



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

STAGING NEOLIBERALISM

SEBASTIÁN CALDERÓN BENTIN NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

In a very fundamental way we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.

Steve Tesich, "A Government of Lies" (1992, 13)

Introduction

This essay looks at the intersection of live performance, propaganda, and political economy. In particular it examines new forms of concealed or disguised propaganda that deploy live performance as a medium or as source material for media circulation. I examine the role of two forms of disguised propaganda, astroturfing and staged media, deployed in the United States and Britain on behalf of private interests during key political moments. These performances reveal the continued commodification of civic space and participation which not only provide new opportunities for citizen disenfranchisement but also produce an increased distrust of knowledge and information, particularly when it comes to democratic forms of deliberation and communication. Moreover, these performances not only mark new sites of commodification and privatization characteristic of neoliberalism as conventionally understood, they also reify a particular neoliberal epistemology which positions the market as the arbiter of truth. In this sense, astroturfing and staged media are emergent forms of neoliberal performance that while achieving their own tactical ends as discreet forms of propaganda, also subsume the cognitive and communicative conditions necessary for democratic deliberation to the dictates of the market.

Pricing the Public

On October 16, 2017, the New Orleans City Council held a two-hour meeting to hear public comments regarding the proposed construction of a new gas-fueled power plant by the energy corporation Entergy. The company had submitted its construction application in 2016 and its proposal had been working its way through the city's review process for the last sixteen months. On the day of the hearing, the first opportunity to listen directly to local citizens regarding the project, dozens of residents and activists showed up cramming the council chamber in a matter of minutes. Though the hall was packed with city residents eager to share their opinions on the construction project, only one out of seven councilmembers, Susan Guidry, was present during the entire meeting, two others, LaToya Cantrell and Jason Williams, left early on (Stein 2017).

Despite moving through the city's review process, Entergy's proposal remained controversial. A coalition of local environmental and community groups including the Alliance for Affordable Energy, the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, 350 New Orleans, and the Sierra Club issued a joint report on the day of the hearing detailing multiple medical, environmental, financial, and civil rights reasons for rejecting Entergy's new plant proposal. Supported with testimonies by an urban sociologist, a mechanical engineer, a coastal geologist, and an environmental physician, among others, the report concluded that Entergy's proposal "does not serve the public convenience and necessity, is not in the public interest, and would have a racially discriminatory effect" (Wiygul, Brown, et al. 2017, 7). In contrast to these arguments, dozens of citizens supporting the project flooded the council chamber, many wearing bright orange t-shirts that read "Clean Energy. Good Jobs. Reliable Power," as well as holding signs with the slogans "We Need Power in the City" and "Power Station = JOBS!!!!" Two grassroots organizers supporting the project passed out the t-shirts to fellow advocates during the hearing. Gary, one of these organizers, explained that they had coordinated with others via Facebook as part of their own coalition, the Council for Responsible Governance. Reflecting on the disastrous aftermath of hurricane Katrina in 2005, he warned that "if there's another emergency and this power plant isn't built, there's a good chance we won't survive it" (Stein 2017). Repeated power outages, increased hurricanes, and the potential for new jobs were some of the arguments presented by advocates of the project that day, even though infrastructure experts, environmental organizations, and consumer advocacy groups highlighted the fact that recent power outages in the city were not due to lack of energy generation. In fact, "98 percent of outages between 2011 and 2016 were due to failures in the distribution system," something which a new plant would do nothing to resolve. Moreover, the low-lying altitude of the proposed construction site in east New Orleans made it particularly vulnerable to flooding, something which had happened to a major plant during Katrina, forcing it to go offline for six months and causing \$17 million in damages. Despite these arguments, the promise of a new plant struck a chord with many residents, something that became visibly apparent during the hearing since the majority of those who spoke expressed support for the proposal. As another supporter at the hearing explained, "I'm no expert, but what I do know is that this summer has not been fun, the anxiety is real" (Stein 2017). The afternoon meeting ended at around half past seven after more than 65 different community members were given the opportunity to speak and

present their arguments before the council and the journalists present (Johnson and Coman 2018, 13-17).

Having seen the groundswell of support the project had garnered that day, environmental and opposition groups made a concerted effort to bring more of their activists to the next and last public hearing four months later, hosted this time by the City Council's Utility Committee. Supporters of the plant, many wearing their orange t-shirts again, arrived early to secure seats in a now smaller room. To the surprise of many, the meeting room doors closed 45 minutes before the hearing was scheduled to start leaving almost 50 to 60 opposition activists locked outside (Jewson 2018). This caused further consternation given that the Utility Committee was planning to vote on the project that very day. If approved, not only would the plant be built in and therefore pollute a predominantly African-American and Vietnamese neighborhood, but it had also been estimated that "the average residential customer's monthly bill would rise by \$6.43 a month once the plant is built" (Williams 2018). Despite these arguments, after hours of oral testimonies and speeches the Utility Committee voted 4-1 to approve the \$210 million gas-fired power plant, a vote which was ratified on March 8, 2018 by the City Council in full.

