights of the subject and the grounds of the nation as already under threat. It is the emotional reading of hate that works to bind the imagined white subject and nation together" (Ahmed, 2002, p. 118), she is speaking of white nationalist mobilization in the United States as situated by the war on terror. While Ahmed focuses on the circulation of hate in her analysis, the affective networking of paranoia is also critical to the political mobilization of white bodies. This ontological process involves emergent media such as Richard Spencer's "I'm safe" cell phone videos, recorded in suffocating close-up post-punch or post–pepper spray; memes of Pepe the Frog and (or as) Donald Trump; Alex Jones alternatively sobbing and screaming over the state of America in the clutches of the "New World Order"; as well as Ku Klux Klan members bearing Confederate flags and neo-Nazis holding their arms in stiff salute.

In her analysis of power and paranoia in the age of fiber optics, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2006) examines how the Internet, a technology that she argues thrives on control, has been accepted as a mass medium of freedom. She contends that the "structuring paradox of information and communications" of the Internet is "a response to the end of the Cold War and to the successes and failures of containment" (Chun, 2006, p. vii). This troubling convergence of freedom and control post–Cold War "stems from the attempt to solve political problems technologically," such that "to be paranoid is to think like a machine" (Chun, 2006, p. vii). Currently, paranoia legitimizes federal laws and Twitter outbursts that instrumentalize threat as a weapon against the press and the public, including African-Americans, Muslim-Americans, undocumented immigrants, and those who identify across the LGBTQ spectrum (among others) in mandated checks on police monitoring, U.S. travel limitations targeting predominantly Islamic countries, the boastful advertising of deportation statistics, and the rollback of protections for trans youth and soldiers.

Chun states that her project aims to demonstrate how "the Internet enables communications between humans and machines, enables—and stems from—a freedom that cannot be controlled," in order to "take seriously the vulnerability that comes with communications—not so that we simply condemn or accept all vulnerability without question but so that we might work together to create vulnerable systems with which we can live" (Chun, 2006, p. vii). Scholarship and speculation concerning the origins of fake news and the psychological profiles of those it convicts distracts from the project of creating vulnerable systems with which we cannot only live, but that are critical to life as/with vulnerable being/beings.

The self-radicalization of White men

The AR-15 rifle Edgar Welch fired in Comet Ping Pong is cousin to the military-issue M-16, the same weapon used by Omar Mateen, the American who killed 49 people at Pulse nightclub in Orlando in June 2016. This mass shooting was immediately considered an act of terrorism carried out by a self-radicalized Islamic extremist without clear evidence that Mateen had any link, even indirectly, to an organization such as ISIS. While Mateen had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in a 9-1-1 call as the massacre began, after further investigation the CIA concluded that he had no relationship to ISIS, and questions concerning his religious convictions remained unresolved.

Overwhelmingly, "self-radicalization" is a category reserved for "a self-starter jihadist guy, or girl…who can be lionized as a soldier of the Islamic State and regarded as a warrior" (Alvarez & Pérez-Peña, 2016). According to this formulation, self-radicalization is particular to Muslims and involves not only the "lone wolf" terrorist, but also information and images designed to affirm that the violence performed has greater purpose. During the Obama administration, the federal counterterrorism program known as Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) sought to deter potential terrorist attacks from various groups inspired by violent ideologies, including the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and anti-government militias. However, contrary to this principle of inclusivity, CVE primarily focused on enlisting Muslim communities to monitor suspicious individuals and share information with law enforcement to preempt terrorist attacks and prevent radicalization. Pilot CVE programs headed by U.S. attorneys in cities with a high percentage of Muslims, such as Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and Boston, cultivated animosity, distrust, and fear of prosecution. While the CVE buzzword was collaboration, it promoted the alienation and criminalization of American Muslims.

Even so, during his 2016 campaign Donald Trump railed against President Obama's refusal to utter the phrase "radical Islamic terrorism" as politically-correct obfuscation that undermined counterterrorism efforts. He also called the Obama administration weak in its effort to combat ISIS, a masculinist refrain that energized supporters at rallies. President Trump has since intonated that he intends to revamp and rename CVE "Countering Islamic Extremism" or "Countering Radical Islamic Extremism." What gets elided in this dangerous narrowing of what qualifies as extremist is the role that news sites like Infowars and Breitbart, message boards like 4chan and Reddit, and social media such as Twitter and Facebook have played in the affective networking of paranoia.

