Social Media Narratives as Political Fan Fiction in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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This text was automatically generated on 19 April 2019.

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Imagine that you're standing in a multiplex, holding a ticket for either of two movies that are about to start at the same time. The first is a plodding, predictable flick you've sat through twice before and didn't like. The second is a film that every reviewer agrees is one of the worst things to ever hit the screen, but you haven't seen it, and there's at least a chance they'll turn out to be wrong, because they're wrong about everything all the time. How many of us are going to take our chances on the second movie?[i]

1. Introduction

1   With these words, Matt Bei of *Yahoo News* closed out the election season, as the United States chose to go with the second movie, albeit not decisively—and, some would say, on a technicality. He reiterated a point he had made previously during the primaries: that the prevalent mood of the election was slanted toward discarding the safe and boring in favor of excitement and even danger.[ii] He not only invoked this often-repeated characterization of 2016, but also likened the entire electoral process to an affair of entertainment. It was portrayed as a popular cultural show to be consumed, rather than an event that could change the course of the country.

2   There is nothing particularly new about the idea of elections as affairs of performance and narrative. It is a well-worn thought, supported by research, that they involve selling a story to the voting audience. This is a story of the country, the candidate, and of the policies, issues, and ideologies they represent.[iii] As Molly Andrews puts it, "politics is nothing if not a stage for competing stories to be told about the same phenomena."[iv] Therefore, what set the 2016 electoral season apart the most was not the presence of narratives, but rather the extent to which they were distributed, performed, and even shaped within social media.[v] If the election was indeed a movie, then social media served

as an increasingly important site where it was produced and acted out, as well as received, evaluated, and transformed by the users.

3   In this article, I will present an argument about the entanglement between social media and the electoral narratives of the 2016 election. I approach social media as a site in which people came together in a struggle to make sense of what the election was about and what its prevalent narratives were.[vi] Ultimately, I see it as a system of communication governed by what Ulrike Klinger and Jakob Svensson have called "network media logic," which allows one to account for its particularities without falling into determinist assumptions of technology shaping communication as such or of communication being freed of all technological and commercial constraints.[vii] I see it as part of a hybrid media system, theorized by Andrew Chadwick, where several different types of media, each with their own operational logics, coexist and interact.[viii] Approaching social media in this way makes it possible to account for its societal/cultural dimensions, as well as its technological and commercial aspects, without assigning one dominance over others. In adopting this approach, it is not in my interest to argue one way or another about the "influence" that social media may have had on the election or its results. Not only is such an effect difficult to demonstrate, it also adds undue distance between the two. As Simon Lindgren and others have argued, it is increasingly problematic to sustain a division between being "online" and "offline," with virtuality being "an inescapable dimension of sociality."[ix] Therefore, to separate activity in social media into a detached sphere of existence whose impact on the "real" we must constantly demonstrate appears to miss the point.

4   Focusing on the ways in which matters of time and varying temporalities became involved in electoral narratives online, I see narratives as ways of assigning significance to specific events by weaving them together into a cohesive sequence in service of a larger sense of story.[x] In politics, they are the ways in which individuals make sense of what is happening and by which they situate themselves within larger societal patterns.[xi] Seeing how this involves connecting the past to the present with a looming sense of a future, time—already since the work of Paul Ricœur[xii]—has been an integral element.[xiii] Mark Currie has emphasized the need to understand narratives not simply as ways of creating connections between past events in order to plot our path to the present, but also as being intricately tied to the anticipation of an envisioned future. Currie describes anticipation as "a mode of being which experiences the present as the object of future memory."[xiv] While Currie's focus is on fictional narratives, the principle applies to politics as well, as politicians invite potential voters to see themselves as part of a movement that will alter the course of history itself. As such, narratives can be seen as a form of "worldmaking" by which disparate events are brought together into a cohesive story-world through the application of performative power.[xv]

5   In looking at how these narratives are created, shared, and shaped online, I employ an idea presented by Jason Wilson, who suggests that one way of approaching political engagement online is to see it as a form of fandom or even the act of writing fan fiction.[xvi] Seeing how Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse have described fan fiction as being perpetually in progress and forever changing (rather than authored top-down into a state of completeness), this approach allows me to view social media as a site where narratives are stories in process of being created, as vast numbers of users were constantly taking the materials produced by the candidates and by other media entities (the "canon" in this mode of production) and weaving them into evolving narrative frameworks.[xvii] In a

manner reminiscent of crossover fan fiction where different fictive universes are brought together, the political events and actors of the 2016 election were placed into new character positions and narrative conventions, drawn particularly from popular culture, which served as a secondary repository of "canon" imagery, in order to facilitate a certain understanding of the campaign and its significance. The transformative nature of this practice allowed users to easily discard those elements they found unfavorable in their candidate and focus on those that supported the story being built. I therefore view fan fiction primarily as a mode of production, the mechanisms of which can be used to examine the workings of politics in social media. But before setting off to examine the key candidates through the presented framework of inquiry, I need to delve a bit further into the role of imagination in the formation of narratives in the 2016 election.

