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What if There's no One Pulling the Strings? A Cultural Theoretical Account of Trumpism and Big Tent Conspiracy Theories

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What if There's No One Pulling the Strings? A Cultural Theoretical Account of Trumpism and Big Tent Conspiracy Theories

by

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All errors and unclarities that remain in this paper are my own.

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Introduction

Religious experiences bind us together, tell us what to value, and provide us with the blueprints for making meaning out of our lives.[1] For this reason, the study of religion towards understanding the social world has proven useful for many scholars since the industrial revolution, ranging from Max Weber to William James, Fredric Nietzsche to Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim to W. E.B. Du Bois, Soren Kierkegaard to Hannah Arendt. Perhaps James put it best with the phrase " Religion is man's total reaction upon life."

In this project, I study a contemporary religion. This religion, like those of Jesus, the Buddah, and the Holy Trinity, has long and storied historical roots. This religion bifurcates the world into categories of sacred and profane, is informed by real-world issues, is clung to dogmatically, champions a mythic past, and often envisions an Edenic future in which the current social order is completely and thoroughly abolished. This religion is anti-elitism.[2]

In a world increasingly characterized by partisanship, anti-elitism looms large among otherwise disparate groups. To many on the political right, silicon-valley tech elites and the political establishment collaborate to maintain the status quo and enrich themselves at the

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[1] The word "religion" itself stems from the Latin *regalare* which means, among other things, "to bind together."
[2] Of course, the concept of religion encompasses many different traits. In treating anti-elitism as a religion, I focus on its epistemic and social capacities, that is, the ability of anti-elite worldviews to impact how individuals conceptualize and contextualize political events and form community.

expense of the "silent majority." To many on the political left, corporate elites advance self-enriching policies that prolong racial, economic, and social disparities throughout wider society. Some anecdotal evidence from the worlds of publishing and entertainment help to illustrate this phenomenon. Fully half of the world's largest internet retailer (Amazon)'s best-selling books of 2021 (including the top three) center explicitly on the excessive power of elites, with the top seller titled *Red Handed: How American Elites Get Rich Helping China Win*. In 2021, the two most popular television shows of the world's largest entertainment company center explicitly on the excessive power of elites.[3] The most successful comedy special of 2021 frequently references elite domination, noting in song that "every politician, every cop on the street, protects the interests of the pedophilic corporate elite" (Burnham 2021). Even children's cartoons are not immune to the current elite-fetish, with films such as *Superman vs the Elite* (2012) populating the airwaves.[4]

This current anti-elite fixation in popular culture has been joined by two significant political trends. One is a rise of populism, a political approach the very lifeblood of which involves counterposing the deserving "people" to out of touch, corrupt, and dangerous elites. This populist "explosion" has truly spanned the globe, ranging from Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, Donald Trump in the United States, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Narendra Modi in India, and Giorgia Meloni in Italy, and Boris Johnson in the United Kingdom, to name but a few (Brubaker

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[3] I am here referring to Netflix's *Squid Game* and *Arcane*, both of which have been renewed for following seasons after their success.

[4] Interestingly, the fixation on elites is also found throughout contemporary sociological practices. Anti-elite Marxist strains of sociology continue to be a pervasive force in the academy, and the focused study on elites has increased in recent years with Shamus Khan's success. This elite-focused literature is rarely flattering towards its subject of analysis.

2017; Berman 2021; Calhoun 2017: 106).[5] A second is the dramatic rise of anti-elite

conspiratorial belief throughout the western world.[6] Conspiracy theory experts Peter Knight and

Jordi Dean argue that conspiracy theories have spread with particular speed since the 20th

century (Dean 1998: 10; Knight 2000: 2). Today, belief in conspiracy theories has reached such a

climax that scholars today regularly characterize the current epistemic order as a "Post-Truth

World" (Cosentino 2020; Lubchenco 2017; Wilber 2017; Picciotto 2019; Baggini 2017). [7] Why,

four-hundred years after the Enlightenment, do these deeply anti-intellectual social movements

carry such purchase?

This thesis argues that both the current appeal of nationalist populism and dangerous

conspiracy theories are fueled by similar historical trends that stem out of the social and

philosophical commitment of the Enlightenment towards the increase in the speed and scale of

knowledge dissemination. These trends take place widely throughout the entire structure of

society in various realms of economics, politics, and society, and thus, some sociologists refer to

them as "structural forces." I contend that, while the Enlightenment generated many positive

benefits, an unquestioned commitment to its tenets has also manufactured far-reaching negative

implications. In this thesis, I demonstrate how the Enlightenment's relationship to the

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[5] Populism is of course far from a novel phenomenon; populism in the United States ranges at least as far back as the early 1800s with Andrew Jackson's presidential campaign (Lowndes 2017). Instead, in line with much contemporary work, I am simply noting that the political and social salience of populism has increased of late (e.g Brubaker 2017).This populist rise is contradictory as the very leaders that run (and succeed) on populist messages are often the very same elites that the ideology demonizes (Calhoun 2017).