During the weekend of August 12th to 13th, 2017, in Charlottesville, Virginia, white supremacists, white nationalists, and self-styled militias—members of the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, alt-righters, and Trump supporters among them—demonstrated against the removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee from Emancipation Park. David Duke, a former KKK imperial wizard, made explicit connections between the Unite the Right rally—where protestors arrived for battle with assault rifles and

broken pool cues—to Donald Trump's election. Duke stated, "We are determined to take our country back. We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in, that's why we voted for Donald Trump. Because he said he's going to take our county back. That's what we gotta do" (Hanson, 2017). On Friday night, several hundred people, most of them men, marched on the main quadrangle of the University of Virginia campus with torches and gathered under a statue of Thomas Jefferson, shouting, "white lives matter," "you will not replace us," "Jews will not replace us," and "blood and soil," a Nazi rally cry. That evening, protestors and counter-protestors confronted one another under the statue, and physical conflict waxed and waned throughout the following day.

The first to respond from the White House was First Lady Melania Trump, who tweeted: "Our country encourages freedom of speech, but let's communicate w/o hate in our hearts. No good comes from violence. #Charlottesville" (Trump, 2017). By locating hate in individual hearts, the First Lady reframed this orchestration of terror into an individual "bad apple" problem: one that led to the murder of a 32-year-old woman named Heather Heyer when a car plowed into a group of anti-racist protesters on a street near Emancipation Park. The driver was a 20-year-old white man from Ohio named James Alex Fields, Jr., a registered Republican who was photographed at the protest bearing the bland uniform of a white shirt and khaki pants to demonstrate solidarity with the white nationalist organization Vanguard American.

On Fields's Facebook page, memes of Pepe the Frog and Emperor Trump were found among neo-Nazi symbols, a photo of soldiers with Nazi and American flags, and a portrait of baby Hitler. While Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Microsoft collaborate on sharing information to stem the flow of terrorist propaganda through their networks, it is unclear how this material is defined. Twitter and Facebook encourage users to report hateful messages and censor individuals for violating their terms of service. After the violence in Charlottesville, GoDaddy and Google removed neo-Nazi and white nationalist sites, while Facebook banned pages with names such as "Right Wing Death Squad" and "White Nationalist United" (Stevens, 2017). However well intentioned, such efforts will not curb the deluge of user-generated content on message boards that function as networks themselves. On Reddit, for example, the alt-right feeding frenzy called The_Donald has over 450,000 subscribers and three billion comments (Squirrel, 2017).

On August 12th, President Trump eventually spoke on the violence in Charlottesville:

> We condemn in the strongest possible terms, this egregious display of hatred, bigotry, and violence, on many sides, on many sides. It's been going on for a long time in our country, not Donald Trump, not Barack Obama…Our country is doing very well in so many ways; our country has record, just record

> employment. We have unemployment the lowest it's been in almost 17 years. We have companies pouring into our country. Foxconn, car companies, so many others, they're coming back to our country. We're renegotiating trade deals to make them great for our country and great for the American worker. We have so many incredible things happening in our country.

In this speech, President Trump did not rebuke, or even mention, racism, neo-Nazis, or the KKK. Neither the president nor officials on the ground called the violence, perpetrated in the name of white nationalism and in support of white supremacy, domestic terrorism.

By repeatedly stating that hatred, bigotry, and violence came from "many sides," and ahistorically positing this conflict as "going on for a long time … not Donald Trump, not Barack Obama," the President distanced himself from the violence and whitewashed U.S. history. Simultaneously, he figured white, working-class men left behind by a globalized economy as the *real* victims, while promoting himself as a man who is keeping his promise to make America great again. His comments earned the approval of his target audience, as evidenced in the praise of the founder of the neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer, Andrew Anglin:

> He didn't attack us. He just said the nation should come together. Nothing specific against us. He said that we need to study why people are so angry, and implied there was hate…on both sides! Also refused to answer a question about White Nationalists supporting him. No condemnation at all. When asked to condemn, he just walked out of the room. Really, really good. God bless him. (Mosbergen, 2017).