2. From Alternative Realities to Narrative Imagination

6   "How can we still be speaking of 'facts' when they no longer provide us with a reality that we agree on?"[xviii] asked William Davies in his August 2016 column for the *New York Times.* With this, he contributed to the debate on whether the success of Donald Trump meant that we had moved toward a "post-truth" era where truth no longer matters. Davies's idea was that U.S. society had lost a collective, cohesive sense of a shared reality due to social media providing an uninhibited deluge of facts (both real and falsified), which people were able to pick and choose from in creating those stories and versions of "the real" with which they felt most comfortable.

7   As with most things dubbed as "new," there are definite grounds to argue whether "post-truth" is simply a new word for an old phenomenon. The presence of lies in politics has never been a rarity, as remarked on by Hannah Arendt in 1967: "No one has ever doubted that truth and politics are on rather bad terms with each other, and no one, as far as I know, has ever counted truthfulness among the political virtues."[xix] Politics has always involved selling an idea not by its merits, but rather the story that gets spun around it.[xx] Therefore, the particularity of the 2016 election lay in how stories that previously would have been told in spatially contained settings to limited audiences could now find resonance within online communities across the country. Unlike systems operating under "mass media logic"—a term used by Klinger and Svensson to describe media where content is produced by professionals, filtered by gatekeepers, and consumed in spatially and temporally confined settings[xxi]—network media allowed competing stories of the same phenomenon to be produced at will and circulated freely, in a variety of narrative configurations, which campaigns and professional pundits could only attempt to seize or influence. The alternate "realities" described by Davies suggest a prevalence of narrative formations so distinctly different that they could no longer find any resonance with one another, essentially having produced fan fictive narrative worlds with wildly contradictory framing for the events that helped produce them.

8   In everyday parlance, to identify something as a "narrative" is to reveal it as manufactured. The word implies leaving out facts which might have worked to disrupt the proposed understanding while privileging or indeed fabricating others to support it. In my approach, however, narratives are ubiquitous in our daily lives and not by definition "false" (or "true"). They are instead attempts to make sense of things by imposing a structure on sequences of events.[xxii] As Barbara Czarniawska points out, there are no structural differences between fictional and factual narratives; this, she argues,

can be seen as a source of the power they hold.[xxiii] Politically, individuals position themselves by relating their personal narratives of "how the world works, how they explain the engines of political change, and the role they see themselves [in]" toward the "larger cluster of national stories, within which individuals position themselves, explicitly or otherwise."[xxiv] Rather than a mode of disinformation, narratives are therefore a "mode of knowing."[xxv] In social media, the performative function of narratives is emphasized as individuals add their voices to its evolving, dialectic space. By subscribing to specific stories, users become participants in certain networked communities.[xxvi] As social media communication is often fractured and limited, for example, by constraints of the platforms, what we find are not necessarily full narratives in a traditional sense, but rather allusions to such. Therefore, users in essence *invoke* narratives rather than construct them per se.

9   In describing what she calls "the global imagination," Shani Orgad has illustrated the role that media representations have in feeding us material on which our imagination operates. She sees that this global imagination is "enabled through, cultivated by, and emerges via an ongoing process of symbolic construction of the real and the possible in image and narrative."[xxvii] I see networked social media as a primary site for this kind of cultivation. In this, I follow the lead of Ingrid Hotz-Davies and others, who have theorized that the Internet "is a mirror whose image is an imagined and fabricated one, a conglomerate of stories of how and what we fantasize."[xxviii] In following the different forms of political fan fiction circulating around the 2016 election, one can thus gain a sense of the differing strands of fantastic imagining taking place around the political struggle. Indeed, the relationship between reality and its imagined possibilities forms the core political narratives in general. According to Molly Andrews, "political narratives engage the imagination, not only in constructing stories about the past and the present, but in helping in articulating a vision of an alternative world."[xxix] These alternative worlds are essential for campaigns to differentiate their message from those of their rivals and for creating narratives that "matter." As Jan Hanska has argued, successful political narratives require gravitas and a sense of high stakes.[xxx] In his study of Barack Obama's 2008 campaign, Jeffrey Alexander has called this the "hinge of history":