The live debate, passionate testimony, and creative insignia involved in these municipal hearings belong to a well-known tradition of civic performance. That is, they embody a type of deliberative performance which, in its idealized form, seeks to affirm the legitimacy of the state's actions by staging a democratic public sphere scripted along certain normative conditions of argumentation, including "the thematization and reasoned critique of problematic validity claims, reflexivity, ideal role taking (combining impartiality and respectful listening), sincerity, formal inclusion, discursive equality, and autonomy from state and corporate interests" (Dahlberg 2005, 112). Through varying iterations of this socio-political script, from small town hearings to national public inquiries, official deliberative performances reify liberal governmentality as the normative condition of the modern state (Foucault and Burchell 2011, 102-3). While ubiquitous in capitalist societies, deliberative performances are thought of as non-commodified public events where political argumentation and expression can flourish beyond the limits of market logic. In multiple instances, this form of market insulation has provided enough space for vigorous dissent, struggles for justice, and collective transformation. The quasi-theatrical nature of these deliberative performances has also caught the attention of artists. From Augusto Boal's *legislative theater* to Lois Weaver's *long table* to Aaron Landsman and Mallory Catlett's *City Council Meeting* (2012) to Milo Rao's *General Assembly* (2017), theater and performance artists of various kinds have picked up on the possibilities of these forms of civic enactment, appropriating and expanding them for their own political and aesthetic ends (Boal 2005; Weaver 2015; Landsman and Catlett 2013; Wihstutz 2019). These artists have played with and at times radicalized the imaginative, democratic, and collaborative potential of deliberative performances not just as extensions of liberal authority but as embodied prefigurations where questions of justice, equality, solidarity, and liberation can play themselves out. In these ways, theater can expand the parameters placed on deliberative performances by liberal governmentality, especially when we consider the central role of collectivities within performance histories, including the *jiutai* in medieval Nō and the *khōros* of ancient Attic tragedy (Billings et al. 2013; Salz 2016, 24-31).

In the aftermath of the City Council's approval, however, some of the normative assumptions behind the legitimacy and efficacy of the city hearings came into question when a critic of the plant, Danil Faust, noticed that a local acquaintance of his, Keith Keough, was wearing one of the "Clean Energy. Good Jobs. Reliable Power" t-shirts during the October 2017 meeting, something which surprised him since he knew Keough was not usually politically active. Speaking with his friend soon after the meeting, Keough revealed to Faust that:

He had been paid to attend and wear the orange t-shirt in support of the Power Station. Keough introduced Faust to another individual, "John Doe," who told Faust that he was also paid to attend the 10-16-17 meeting on Entergy's behalf. Organizers required Keough, John Doe, and others to execute non-disclosure agreements ("NDA") as part of the process of being paid to attend the meeting on behalf of Entergy's NOPS Power Station project. [...At the second committee] meeting, Faust was able to speak where he relayed what he had learned from Keough and John Doe. In turn, Faust's claims were chronicled by local media. (Johnson and Coman 2018, 24–25)

Following Faust's inquiries, *The Lens* reporter Michael Isaac Stein published an investigative report on May 4, 2018 revealing that those fifty or so orange-clad supporters crowding the first hearing in October 2017 had been paid \$60 each for appearing at the event, while many who spoke in front of the council were paid \$200 after having been auditioned and given talking points (Stein 2018a). Keough explained that "the group was paid to clap anytime someone denigrated renewable energy such as wind and hydropower" (Stein 2018b). Gary, one of the organizers for the self-described Council for Responsible Governance, revealed to be a fictitious organization, was actually an employee of the company in charge of bringing people to the event. The company, Crowds on Demand, was founded in 2012 and specializes in hiring actors to pose as paparazzi, fans, or protesters for various events (Schneider 2015). Crowds on Demand had been hired by Entergy's Virginia-based public relations firm, the Hawthorn Group, which orchestrated the artificial grassroots campaign as a way to secure rapid "public support" in preparation for the public hearings and the council's vote. For the first hearing, Entergy paid Hawthorn \$32,142.11, including actors' fees, t-shirts, as well as Crowd on Demand's coordinating expenses (Stein 2018b). For the second meeting, the Hawthorn group billed Entergy \$22,478.40 to make sure enough supporters attended the meeting early on so as to crowd out opponents of the plant coming from east New Orleans. As an internal email by Entergy's head of regulatory and governmental affairs lays out, "I received confirmation that the room will open at 8:30 am. Let's get as many of our folks there ahead of the bus from NO East" (Stein 2018b). The revelation of these deceptive practices in the media quickly stalled the plant proposal and outraged many citizens until the council's vote was rendered void by a Civil District Court in early 2020. However, after appealing this decision, the City Council was eventually given a green light to proceed with the construction because, as Judge Dale Atkins from 4th Circuit Court of Appeals wrote, "it is only the council's decision which ultimately has binding effect [...] no remedy is necessary where no violations occurred" (Williams 2020). In effect, the strict contractual question hinged on the council's final vote, irrespective of the deceptive practices at play around it.