Trump's statement demonstrates how emotions such as anger, fear, and hate have visible identifiers, making it simple to reverse subject and object relations. That does not make such equivocations justifiable or legitimate, but it does lead to conjecture concerning who is to blame, even if the ideological differences between someone carrying a neo-Nazi flag and an anti-fascist flag appear obvious.

A few days later, on August 15th, President Trump unleashed a tirade against the "fake news" media during a press conference when he was asked why he did not release a more timely statement on the violence in Charlottesville: "Before a statement I need the facts…if the press were not fake and if it was honest, the press would have said what I said was very nice…unlike the media, before I make a statement I like to know the facts." Minutes later, President Trump became more combative when asked whether he thought the alt-right was behind the attacks, "what about the alt-left who came charging at the, as you say, alt-right. Do they have any semblance of guilt?" After reiterating that there were two sides at equal fault for the violence, he added, "Not all those people were neo-Nazis, believe me. Not all those people were white supremacists, by any stretch. Those people were also there because they wanted to protest the taking down of the statue of Robert E. Lee…I noticed that Stonewall Jackson is coming down. I wonder if it is George Washington next week and if it is Thomas Jefferson

the week after?" With these words, the President echoed statements by the neo-Confederate League of the South, which called the disappearance of the Confederate statues in New Orleans "ISIS-Style Cultural Genocide" (Wallace, 2015). He also used the First Amendment to defend white nationalists, while the Justice Department seeks to identify anti-Trump protesters on Inauguration Day. These threats against the press and the public by the state are focused on anyone whom President Trump views an opponent, optics that shift according to his mood and which rarely reflect on his "base"–white, working-class men who love God, guns, and country.

In his sociological study of "American masculinity at the end of an era," Michael Kimmel argues, "white men's anger comes from the potent fusion of two sentiments —entitlement and a sense of victimization" (2017, p. x). By this rationale, Trump's election shows that the righteous rage fueling anti-Washington populism is driven by "aggrieved entitlement," or "that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you by unseen forces larger and more powerful" (Kimmel, 2017, p. x). The white men Kimmel spoke with shared sentiments rather than a worldview, which leads him to surmise: "Populism is not a theory [or] an ideology, it's an emotion. And the emotion is righteous indignation that the government is screwing 'us'" (Kimmel, 2017, p. xi). While his conceptualization of aggrieved entitlement is convincing, Kimmel's analysis stays moored in exploring the hegemonic notions held by white men and women about their victimhood, the American dream, and what it means to be a real man. He takes a non-judgmental stance with relation to white men's rage because, "It's hard to tell anyone that their feelings are wrong. Their feelings are *real*…but at the same time, their feelings may not be *true*—they may not provide an accurate assessment of their situation" (Kimmel, 2017, p. x, emphasis in original). By figuring emotion as a right of ownership, Kimmel validates white men's anger despite declarations otherwise. His map of social relations feeds paranoia by reiterating the (white) individual and (multicultural feminist) society as oppositional. Literary scholar Timothy Melley calls the effects of this form of paranoia "agency panic," and contends that conspiracy theories are self-protection, the "attempt to defend the integrity of the self against the social order" (2002, p. 60). Trump and Jones use social media to stoke and spread conspiracy theories that thrive and capitalize on the agency panic of white men; however, paranoia is also animated in the networking process of social media such that it is not strictly attributable to, or generated by, them.

"Fake news" and the affective networking of paranoia

"The Intel on this wasn't 100%," Welch stated a few days after his arrest, "I just wanted to do some good and went about it the wrong way" (Goldberg, 2016). Rumors by word of mouth became incontrovertible facts once he installed Internet service at home and began to self-investigate #pizzagate online. As one report linked to several more, details from a combination of sources left him with the "impression something nefarious was happening" (Goldberg, 2016). Despite landing in jail as a

result of following this conspiracy to its unfounded conclusion, Welch remained unconvinced that it was fake news and stated that he did not like this term because it served to validate the "mainstream media," which he did not trust (Goldberg, 2016). He was far from alone in being suspicious of the press after so many pundits wrongly predicted the outcome of the 2016 election.