> To become a hero, one must establish great and urgent necessity. A hinge is created in history and the candidate inserted into that break. Heroes are constructed by shoehorning a political actor into world-historical time. It's about narrating time, about building a new temporality that is radically discontinuous, and about weighting the imminent break with immense significance. The hero's opponent is so dangerous that electing that person will plunge the nation into apocalypse.[xxxi]

10   To construct this hinge, one needs to successfully appeal to the imaginations of the public and use this to create a distinct sense of temporality that spans from the past through the present to the future. This is what Andrews refers to when she describes imagination as the bridge between "the real" and the "not-yet-real."[xxxii] It is the means by which we are able to extrapolate from our current, daily reality an alternative vision that can be accomplished through the political choices presented by the candidates. Yet she also points out that political narratives need to have certain "landmarks" one can recognize, or else they appear too bizarre and foreign.[xxxiii] Social media can serve as a site for struggle over these landmarks, as new configurations are constructed and legitimized while others are articulated as foreign.

3. Seizing Time and Performing Narratives

11   When attempting to assess the level to which Twitter engagement could be used to measure electoral success in the 2012 Republican primaries, Dhiraj Murthy discovered that certain candidates appeared more resistant than others to fluctuations in their Twitter popularity, regardless of their electoral success. From this he drew the conclusion that their ability to develop a "buzz" online might be the result of "a certain level of Twitter savvy or 'Twitter capital,'" which he likened to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of "cultural capital."[xxxiv] Amanda Hess of *Slate* made a similar point in December 2015, when she noted that while Hillary Clinton's social media team was working hard to appeal to millennials by adopting a playful and trendy vocabulary, her rival Bernie Sanders succeeded in having his fans do all the work, creating a fandom-like engagement culture online while keeping his own Twitter feed largely centered on the issues.[xxxv]

12   Having examined the social media strategies of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in the 2012 election, Daniel Kreiss has argued that the performative application of power online and a keen sense of timing were essential to the success of Obama's social media campaign.[xxxvi] While Clinton's social media strategy struggled early on, it later became much more effective, particularly on this front of "seizing the moment."[xxxvii] The best example of this is no doubt the most retweeted tweet of the election. In response to Donald Trump's disparaging tweet about Barack Obama's endorsement of Hillary Clinton in June 2016, her account tweeted to Donald Trump: "Delete your account."[xxxviii] The post was successful and impeccably timed, firing back within minutes of Donald Trump's original tweet. It displayed the kind of wit and playfulness that permeates social media while simultaneously playing on Donald Trump's widely criticized habits of Twitter use. [xxxix]

13   In contrast, Trump's response came almost two hours later and did not receive nearly the traction: "How long did it take your staff of 823 people to think that up—and where are your 33,000 emails that you deleted?"[xl] While not as well in tune with the ebb and flow of social media, Trump's tweet also held a resonant message. Despite the work done by Clinton's social media team, the appearance of inauthenticity never ceased to be an issue for her. She lacked "Twitter capital," which appeared to work much in the same vein as the more general performativity of political narratives described by Jeffrey Alexander: the strings had to remain out of sight for the performance to work.[xli] While the social media excitement around Bernie Sanders had the appearance of being natural and spontaneous, Clinton appeared more manufactured, an image further amplified by initiatives such as the super PAC "Correct the Record." This was a self-styled "rapid response operation," which in April 2016 announced it would spend a million dollars to "engage in online messaging both for Secretary Clinton and to push back against attackers on social media."[xlii] The existence of such a super PAC gave legitimacy to doubts around the motivations of each fervent online Clinton supporter.[xliii] Essentially, looking at social media narratives through the framework of fan fiction production, one can argue that having "social media capital" served to reinforce the authored, top-down interpretations of political events (the purported "canon"), while the lack of such eroded the credibility of certain authorial positions and thus made the political story more susceptible to being overrun by fan fictive interpretations.