On top of the scandal brought on by Entergy, the Hawthorn Group, Crowds on Demand, and the City Council's actions regarding the plant hearings, Judge Atkins' ruling set an implicit precedent legitimizing the use of covert propaganda as a valid condition of the deliberative process in the city of New Orleans. As a legal precedent, this marks an explicit departure from the classic liberal democratic script of public deliberation, which at least in its nominal understanding holds on to ideals of "sincerity" and "autonomy from state and corporate interests," elusive as those may have always been given the role of cultural hegemony in the construction of relations of domination in capitalist societies (Gramsci 1971, 7-10). With the city government and the judge's decision, however, even these conditions are done away with as commodified civic performance and market relations can now quite literally script citizen deliberations around state policy. According to this new logic, the fact that Entergy actors were performing their support for the plant as an expression of their wage relation did not invalidate their arguments, as Deputy City Attorney Corwin St. Raymond defended in court, "paid actors, if they live in Orleans Parish, have every right to voice their opinion" (Jewson 2018). And yet the fact that this wage relation was kept purposely hidden by Entergy demonstrates an awareness by corporate actors of the popular antipathy this new vision of "democratic" participation produces.

Disguised Propaganda

From a performance perspective, the tradition of paying people to act out as a way to augment and direct public opinion and sentiment is not particularly new. Already in the early 19th century we see the use of *clagues* in France, planted audience members assigned to cry, jeer, laugh, or clap during theatre productions (Szubartowska 2016), or *plañideras* in Mexico and Peru, hired weepers for funerals whose powerful effects eventually led to their regulation by state authorities (Warren 2011; Muñiz 2002). In this context, as the direct result of public relations work, the performances carried out in the hearings rooms of the New Orleans city council under the direction of the Hawthorn Group and Crowds on Demand can be best understood as a form of propaganda, that is "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 7).¹ Unlike propaganda where the identity of the propagandist is made explicit, so called identifiable propaganda, in this case the identity and message of the propagandist is hidden and displaced from the institution of the corporation to the individual performer in the guise of everyday citizen. The improvised troupe of actors impersonating concerned citizens thus become what Victoria O'Donnell and Garth Jowett call a deflective source for the propagandist's message (26). This strategy belongs to a tradition of covert, concealed or disguised propaganda (Farkas and Neumayer 2020, 711-712), a practice which reaches as far back as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* written by the secret police of Czar Nicholas II in 1903 as part of its anti-Semitic campaign. The fraudulent text, published initially in serialized form in Russian newspapers, claimed to be the written minutes of a secret meeting by Jewish leaders discussing world domination (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 18). Most commonly, during times of war disguised propaganda has been used to spread disinformation and erode enemy morale as was the case during World War II with covert German radio stations broadcasting in English and French, as well as secret British operatives

feeding stories to newspapers and radio stations inside the United States to encourage it to join the war effort years before the bombing of Pearl Harbor (Doherty 1994; Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 18–19).

If the performances in New Orleans can be understood as contemporary forms of disguised propaganda, they were also vertical and agitative. That is, they were organized from the top of the corporate hierarchy down to the subcontractors and actors on the ground and were specifically designed to agitate the city council towards approving the plant proposal by showing widespread popular support for the initiative. Disguised propaganda aimed to provide the appearance of grassroots support is commonly referred to as *astroturfing*, in allusion to AstroTurf, the premade artificial grass carpeting used in sports. While *astroturfing* is now most commonly deployed in digital form (Walker 2009; Farkas and Neumayer 2020), particularly given the possibility for anonymity and automation afforded by social bots on Facebook and Twitter, in this case *astroturfing* relied on a staged performance. As “grassroots” propaganda disguised and presented via live performance, *staged astroturfing* has grown more common (Oldham 2014), most notably in 2015 when then-presidential candidate Donald Trump was revealed to have hired a casting agency, Extra Mile Casting, for \$12,000 to fill his Trump Tower election campaign launch with actors “at \$50 a pop” (Couch and McDermott 2015; Mathis-Lilley 2017). In a similar response to Judge Atkins, upon reviewing a complaint against Trump’s use of covert propaganda during a presidential campaign, the Federal Election Commission concluded that “because of the seemingly modest amount at issue, we recommend that the Commission exercise its prosecutorial discretion and dismiss the allegation” (Gardner 2017). In the face of these regulatory and judicial responses, the pattern that emerges is one where private actors such as the Trump organization and Entergy take the initiative in *astroturfing* their events and state regulators end up sanctioning their use thus normalizing the commodification of civic participation as a viable institutional strategy for those able to afford it.