However, Facebook also received criticism for proliferating anti-Clinton conspiracy theories in the form of news. The day after the election, Mark Zuckerberg responded in a Facebook post:

> Our goal is to give every person a voice. We believe deeply in people… Assuming that people understand what is important in their lives and that they can express those views has driven not only our community, but democracy overall…Of all the content on Facebook, more than 99% of what people see is authentic. Only a very small amount is fake news…our goal is to show people the content they will find most meaningful, and people want accurate news. (Zuckerberg, 2016).

What Zuckerberg assumes is better posed as a question: do people want accurate news? There is evidence to the contrary.

Infowars.com had 10 million unique viewers during its "coverage" of pizzagate from November to December 2016, more hits than the *National Review* and Rush Limbaugh's site (Beauchamp, 2016). After the shooting, Jones and many alt-right talking heads, bloggers, and even government officials maintained that pizzagate was real. Finally, in March 2017, in lieu of a lawsuit threatened by Alefantis, Jones issued a public apology in which he admitted that none of what he had conjectured regarding Comet Ping Pong was true. However, this admission did not stop a group of 50–60 protestors, several of whom had endured or witnessed sexual abuse, from rallying outside the White House to call for an official investigation. One 55-year-old woman wearing a pink T-shirt with the words "Ephesians 6:12," a reference to scripture that speaks to a struggle "against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil," drove eight hours from Michigan with her family and told a reporter, "pedogate is a spiritual darkness" (Miller, 2017). Throughout his "reporting" on pizzagate, Jones gave political voice to such Manichean visions by pitting good versus evil in an apocalyptic tenor. In these Infowars segments, Jones perpetually stresses that pizzagate is real and urges viewers to investigate the evidence on Wikileaks and Infowars themselves: a "rabbit hole that is horrifying to go down." He admonishes viewers, "it's up to you to research this yourself, you gotta go to Infowars.com and actually see the photos and videos inside these places… something needs to be investigated, you just call it fake news, these are real Wikileaks, real stuff going on."

Social media incites users to circulate information as a form of entertainment in ways that undermine Zuckerberg's vision of such networks as democratizing public squares. Political scientist Jodi Dean calls the enjoyment of contributing and sharing online content "affective networks," "feedback loops, the circuits of drive, entrapping

contemporary subjects" (2010, p. 21). Dean critiques Zuckerberg's statement on fake news as she discusses how Twitter and Facebook feed "communicative capitalism," which is an "inescapable circuit" that materializes democratic ideals "in the contemporary information and entertainment networks necessary for globalized neoliberalism" (2010, p. 21). Social media generates and amplifies affect to the extent that "people *enjoy* the circulation of affect that presents itself as contemporary communication" (Dean, 2010, p. 21, emphasis in the original). Subsequently, the enjoyment of participating in an affective network is a "binding technique" that intensifies through reflexive communication: adding comments, links, and interconnecting myriad platforms, people, and devices (Dean, 2010, p. 21). Rather than finding accurate news meaningful, Facebook users find the affective pleasure of connectivity addictive, whether or not the information they share is factual, and that is how communicative capitalism captivates subjects as it holds them captive.

In her analysis, Dean (2010) assumes the neoliberal subject is intact but ensnared by the affective networks that bolster communicative capitalism. She writes, "every little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in" (Dean, 2010, p. 21). In her argument, the individual is subjugated by a stable technical system; affective networks are closed structures that breed engagement and feed capitalism out of self-interest. However, there is evidence that surplus affect overrides individual human agents to reveal the myth of self-contained subjectivity. The affective networking of paranoia *as* social media bodily mobilizes white men to commit singular acts of terror that belie logics of self-interest, such as shooting a gun at nothing and speeding a car into a crowd for no reason. Rather than hate, fear, anger, or enjoyment, paranoia is without a subject or object: it is an affective network that has no visible expression such as rage, and as such it is more difficult to index, claim, disassociate from, and transpose.