4. History and Heroism in the Making of the "Canon"

14   Much like fostering social media engagement, the establishing of certain narratives therefore takes more effort (or "capital") than others, and eventual success is determined by a complex set of interrelations between the narrative and its social context.[xliv] At certain times, specific stories gain more resonance than others. Matt Bei's aforementioned metaphor about the election as a choice between two different movies—one we have seen and deemed boring, the other said to be horrible and yet fresh to our eyes—draws on this idea. In narrative politics, the creation of a rupture in the progression of history helps in formulating a resonant story around the campaign. The candidates with the most social media buzz (whether negative or positive)—Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders[xlv]—were also the candidates who most effectively represented such a rupture. Likewise, according to the research conducted and published by the TrackMaven marketing analytics firm, the most engaging social media content by the Clinton team were the posts that emphasized her campaign's historical significance.[xlvi]

15   For a political narrative to function, one needs to articulate each of the three steps: the past, the present, and the future. For Clinton in particular, each step had inherent problems that she had to overcome. On a national level, she was the representative of the status quo, making any break with the Obama administration inherently difficult. Clinton's early attempts at leveraging such a break with her potential to be the first female president largely proved ineffectual, particularly among young, white women.[xlvii] This resembled the issue John McCain faced in 2008, when his status as the "warrior candidate" proved to be the wrong type of hero for a war-weary country facing an economic downturn.[xlviii] On a more personal level, Clinton faced the issue of being a highly public figure, which—while positive in terms of name recognition—meant her past was filled with prior characterizations (and character attacks) by political opponents and pundits alike, effectively hindering her ability to assume new narrative positions.[xlix] She faced similar issues in 2008, when her attempts at rewriting her public character became an often-repeated media narrative in itself.[l]

16   According to Jeffrey C. Alexander, to turn themselves into heroes politicians must "create meaning by looking back to the past from the present and by projecting the plot's next act into the future, all at the same time. In their earlier lives, heroes were tested and suffered, usually on behalf of something greater than themselves. In the present, however, their suffering and their causes will be redeemed."[li] This sort of biographic narrativity has been very prominent in political campaigns. By telling stories, politicians have rooted themselves in historical time and turned themselves into protagonists in a tale. However, the 2016 election proved different, particularly in regards to the two candidates most buoyed by their social media buzz: Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders. Both their campaigns, especially in social media, operated on a very different sense of narrative time, and both are excellent targets for analysis that sees political engagement online through the lenses of fandom and fan fiction.

17   As Michael Kruse of *Politico* argued in July 2015, Bernie Sanders's personal history had an unusual role in his campaign. The candidate consistently refused to talk about himself, choosing instead to address the political issues driving his campaign. This is why Kruse called him "the known unknown": someone whose presence was more about his actions, both in the present and the past, than about his persona.[lii] This sense of an uncomplicated

history greatly contributed to his image, especially among his supporters. As Nathan Heller of the *New Yorker* estimated in August 2015, Sanders's supporters were drawn to his stability: one could easily project his present-day character onto history, finding largely the same man with the same ideas.[liii] Social media reinforced this point, as a number of memes showed Sanders "then and now," side by side or in sequence, exhibiting the same opinions and the same political rhetoric across time.[liv] His character was portrayed as static, unchanging, and thus unyielding. This contrasted with videos and memes which drew attention to changes in Hillary Clinton's character, such as the viral YouTube hit, "Hillary Clinton lying for 13 minutes straight."[lv] The video not only highlighted changes in Clinton's political stances, but also emphasized the idea of rupture in her personal narrative. Instead of giving her the benefit of biographical history, where changes occur over time, the video portrayed Clinton as someone who formulated her character entirely within the present, in line with what she felt to be popular at the time. These sorts of mobilizations of the historic past are an elementary part of a hybrid media system, as old media clips become archived online and thus can be transformed and used in the creation of new narrative formations.[lvi] Thus, they form a ready-made repository for contesting the validity of specific narratives, whether these are authored by the official campaigns, representatives of the mass media system, or by average users in their more fan fictive accounts.

18   However, Bernie Sanders's characterization likewise contained a tension that would manifest in different interpretations of his overarching political story. This tension was deftly illustrated by Edward-Isaac Dovere and Gabriel Debenedetti of *Politico*, who described the campaign in its final days as split between those staff members who blamed Sanders's more aggressive maneuvers for the campaign's ultimate failure and those aides who felt that they had exhibited too much restraint. Dovere and Debenedetti described Sanders as "convinced... that he's realizing his lifelong dream of being the catalyst for remaking American politics."[lvii] Continuing their argument, Jack Shafer saw the differentiating factor between "the egomania" of Sanders and the more traditional candidates as being "his revolutionary heritage. When Sanders says 'the struggle continues,' his time frame is not the campaign season, it is perpetuity."[lviii] What Sanders's campaign's narratives drew from was a sense that it existed in the service of history, with Sanders positioning himself as the catalyst for a shift toward a new age. However, for his supporters it was often the appearance of lacking any personal motivations that made him the most endearing. For them, there was a quality to Sanders's campaign in which he did not appear motivated by internal desires, but by the momentum of a historic shift which demands action, with his being an almost replaceable part of the equation— something that Nathan Heller called Sanders's "cause-and-direct-effect rationale for stepping in."[lix]