The use of performance as part of Entergy’s PR campaign was also in response to the terrain they chose to infiltrate given that hearings are by their very nature live events. It would have done little use to have an army of bots on Twitter when the actual trenches were the New Orleans city chambers. Performance thus spoke to the particular medium through which deliberation was to be enacted. However, the signs, chants, slogans, and speeches staged at the hearings were also designed to be captured and circulated by members of the news media as well as anyone sharing images of the events on social media. As such, these performances were also staged to converge with mass and social media. As Henry Jenkins notes, convergence explains “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (Jenkins 2006, 2). By converging with broadcast and digital media these staged performances circulate as image-events while maintaining the authenticity of the *vox populi*. This authenticity is indebted to live performance since, unlike written accounts and social bots, performance works through enactment and embodiment. This makes viewers feel less as interpreters and more as witnesses to a scene; that is, performing bodies are not an account of popular support, they are a literal manifestation of such support. In disguised form, this allows for the propagandist’s message to feel even more present, palpable, and self-evident. Thus,

performance endows propaganda with certain methodological and ontological advantages. First, it is able to marshal acts of physical occupation, self-presentation, and oratorical skill which allow the propaganda strategy to adapt to the site of communicative action, in this case the hearing room. And secondly, because performance can embody and refract meaning through various forms of enaction, simulation, and impersonation, it can anchor and direct the propagandist's message with a unique veridical force. When these advantages are offered to market actors as just-in-time services, we see the value of companies such as Crowds on Demand in assuring their clients how "if you need to hire protesters, we can get a crowd on the street, sometimes within 24 hours time [...] we provide a cost-effective way to lobby government to pass or defeat legislation, push for approval of projects, and influence government in a grassroots manner" (Demand 2021). As an emergent strain of disguised propaganda, staged astroturfing thus relies on performance to increase its range, capacity, and credibility through deceptive scenes that easily converge across electronic media as they are recorded, posted, and shared.

Open Borders

The convergence of live performance with social media as part of disguised propaganda was also deployed in the lead up to the 2016 Brexit referendum in Britain, where years of government-backed austerity policies exacerbated economic stagnation and labor precarization following the 2008 financial crisis (Bailey 2018, 50–55). Over time, these conditions along with postimperial nostalgia (Dorling 2020) provided fertile ground for increased levels of anxiety and discontent which, amid a barrage of propaganda and disinformation, found expression in the rallying cry "Take Back Control" as part of the Leave campaign during the 2016 election. In June 2016, just a few days before the referendum, an "investigative video" was posted on the Leave.EU campaign's Facebook group page. The pro-Brexit Leave.EU campaign was founded in 2015 by Ukip donor and multimillionaire Arron Banks, who made his fortune working with Lloyd's of London before starting his own insurance businesses empire. Upon creating Leave.EU, Banks contracted the U.S. lobbying and referendum consulting firm Goddard Gunster, which had previously worked on Boris Yeltsin's state privatization and market liberalization reforms in the 1990s (Littler 2019, 20). In 2012 the firm had astroturfed the public advocacy group "New Yorkers for Beverage Choices" on behalf of the American Beverage Association as part of a propaganda effort to resist capping the size of sugary drinks sold in New York City (Phillips and Pasick 2013). Banks recalls the firm's most vital advice to his new founded pro-Brexit campaign, "what they said early on was, 'Facts don't work,' and that's it. The Remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally. It's the Trump success" (Fletcher 2016).