The way that Trump's mood was monitored and modulated by campaign staff to curb his compulsive tweeting demonstrates how processes of digital communication affectively network paranoia without a user plugging in. Six former campaign officials said that the "key to keeping Trump's Twitter habit under control" was "to ensure that his personal media consumption include[d] a steady stream of praise" (Hananoki, 2017). When there was no positive reinforcement to be found, "staff would turn to friendly outlets to drum some up…using alternative media like Breitbart, Washington Examiner, Fox News, Infowars and the Daily Caller to show Trump positive coverage" (Hananoki, 2017). While Trump was effectively validated and affectively stroked by the aggregation of such admiration from online sources, this process was meant to hinder, not further, his voice on social media. Instead of feeding a technical system such as communicative capitalism, this online curation technique networked paranoia as affective capital offline to interrupt it. The only "real" news was political endorsement, such that paranoia intensified through the bodily networking of information without knowledge. There is no man in this machine or subject of this network, only the circulation of paranoia as social media.

People and machines have demonstrated that they cannot be as trusted as Zuckerberg thinks when it comes to caring about, and sharing, accurate news. In the aftermath of the 2016 election and criticism for Facebook's role in spreading misinformation, the company evaluated its options for determining real from fake news. These possibilities included editing by trained professionals before information enters the news stream, crowdsourced vetting to democratize the process of evaluation, and algorithmic vetting, which was the technique that Facebook initially preferred. However, this system failed to identify and downgrade hoaxes or distinguish satire from real stories, proliferating fake news soon after it was implemented (Woolf, 2016).

Even when Facebook used a human fact-checking system, it failed. When a Newport Buzz article was flagged as possible fake news, traffic to the story accelerated (Levin, 2017). Conservatives took the warning as a sign that news important to them was about to be censored, so they began to share the story that falsely claimed hundreds of thousands of Irish people were brought to the United States as slaves (Levin, 2017). Jestin Coler, a writer known for the fake news that he published in 2016, said that it was difficult to imagine this system effectively working. "These stories are like flash grenades," he stated, "they go off and explode for a day" (Levin, 2017). Such commentary signals the affective value of fake news, as it inflames and networks paranoia without belief.

On December 5, 2015, Trump appeared on Infowars for a mutually congratulatory meeting during which the future president commented on Jones' "amazing reputation" and told him, "I will not let you down." During his campaign, Trump showed his admiration for Jones' media savvy by amplifying his conspiracies. Infowars marketed the "Hillary for Prison" T-shirts spied so often on Trump's campaign trail, where "Lock Her Up" became a rally cry (Hananoki, 2017). Trump capitalized on an Infowars headline that announced "Three Million Votes in Presidential Election Cast By Illegal Aliens" to claim that he would have won the popular vote if those ballots were disqualified (Hananoki, 2017). He has also retweeted Infowars fake news reports, including the fallacy that "thousands" of Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the 9/11 attacks in 2015 (Hananoki, 2017).

Media coverage of national tragedies such as the attacks on 9/11 serve to promote not only conspiracy theories by the likes of Jones, but also the notion that the United States is exceptional: the only free nation equipped to combat evil during an endless war on terror and prolonged end times on Earth. Over the years, Jones has used traumatic events and national tragedies to spin conspiracy theories. He calls these terrorist acts "false flag" attacks staged by the government to curtail citizens' freedom: the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing; the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing; the 2015 San Bernadino shooting; and the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre, which Jones proclaimed a hoax fabricated by gun control advocates. The parents of the children murdered continue to endure harassment over Jones' declaration that, rather than real losses, their children were "crisis actors" playing roles. Jones used a similar narrative with relation to the violence in Charlottesville: one Infowars video headline declared, "Virginia Riots Staged To Bring In Martial Law, Ban Conservative Gatherings"

(Jones, 2017). In a later "report," he would claim that Ku Klux Klan demonstrators, in his experience, are actually Jewish actors (Dicker, 2017).