19   Much of Sanders's heroic narrative was not performed as much by him as by people participating in the numerous online initiatives around him. In traditional accounts of fan fiction as a creative practice, it has been the prevalent idea that fan fiction writers "fill in the gaps" in existing universes or "elaborate upon and extend the narratives and characters of a world."[lx] Natalia Samutina has expanded on this by emphasizing fan fictive practices that do not simply add to a world, but radically transform it.[lxi]

20   For Bernie Sanders, Twitter accounts such as @BernieWanCanobi or @PoliticoPotter engaged in crossover-style narrating of the political campaign by using references to Star Wars and Harry Potter, respectively, to add layers of mythos around their preferred

candidate. In both cases, Sanders was depicted as the mentor character (Obi-Wan Kenobi or Dumbledore), a hero-maker archetype whose primary function was to guide and empower the actual hero of the tale—who, in this instance, were his supporters. Time was integral to such depictions, as these mentors represented a bygone era and often had to pass away in order for the hero to excel. Nathan Heller likewise noted that one of the alluring aspects of Sanders's candidacy was that he appeared "out of place," effectively transcending history and serving as a conduit between the "corrupted" present and the era of revolutionary optimism lost to time that was the 1960s.[lxii] Therefore, to his supporters Bernie Sanders appeared as a candidate of both the past and the future, empowering them in their fight against the present.

21   Meanwhile, accounts such as @SassySenSanders presented another side of political fan fiction. They imagined alternative versions of their preferred candidate, in this instance one capable of delivering snappy comebacks and pointed responses, which many Sanders supporters—especially online—were frustrated not to see coming from their candidate. In a sense, the Sanders campaign had succeeded so well in articulating their "hinge of history" that his supporters questioned why he refused to take a stronger stance against his political opponents. For example, in their analysis of the Democratic primary debates, the panelists of the progressive online news and commentary network *The Young Turks* (*TYT*) would regularly lament on Sanders not taking as aggressive a stance as they would have liked.[lxiii]

22   It is worth examining one instance where this changed. In the Univision Miami debate, Sanders delivered a very effective line, which turned out to be the most tweeted of the night. In reference to a recent comment by Goldman Sachs CEO Lloyd Blankfein about the potential dangers of his candidacy, Sanders said, "I am dangerous... for Wall Street."[lxiv] The reaction of the *TYT* panel on the debate livestream is noteworthy in itself, as the commentators exploded in wild cheering at the delivery of the line. *TYT*'s owner Cenk Uygur yelled repeatedly, "Goddamn right you are!" until shouting: "I am the danger! I am the danger! I am the one who knocks!"[lxv] The video not only shows the sports-like reaction of the panel, but displays narrative layering occurring in real time. Uygur's first reaction was to affirm the one-liner. To him, it represented Sanders stepping up his game, taking the step that Uygur had argued he should, and thus finally assuming the mantle his fans had been eager to bestow upon him. What immediately followed was a connotative connection of the line with one of the most iconic scenes in the TV series *Breaking Bad*, where Walter White affirms his moral and narrative transformation by telling a story about a man opening the door and getting shot. His line, "I am the one who knocks!" signifies the transformation of the character from victim to perpetrator, from a mild-mannered chemistry teacher to the drug-lord Heisenberg.[lxvi]

23   #HeisenBern became a Twitter hashtag, a recurring meme, and a T-shirt design. While it might be tempting to dismiss this as mere pop-cultural play without deeper meaning, one cannot help but reflect at the ease with which the role of Walter White—a deeply flawed anti-hero who over the course of the series sheds even the last vestiges of morality and decency as part of his transformation—was ascribed to Bernie Sanders, a candidate for whom a major part of his allure had been the appearance of historic stability and purity, innocence, and standing as the "last honest man in politics."[lxvii] There was thus a fundamental tension in Sanders's narrative between the rhetoric of unity/unification and that of revolution. One can read Sanders's campaign as a constant struggle between the ego and the id, with social media serving as a site of fantastic envisioning of a Bernie

Sanders ruled by the latter. At the Democratic National Convention, these two versions of Bernie Sanders clashed, as he was booed by his own supporters upon delivering his endorsement of Hillary Clinton for president.[lxviii] For them, this was an act of betrayal against the fan fictive narrative in which they had become so deeply invested, with Sanders ultimately "selling out" their rebellion and joining the evil empire.