With just a few days remaining before the vote, the Leave.EU's video, titled "This is how easy it is to cross the Channel illegally" was posted on Facebook. The short two and half minute video opens with medium close-up shot of a middle-aged man with military-style cropped short grey hair and a goatee beard looking at the camera while standing on a blue rigid-hull inflatable boat. Behind him lies a waterway followed by a seawall and rows of red-roofed houses, to the left stands a twirling black and white lighthouse beneath a cloudy grey sky. "So, we've reached the RB [response

boat] here at Graveline in France,” the man explains to the camera, “in a moment my three would-be refugees or asylum seekers or whatever you want to call them will board this boat and we’ll make our way back over to the UK. So far, we’ve had absolutely no attention from anybody whatsoever and the whole thing’s looking good” (Dunn 2016). From a high angle, a long shot shows three men boarding the boat. As soon as they’ve boarded, the video cuts to a side shot from the moving vessel as it races through the Channel’s waters, various tugboats and larger ships can be seen in the distance. From the back of the boat the camera then pans across the bow, in front the three men’s hoodies blow in the wind and the pilot can be seen seated in front, as the camera pans to the starboard side the white cliffs of Dover gleam in the sunset. Our narrator then turns the camera back on himself, “OK, so behind me the UK. To get here a two-and-a-half-hour trip in moderate weather. No great shakes, an easy feat by anyone’s standards. With me I brought three people who want to get into the UK. They’re here now, and they will get in. We’ve been unopposed all the way over from the other side. Nobody’s fought to stop us or do anything about it. That is how easy it is to bypass immigration and border in the UK” (Dunn 2016). The camera cuts again showing the backs of the “would-be refugees” as the boat keeps racing ahead, the Channel’s waves skimming past. As the boat slows down, our narrator continues, “OK, so this is Folkestone Harbour. No harbour master, no police, no customs, no nothing. I could be running my own touring business here; I can get people in and out that easily.” With the boat finally docked, we see the three men disembark, their faces obscured with hoodies and caps, the pilot holds on to the concrete pier as they climb out. Standing next to a plaque that reads “VISITING MOORING: You Must Contact Port Office On Arrival,” our narrator explains, “so I pulled into Folkestone Harbour, as you can see ‘Visiting Mooring,’ nobody’s going to stop me, nobody’s going to think that this is unusual. This is broad daylight; I can do this whenever I like.” A final medium close-up shot shows our investigator on the stern of a different boat, concluding, “so, three guys dropped, from a rib [rigid-hull inflatable boat] into the UK, unopposed, absolutely nothing stopping me from doing that, not even a raised eyebrow from the people watching” (Mowat 2016; Dunn 2016).

The video was an instant success, rapidly racking over 600,000 views on Facebook. It seemed to provide photographic evidence to support how “marauding Africans’ foregathering at Calais” and “swarms’ of refugees arriving from Syria” could enter British soil (Powell 2017, 230–1). As the performance of this “mock migration” converged with electronic media, the clip was reposted across social platforms making instant headlines in conservative newspapers. In the *Daily Mail*, the video was posted on its website and accompanied with the header “UK’s open borders exposed: Brexit campaigner films himself ‘illegally’ crossing the Channel to reveal just how easy it is for migrants to get into Britain” (Dunn 2016). Echoing the sentiment, the *Daily Express* announced, “Shocking video shows how ‘easy’ it is for people smugglers to cross Channel illegally” (Mowat 2016).

It was not until three years later that a fuller picture emerged about the performance captured in the video. In April 2019, a Channel 4 News investigative team led by Fatima Manji identified the video’s narrator as Phil Campion, a former SAS (Special Air Service) officer, who since leaving the British special forces years ago has been “working on the private military circuit” (Campion 2020). When asked in an interview if the Leave.EU campaign had contracted him directly to produce the

video, Champion responds “no, it was a friend of a friend” (Manji 2019). So even though the video premiered on Leave.EU’s Facebook page, Champion insists on obfuscating the identity of those behind its production, a common feature as we have seen with disguised propaganda. After asking him again to elaborate on how exactly he was hired to produce the video, Champion explains that he was asked if crossing the Channel would “be possible and would you be prepared to go and prove that this can be done? And I said yes, it would be possible, and yes I can prove it can be done, and how much are you going to pay me to do it?” (Manji 2019). When pressed by Manji on how much he was actually paid to produce the video, Champion balks, “I’m not telling you.” As with *Crowds on Demand* what we see here is the emergence of an opaque yet thriving covert propaganda market. Moreover, upon reviewing the boat’s built-in GPS tracker and satellite data, Channel 4 News was able to determine that the boat actually *never* left British waters. Instead, the boat first travelled from Dover to Deal, where Champion’s final message about a lack of “raised eyebrows” was recorded. The following day the boat traveled from Dover to Folkestone Harbour carrying the three men, who got off without ever stepping on French soil. After dropping them off, the boat then returned to Dover and, without any of the “would-be refugees,” crossed for the first time to Gravelines, France. When the boat returns the next day to Britain it heads directly back to Dover, never dropping anyone off at Folkestone after leaving France (Manji 2019).