Jones has also proliferated conspiracies concerning the "feminization of men," such as chemicals in drinking water that can change the sex of babies in utero (Miller, 2016). This Infowars story suggested that filtering water as much as possible was necessary to defend against this feminizing contaminate. Conveniently, on the Infowars website, Jones' audience can buy the "Alexpure Pro Water Filtration System" for a mere $147.75, nearly 12 times the price of the cheapest Brita water filter. To further combat feminization, men can purchase Caveman True Paleo Formula, a "bone broth" that is advertised as "A Return to Ancient Traditions and Practices" when "man roamed the Earth in a constant state of hunting and being hunted."[1]

This masculinst paranoia furthers Islamophobia in the "church militant" strain of Catholicism proffered by former White House Chief Strategist and Executive Chairman of Breitbart news Stephen Bannon, who calls on Christians to battle against a "new barbarity" of "Islamic fascism" (Freedman, 2016). In turn, Christians are told that "their faith is the most persecuted" in the world by Vice President Mike Pence (Blumberg, 2017). Concurrently, the conviction that Christians are under assault in America is validated by President Trump, who calls them "targeted, bullied [and] silenced" (Blumberg, 2017). This claim is reflected in state policy, such as an executive order on religious liberty aimed to increase the political influence of churches while preserving their tax-exempt status, and proposed travel restrictions on refugees that privileged Christians over Muslims.

Wendy Chun (2006) writes:

> Fiber-optic networks spread the light and conflate message with medium, so that we no longer see the light through our glass tubes. What we do see via, if not through them, seems delusional and hallucinatory, supposedly consensually so. Although we do not mistake personal hallucination for reality, developers hope that one day everyone, not just paranoid schizophrenics, will be unable to distinguish between pictured humans and real ones. (Chun, 2006, p. 299).

Perhaps Welch's gunfire is evidence of the developers' success. Facebook increasingly evaluates and rewards users based on the ambient metrics of authenticity (Phnaeh, 2017). Negative feedback, such as people unliking your page or hiding your posts, qualifies for authenticity demerits. Positive feedback, in the form of comments, likes, or reactions (via emoji), earn authenticity points (Ramondo, 2017). The reactions are more heavily weighted than likes, presumably because they require more time and demonstrate further engagement, but this interactive approach to registering individual mood also modulates and measures social sentiment, signaling a distinct visceral value in the networking process.

Despite ovations to the contrary by Zuckerberg, the goal of Facebook is not to give every person a voice, but to rank voices based on algorithms. The agency panic generated in this instance is not one organized through logics of self-protection, but human exceptionalism. Meanwhile, Trump's Twitter feed is a daily source of news

for people who have no interest in following him on social media. His tweets litter *New York Times* articles online, for example, where facts used to be. Readers of the "mainstream" or "liberal" media are regularly confronted by the president's tweets, which are often outrageous and threatening in tone and content, feeding spectacle and amplifying terror.[2] This evidence suggests that, rather than countering violent extremism by focusing on violent ideologies, counterterrorism efforts would be better served by attuning to violent intensities.

In June 2017, researchers from the Facebook AI Research Lab discovered that chatbots, or "dialogue agents," were creating their own language. The bots queered scripted norms and spoke on their own terms. Using machine-learning algorithms, the dialogue agents strengthened their conversational skills to become what developers called "incredibly crafty negotiators" ("Indo-Asian News Service," 2017). Conspiracy theories proliferate online due to an agency panic that is built into the social process of human and nonhuman communication. Facebook is not the democratic public square that Zuckerberg imagines; nor does the Internet simply thrive on control and the illusion of freedom to circulate affect in support of capitalism. Instead of thinking of these technologies as systems or tools, we need to consider them affective networking processes that demand vulnerability.

Notes

1 Infowars Store, *Infowars*, August 18, 2017, https://www.infowarsstore.com/caveman-paleo-formula.html.

2 For example, this news article on Trump's proposed banning of transgender people in the military, "Trump Says Transgender People Will Not Be Allowed In the Military" (Davis & Cooper, 2017), or news coverage of verbal threats and insults traded with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un that suggest President Trump is ready and willing to engage in a nuclear war

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