5. Hybrid Temporalities of Donald Trump

24   Meanwhile, for Donald Trump, one of the key elements in helping build his "social media capital" was the sense of immediacy which permeated his social media presence. In contrast to Clinton, whose social media outlets were carefully strategized and coordinated, as pointed out by multiple experts over the course of the election,[lxix] Trump's tweets appeared off the cuff and instantaneous, a point that was reinforced by stories such as the *Washington Post*'s data analysis of tweets written by Trump himself versus his staff, which showed notable differences between the two.[lxx] The contrast between the two approaches and the value they carried for their respective supporters is well illustrated by an exchange between two Twitter users, as part of a comment chain responding to Donald Trump's previously mentioned tweet on Clinton's sizeable social media team:

> User1: '@realDonaldTrump it's not often that I say this, but lol u mad'
> User2: '@User1 @realDonaldTrump at least he writes his tweets lol'
> User1: '@User2 @realDonaldTrump 'at least he writes [remarkably ignorant] tweets [that almost anyone would be ashamed to have written] lol"
> User2: '@User1 @realDonaldTrump at least he writes [not an argument] tweets [not an argument] lol'
> User1: '@User2 'at least he is the author of his woeful opinions' is kinda a textbook bad argument though honestly'
> User2: '@User1 you gave two opinions, I gave facts.'[lxxi]

25   The argument embodies key elements of the 2016 election. The Clinton supporter (User1) cared more about the message than the messenger. Importance was placed on what was said rather than the act of saying itself. The Trump supporter, meanwhile, stripped the message away as entirely meaningless. It did not matter what Trump said, so long as something was being said and it was Trump who was saying it. This was the only fact that mattered, and anything else was "just" opinion. The exchange echoes the theory posited by Salena Zito of *The Atlantic* and commonly circulated across media: "The press take [Trump] literally, but not seriously; his supporters take him seriously, but not literally." [lxxii] For his supporters, therefore, Donald Trump's character and narrative were effectively elastic, freed of constraints placed upon them by both meaning and history, and flexible enough to be placed into narrative formations where he did not fit based on his persona and habitus alone. Being capable of simultaneously exhibiting wildly contradictory understandings of reality, he thus became a vessel in which his supporters could invest their narrative hopes.

26   In a way, one of the more intriguing explanations for this elasticity was already presented in September 2015 by Judd Legum of *ThinkProgress*, who discovered insight in the work of the literary theorist Roland Barthes. He drew on Barthes's essay on the spectacle of wrestling, which focused on the type of choreographed, dramatized wrestling that in the U.S. eventually culminated in the WWE and other professional wrestling organizations, with which Donald Trump himself has also been involved. Legum saw Donald Trump as a

show wrestler, performing his moves against opponents involved in a different type of contest and thus unable to effectively counter his assault.[lxxiii] For Barthes, this kind of wrestling stood entirely apart from other types of combat sports, particularly in its relentless focus on the spectacle and on remaining locked in a perpetual state of the present, with no history and no future. Unlike in a story, where disparate moments in time web together to form a line across history, with a past and a present and an anticipation of a future, in Barthes's analysis of wrestling, each moment contains within itself all passions and meaning without any need to draw connections or lines to other expressions. For the spectator, what mattered was to "abolish all motives and consequences."[lxxiv] Much like with the Trump supporter quoted above, the raw action itself—the act of acting—counted more than its ramifications or motivations.

27   For Donald Trump's campaign, Twitter became a place of real, visceral action. He transcended the binary division between reality and virtuality, where online speech is depicted as fundamentally different from and secondary to face-to-face communication.[lxxv] Social media became a site where Trump operated in the immediacy of the present, unbound by the conventionalities of traditional campaigning. The logic of Trump's candidacy can therefore be best described by Andrew Chadwick's definition of the ontology of hybridity: "Hybridity is inevitably associated with flux, in-betweenness, the interstitial and the liminal. It is about being out of sync with a familiar past and a half-grasped future."[lxxvi] This "out-of-syncness" depicts Trump's character very well, as he appeared to operate unburdened by his past actions and statements, with each "candidacy-ending" scandal fading away with little effect.[lxxvii] The quickened temporal pace of the network media logic and the hybrid media system appeared to contribute toward this, as Trump was able to continue his performance at an erratic speed, uninhibited by the conventional temporal cycles of political campaigning, as exemplified by his habit of late-night tweeting.[lxxviii] Misha Kavka and Amy West have also identified this manner of temporality as the determinant temporal mode of reality television, the logic of which can be seen to permeate much of Trump's campaign due to his own past in the television genre.[lxxix] Reality television, they argue, is a genre wrapped in an unending sequence of consecutive moments, stripped of a sense of time invested with history. It is thus a form of programming that creates both immediacy and intimacy, continuously playing out a "perpetual now."[lxxx] In a similar fashion, Aaron J. Petten has examined the narrative logic of televised professional wrestling and found it most closely resembling a soap opera. Instead of having an overarching, larger narrative conflict, the story pattern contains multiple, simultaneous, and mutually independent conflicts, operating in a cyclical, seamless manner kept fresh by a steady stream of twists. Each immediate conflict serves as "only a marker, another segment, in the ongoing and open narrative continuum of wrestling's seamless history."[lxxxi] Accordingly, Donald Trump used his Twitter account to perpetuate an endless cycle of conflicts with his opponents.