When confronted with the ship’s logs and GPS data Champion seems puzzled, he nervously insists that he didn’t edit the footage himself, he just handed it over, seconds later he announces, “the interview finishes here.” Later in the report, Manji explains that another ex-SAS officer for hire, Jonathan Pollen, was involved in editing and posting the video for the Leave.EU campaign. In emails obtained by Channel 4 News, Pollen boasts how he will use his SAS links to provide secret government intelligence to Leave.EU since as a reserve member he will be “getting access to other UK security agencies related to IRM [Information Risk Management], GCHQ [Government Communications Headquarters], and 5&6 [Sections 5 and 6 of Military Intelligence] which all tie in quite well” (Manji 2019). Further investigations revealed that Pollen was employed by Bank’s private security and intelligence firm Precision Risk & Intelligence Ltd (Bennet 2016; House 2020). Given these and other revelations of inappropriate campaign behavior, Leave.EU was fined £70,000 on May 2018 for breaking election laws and a year later they were charged, along with Bank’s Eldon Insurance group, an additional £120,000 over private data breaches after a report concluded that “more than a million emails sent to Leave.EU subscribers contained marketing for the Eldon Insurance firm’s GoSkippy services” (“Brexit: Leave.EU and Arron Banks’ firm fined £120,000 over data breaches” 2019). These operations reveal the intense overlap in covert propaganda markets between corporate and political interests and the seeming interchangeable use of one as a vehicle for the other, an expression of universal equivalence when seen from the perspective of the commodity form.

A mixture of Champion’s performance and Pollen’s editing, the Leave.EU video presents us with a second case of disguised propaganda. Relying similarly on staging, this *mise en scène* is designed squarely for the camera and therefore best understood as a form of *staged media*, that is, a video where even though “the visual content has not been doctored or edited [...] the situation depicted has been pre-planned or selectively filmed” (Reuters 2021). Used for pecuniary and/or propaganda

purposes across social media, this performance-based type of manipulated media exists alongside deceptive video practices that rely alternatively on a loss of context, misleading editing, computer-generated imagery, and synthetic manipulation (i.e., “deepfakes”). Deceptive media like the Leave.EU video, however, depend on performance to stage prescribed events in front of the camera and in doing so appeal to its veridical force as an embodied medium. As Patrice Pavis argues, staged performance is “a sign that makes reality” (1998, 334). Unlike the case of Entergy, where propaganda was about *identity-based deception*, that is, corporate messaging impersonated by citizen/actors, the Leave.EU video was focused on *message-based deception*, that is, depicting crossing the Channel as “no great shakes.”² Nevertheless, when it came to identifying the propagandists behind the video there was still a good deal of obfuscation involved, as Manji’s interview with Champion reveals. Through the use of performance, therefore, the Leave.EU video stages an audiovisual tour of “open borders” captured and edited for circulation via social media so as to converge across print and broadcast news days before the referendum in the hopes of agitating the viewer towards a pro-Brexit stance.

Truth Markets

In analyzing the Brexit vote, Kathy Powell notes how “the roots of dissatisfaction and lack of opportunity lie in decades of neoliberalization, that deepened inequalities of class and between regions, and incrementally embedded a consensus around market conformity. That conformity diminished the field of political contestation, as markets were protected from democratic redistributive pressures” (2017, 228). The increased protection of market conformity that Powell associates with neoliberalization echoes the entrenched expansion of market relations we see expressed in the commodification of civic participation and military services as part of Entergy and Leave.EU’s propaganda campaigns respectively. In their production and circulation, these acts of propaganda are not just stage illusions targeted at spectators or image-commodities created for clients, they are also market-making performances that innovate, endorse, and expand growing covert propaganda markets across and beyond the digital realm. The encroachment of these new markets within the lived and mediatized space of civic discourse, a space already dominated by market relations (Herman 2008; Bennett 2016), includes the emergence of specialized firms such as Crowds on Demand and troll farms (News 2016). These firms draw their expertise not just from entertainment, digital journalism, and public relations, but increasingly from military intelligence and psychological warfare, what Champion calls “the private military circuit” (2020).³ They also reflect forms of labor, production, and consumption that parallel broader economic shifts characteristic of neoliberalization: the “gigification” of work, entrepreneurial citizenship, promotional culture, just-in-time manufacturing, and vertical integration. The value of these markets lie in their ability to disguise and direct propaganda within civic spaces and news information circuits through the use of astroturfing and manipulated media as well as emergent forms of “native advertising,” “news fabrication,” and “rumor bombs,” to name just a few (Harsin 2018; Tandoc Jr, Lim, and Ling 2018). Hence, while we can account for disguised propaganda since the time of Czar Nicholas II, it has never been marketized to this extent. The corollary to this expansion is an increased sense of distrust, confusion, and misunderstanding among citizens that