28   In Petten's account of wrestling, the goal of the programming is to produce a "multiform narrative structure" in which each spectator is able to find certain narratives to engage with while being free to discard others.[lxxxii] For Trump, this sheer multitude of often mutually conflicting "canons" perpetuated and shared through social media invited his followers to negotiate their standing within this plurality of conflicts, creating in the process their own, competing depictions of their candidate. A prevalent example of this was his repeated characterization by his fans as an "alpha," in opposition to the "beta male" status of his opponents. This type of imagery was deployed, for example, in the

YouTube video "Donald Trump: The return of the alpha male," which begins with clips of attacks against Trump by his opponents before culminating with swelling music and announcements of his primary victories and clips of his rivals suspending their campaigns.[lxxxiii] In an article in the *Washington Post*, Melissa Deckman characterized this "alpha male" appeal as one of the primary reasons why Trump's supporters continued to side with him throughout the many upheavals of the election.[lxxxiv] This masculine yearning can also be seen at work across social media in 2016 in the spread of the pejorative "cuck" as the go-to insult, aimed initially at his conservative rivals (in its longer form, "cuckservative") but eventually other political rivals as well. The phrase refers to cuckold pornography, where the typically white, submissive husband watches in humiliation as his wife engages in sexual activity with a more virile, often African American male.[lxxxv] The word "cuck" alone therefore contains an entire narrative within it, exhibiting a larger understanding of a world in which both women and minorities have broken loose and are together taking advantage of the white man.

29   As part of the transformative process by which Donald Trump was assigned the identity of an "alpha male," he became involved in other narrative formations as well. His self-portrayal as the "I alone can fix it" hero invited his supporters to imagine him as the cowboy riding into the town of Washington, D.C. to clean it of its corruption.[lxxxvi] According to Robert B. Morris, integral elements of this kind of cowboy mythos have included the lifting of the "I" into a position of ultimate good in a display of masculine individualism and the struggle against a threatening wilderness. This characterization of cowboy is minimally invested in the world he comes to inhabit, as he "rides into town as a mysterious loner and after his adventure is complete, he disappears off into the sunset alone as before."[lxxxvii] The cowboy himself has merely the faintest figment of history and future, as what matters to his narrative is the change he can enact in the present. For Trump's supporters, his precise biographical history likewise appeared insignificant next to the faint figment of history being exhibited by his present self-claimed status as a billionaire (and thus successful) businessman. In Trump's social media, the change he was to enact was represented best by the hashtag #DrainTheSwamp, a political slogan going back to Ronald Reagan (and beyond).[lxxxviii] In a temporal sense, this simple slogan carries with it the sense of a muddied and corrupt past, the dire state of the present demanding immediate action, and the anticipation of a future in which the candidate has ridden into town and fixed everything. The way in which Donald Trump was imbued with the qualities of "alpha male" or "cowboy" (or, for instance, "lion")[lxxxix] involved the transformative properties of fan fiction, by which certain traits are ascribed to characters who might not exhibit them in other narrative contexts. As such, these characterizations of Trump served to *exhibit* the described narratives rather than *embody* them, the latter more readily assuming full conformation to the traits of the narrative and the former suggesting a more loose and even playful relationship, where certain facets of both the narrative conventions involved and Trump himself could more easily be discarded in favor of the faint idea of the narrative.

30   Trump himself employed this manner of narrativization by employing labels and insults against his political foes in order to overwhelm their narratives with his own. Describing Marco Rubio as "Little Marco," Ted Cruz as "Lyin' Ted," and Jeb Bush as "Low Energy Jeb," Trump assigned to them roles similar to ones found in professional wrestling, effectively limiting their narrative maneuvering by turning them into one-dimensional side-characters in his own story. Of these, "Crooked Hillary" stood apart as most clearly being

a title of the villain of the story, with the "crookedness" emphasizing not only the characteristics of corruption and criminal misgivings pushed by the Trump campaign, but also physical deformity. The permeation of this characterization can be gleaned through a June 2016 HuffPost/YouGov poll which asked the participants to describe Clinton and Trump with adjectives of their choosing. While the five top words for both candidates had negative connotations, Clinton's were more directly villainous (liar/lying, dishonest, crook/crooked, untrustworthy, and criminal). In contrast, Trump's (arrogant, racist, ass/asshole, idiot/idiotic, loud/loudmouth) were—with the very strong exception of "racist"—the kinds of attributes one could much more easily also ascribe to a flawed protagonist or a successful contestant in a reality television series.[xc]

6. Conclusions

31   Arguing that the allure of Donald Trump might have to do with the success of anti-hero narratives in contemporary popular culture, Julian Zelizer wrote that, "Americans no longer expect virtuous protagonists. For almost two decades, Americans have been tuning in to cheer on the antihero on television, on acclaimed series from 'The Sopranos' to 'Breaking Bad' – and dozens more. We watch characters who do whatever is necessary to make things happen."[xci] Whether Donald Trump appeared as a regular hero or an anti-hero to his supporters likely varied on the extent to which they found his rhetoric and actions morally questionable. Nonetheless, there was a transgressiveness to his allure that appeared more at home in the realm of anti-heroes than of heroes. It was this quality that allowed him the elasticity to exist in vastly contradictory narrative positions, even simultaneously. Social media in 2016 election thus became a site of transformation and transgression, allowing the narratives spun around political events and candidates to transcend the mundane conventionalities of politics-as-usual and to truly enter a realm of fantastic struggle over the heart and soul of the nation, where one's opponents were evil and vile and where traditional norms of political campaigning were only barriers to be broken in service of history.

32   While the notion of politics as a struggle between good and evil has appeared before—Jeffrey C. Alexander has characterized this as the propensity of U.S. politics to operate in binaries[xcii]—the logic of networked media allowed this struggle to escape the more carefully orchestrated milieus of previous campaigns and assume a life of its own in settings that were much less easily controlled. Similar to the act of telling narratives, there was a performative aspect to social media use by which each tweet, picture, or comment not only sought to exert a level of influence or power over the proceedings, but also served to develop the user's own credentials in their favored online community. With different sites having a vested interest in inspiring their users to share content and communicate in specific ways, the game-like elements of rewarding with likes and follows those types of content found favorable by specific communities incentivized users to engage in perpetuating narratives that had been found resonant by their groups of like-minded peers.[xciii] In this system, taking part in formulating specific narratives became a form of currency online, with popular tropes serving as easy ways of conveying ideas to groups who shared the same signs of communication. As users took to narrating events taking place on the campaign trail—in accordance with their own understanding as well as ideas they had absorbed from their peers and their valued news sources—they often

transformed them in ways that involved assigning to people or events characteristics that had a "larger-than-life" quality.

33   Meanwhile, time held a fundamentally paradoxical status in social media, as the present was turned into a constant flood of updates, news, and commentary, inviting one to discard the past in favor of observing the latest developments.[xciv] In the fragmented context of social media, the historic past assumed the form of an uneasy figment that was performatively conjured into being by each specific act of communication, often either divorced from context that would give it coherent meaning or inserted into settings where it could be mobilized with specific narrative purposes. Ganaele Langlois has described this as "a breakdown of the transition from signification to sense: media creates a proliferation of signs, but these signs fail to make sense."[xcv] As such, on one hand these signs became open fodder to be subsumed into new political and narrative configurations, and on the other the very act of producing these signs became valuable in itself, regardless of their meaning or significance. Heidi Herzogenrath-Amelung has drawn on this notion in her criticism of how the urgency of Twitter commonly invites one to action in the immediacy of the present while leaving unattended more deeply veiled, systematic issues that would require sustained attention across time.[xcvi] In a similar fashion, as we have seen, the very act of saying carried more importance for some users in the 2016 elections than what was being said.

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ABSTRACTS

In the 2016 election, social media became an increasingly important site for building, transforming, and contesting political narratives. As part of this, the candidates and their supporters engaged in creating and sharing narratives that spanned from an imagined past to the present and onward to an anticipated future. This article examines the transformative processes that took place in social media around these narratives and how they were imbued with fantastic, larger-than-life heroic and villainous properties in a fashion similar to the process of producing fan fiction. Looking at how social media operated as a network of varied public imaginations, the article explores the distinct temporalities around Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders, and Donald Trump and explicates how different media logics influenced the ways that the past, the present, and the future were mobilized in narrative formations around each candidate.

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