puts into question the epistemic conditions upon which civic debate and democratic deliberation can take place. As Jayson Harsin argues, “what we find is (again, perhaps especially in the United States but with many signs of globalization) a regime-of-truth change. With such fragmentation, segmentation, and targeted content, perhaps it makes more sense to speak of “truth markets” deliberately produced within an overall [regime of posttruth]” (Harsin 2015, 330). Driven by new modes of marketization and commodification, the proliferation of truth markets suggests a structural link between the performances under consideration and neoliberalization in the sense that these forms of staged propaganda both reflect and reify a certain neoliberal belief in the market as a *normative precondition* for “democratic” communication. And yet, this same precondition sabotages the cognitive capacity for civic debate and deliberation through ever more sophisticated modes of deception and manipulation. How then do neoliberal thinkers envision the role of collective reasoning, truth-seeking and debate while at the same time embracing the expansion of market relations in all areas of social life? Is there something within neoliberal thought that helps explain this new horizon of communicative action?

Among a variety of scholars who have devoted themselves to different aspects of the neoliberal question (Foucault 2008; Cooper 2019; Davies 2017; Gershon 2011; Brown 2015; Slobodian 2020), the research that most directly addresses neoliberalism’s relation to knowledge and epistemology has been developed by Philip Mirowski and Edward Nik-Khah (2017). In *The Knowledge We Have Lost in Information*, they trace the way information and knowledge have been conceptualized, designed, and implemented by neoliberal economists throughout the second half of the 20th century, in particular those involved in the Walrasian school, the Bayes-Nash School, and the Experimentalist School, all of which remain heavily influenced by the work and thought of Friedrich Hayek, one the founders of the Mont-Pèlerin Society and a key architect of neoliberal thought (Mirowski and Dieter 2015). From the beginning neoliberalism developed not just as an economic school but a “constructivist political program,” requiring active intervention, organization, and participation by economists on matters of state policy and market design (Mirowski and Nik-Khah 2017, 57). From a historical perspective, this constructivist imperative explains the way neoliberalism’s adherents continue to seek out an active role in the world, entrenched across government agencies, university departments, think tanks, and policy groups (Djelic and Mousavi 2020). For our purposes, a key observation drawn from the various approaches to market design that emerge out of Mirowski and Nik-Khah’s history of information economics and the algorithmic logics that derived from it is the “gradual transition from economists’ regarding information as an unalloyed good to praising ignorance as the appropriate state of a dedicated market participant” (2017, 32). More and more in neoliberal economic thought humans were framed as inherently cognitively defective, unable to arrive at truth even with the aid of traditional modes of scientific inquiry and informed argumentation. At the same time, neoliberal economists began to see the market as a superior epistemic entity akin to an information processor, able to surpass the limits of human ratiocination. Mirowski traces how this view emerged across some of its most prominent early figures:

Hayek was first to promote seriously the market as information processor, and he was first to realize this would provide a refutation of socialism that would handily

fit on a 3x5 card. For him, socialist planning presupposed the planner knew more than the market; since that was impossible, so, too was socialist economics. It was this first commandment that spawned many of the other attitudes of the [neoliberal thought collective], such as its uninhibited contempt for intellectuals (Hayek's "secondhand dealers in ideas" [1967, 178]), ridicule of experts, and disparagement of education in general. Others chimed in, after their own fashion. For instance, few remember that the single cause Milton Friedman felt so passionately about that he bequeathed his entire fortune to support it was the privatization and debasement of public schools. Nancy MacLean (2017) has recently stressed how destruction of state-sponsored education was central to the trajectory of James Buchanan. Much of George Stigler's work rested on a notion of optimal ignorance of the masses. Friedman, as usual, dumbed down the Hayekian message for those with limited attention spans: "Businessmen, who may be bankrupted if they refuse to face facts, are one of the few groups that develop the habit of doing so. That is why, I have discovered repeatedly, the successful businessman is more open to new ideas [...] than the academic intellectual who prides himself on his alleged independence of thought" (Friedman 1978, xi, xiii).

Given this epistemological position, the commodification of civic debate through covert propaganda markets, staged or otherwise, marks an expression of neoliberal logic not only as a philosophical position but as a concerted intellectual and institutional project aimed at re-shaping social life. From a neoliberal perspective, complaints and anxieties around deception, manipulation, and epistemic fragmentation appear quaint given that truth is determined by markets not by people. As Mirowski and Nik-Khah put it, "truth is the output of the greatest information processor known to humankind—namely, The Market [...] it is The Market alone that effectively winnows and validates the truth from a glut of information" (2017, 7). Hence, we see an exponential growth in truth markets,⁴ evidenced by algorithmic news feeds, media echo chambers, and evermore interactive celebrity cults. Consider the entrepreneurial tone with which "speaking your truth" reinforces individuation as a privileged epistemic position. While exacerbating longstanding postcolonial structures of violence, these neoliberal advances mark a further dehumanizing rupture away from bourgeois liberalism given that the production and maintenance of information commodity chains requires the constant superseding of human agency in favor of the market as the principal arbiter of knowledge.

This political epistemology sets up an aporia for neoliberal thinkers given that they are human and thus in no position to confirm or validate their own truth-claims and arguments in front of others through research, study, and reasoning. Nevertheless, they are also keenly aware that their worldview will not simply roll out through "pure" market logic. Neoliberals maneuver through this contradiction by bracketing their epistemic position when it comes to themselves. That is, they celebrate their intellectual and political agency in private, while publicly critiquing those who challenge the role of markets as ultimate arbiters of truth. This kind of dissociative thinking ends up producing two tiers of reality, a privileged esoteric sphere of cloistered expertise and a fragmented public sphere of consumer-entrepreneurs navigating different truth markets. We see this epistemic cleave play out in the covert propaganda of Entergy and Leave.EU where some are in the know but most are left in the dark. The same can be seen in the neoliberal approach to

climate change, where widely interviewed think tank experts, such as Marc Morano in the U.S. and Benny Peiser in Britain, are not actual climate scientists but rather professional propagandists (Oreskes and Conway 2012; Kenner et al. 2015). And yet, these experts engage with scientists on an equal footing in the mainstream press because, from a neoliberal position, scientific knowledge alone is not enough to monopolize the growth and circulation of an ever more diverse “marketplace of ideas.” As Mirowski notes, “once the neoliberal image of the market as both means of conveyance and validation of ideas took hold, then it consequently shaped and informed changes in the very means and conduct of argumentation in general” (2019, 10). These continuous acts of subterfuge and dissimulation are thus not seen as a problem but as welcomed expressions of an epistemology that equates information processing with truth. Hence, they continue to manifest themselves in a myriad of ways, from influencer marketing to internet bots to climate pseudoscience, which in aggregate begin to produce the systemic condition some have termed “post-truth” (Keyes 2004; Harsin 2018; McIntyre 2018; Cosentino 2021).

Conclusion

Amid these developments popular commentators are starting to realize that this trend cannot be easily undone through nostalgic appeals for depoliticized expertise or whack-a-mole fact-checking (Ohlheiser 2020). At a minimum, everyday practices of market creation, such as staged astroturfing and manipulated media, must be seen in tandem with the growth of neoliberal hegemony, especially when these markets establish themselves as effective channels through which truth and befuddlement can be both asserted and induced. As these cases illustrate, acts of covert propaganda not only legitimate the commodification and marketization of the field of perception through public relations activities and military intelligence expertise, they also reify neoliberal epistemology by producing new and emergent truth markets *through* performance. Covert performances are valuable propaganda commodities since they can catalyze reality effects in ways other forms of spin, publicity, and disinformation cannot. Note how in both cases live and mediated performances were deployed days or even hours before key political events were to take place. As such, performance delivers a unique form of *accelerated* propaganda by providing an embodied scene upon which preexisting discourses (“migrant invasion,” “reliable power,” and so on) can be certified without having to wait for the usual repertoire of political bromides and talking points to take effect. Instead, performance casts reality effects through staging and screening techniques that provide seemingly tangible evidence and ocular proof upon which directed conjecture can bloom. It is the combination of these reality effects and their symbolic appeal that constitutes the veridical force behind staged forms of concealed propaganda. As neoliberal epistemology reifies itself through these performances, new truth markets open up. The more people find themselves trapped in them, the more they seem to behave as deficient cognitive agents, thus producing the very definition of the human that neoliberals hold.

Notes

¹ For a historical analysis of the emergence of term “propaganda” in 17th century Europe as part of Counter Reformation efforts led by the Catholic Church see Prendergast and Prendergast (2013).

² For a discussion between these two forms of deception see Hancock (2012, 290).

³ The marketization of intelligence services through the use of military contractors, private prisons, surveillance companies, and cloud services has been amply documented by scholars and journalists (Ramsay 2018; Bing and Schectman 2019; Shorrock 2009; Piven 2019).

⁴ On truth markets see also Kalpokas (2019, 123–130) and Mavelli (2020, 69–72).

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Biography

Sebastián Calderón Bentin is Associate Professor of Theater Studies in the Department of Drama at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. His research explores the role of contemporary performance in political communication and state formation. Previous writings have appeared in *Theater Survey*, *TDR*, *Identities*, *Istmo*, and the anthology *Neoliberalism and Global Theaters* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

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