[6] Just as subscribers of nationalist populism separate the world into "us-them" binaries between the "elite" and the porous concept of the "people," "big-tent" conspiracy theorists bifurcate the world into the decried elite and brainwashed, unknowing public.

[7] In this thesis, I have chosen to focus specifically on right-wing forms of conspiracy theories and populism. This is not to say that the explanations that I provide fail to offer any explanatory power. However, my focus is specifically on anti-intellectual and anti-technocratic elitism, which is fundamentally distinct from the anti-corporate elitism of the political Left.

exponential increase in the speed and scale[8] of knowledge dissemination paradoxically paved the way for dangerous conspiracy theories and authoritarian forms of nationalist populism.

In the remainder of this chapter, I first discuss how my argument builds upon the existing literatures on conspiratorial beliefs and nationalist populism and innovates upon them by incorporating a comparative and structuralist analysis that is not at odds with the contemporary demographic layout of the purveyors of these social movements. I then provide some background on the cases that will be the focus of this thesis, as well as the data and methods that I will use to examine them.

The Structural Study of Conspiracy Theories

Unlike many other socio-political topics (i.e. the functionality of the state, nationalism,) the topic of conspiracy theory has only been examined recently. Indeed, until Karl Popper's (1940) seminal essay in the mid-20th century, conspiracy theories were not thought of as being distinct from other forms of knowledge. Thus, as with other social scientists, much sociological work conceptualizes and analyzes conspiracy theories in the aggregate instead of investigating the particularities of different conspiracy theories (e.g. Boltanski 2014).

The contemporary structural sociological study of conspiracy theories falls fundamentally into two camps. The first camp consists of scholars who follow the historian Richard Hofstader's (1964) seminal essay, which claims that conspiracy theories are a "political pathology" that is engendered, not by structural forces, but instead by "conspiracy literature" (i.e. texts in the most broadly defined terms including propaganda films, pamphlets, and speeches

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[8] Over the course of this thesis, I frequently refer to an acceleration in the "speed and scale" of information flow. This structural force has been conceptualized by much of the Frankfurt school, (perhaps most centrally by Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*) and most recently by the contemporary sociologist of culture Hartmut Rosa (2013, 2019) when mobilizing his "social acceleration" thesis.

made by conspiracy theorists). In claiming conspiracy theories are a "social pathology," this has come to be known as the "classical approach" to conspiracy theorizing. In more recent years, Hofstadter's claim that conspiracy theories are a social pathology believed by the least learned in society has gained some empirical support by a psychological literature which found that conspiracy theorists are less educated than the general population in the aggregate (van-prooijen 2017; Lantian, Bangeux, Delouvee, and Gauvrit 2021). As Smallpage, Drochon, Uscinski and Klofstad conclude in a review of contemporary conspiracy theory literature, "one highly consistent finding across studies is that income and education are negatively correlated with conspiracy thinking in the U.S.A (2020: 266).

Scholars in the second camp favor cultural-sociological explanations of conspiracy theories that overwhelmingly emphasize the justifiable rationality of historically disadvantaged groups in believing that dominant groups are conspiring against them. In a contemporary milieu of racial, economic, gendered forms of inequality males, it is unsurprising that many of the explanations of the rise of conspiratorial belief in the U.S. center on the often rational nature of conspiracy belief. These scholars note how it is not completely irrational for historically disadvantaged groups to believe that dominant groups are conspiring against them. Melley (2000:14) notes that conspiracy theorists constitute "logical responses to technological and social change," most notably increasing globalization and corporatization. Along the same lines, Olmsted (2011) sees vast military-industrial conspiracies as an understandable response to the rise of the national-security state. And many scholars have linked the appeal of conspiratorial thought with the historical legacy of anti-blackness, as well as low levels of education and social class position (Van Prooijen 2017; Swami et al. 2014; Douglas et al. 2016; Pasek et al. 2015).

While both camps have made valuable insights, each has difficulties providing adequate explanations of the two most significant big-tent conspiracy theories of our time. Most importantly, while this cultural emphasis on the rational nature of conspiratorial belief among historically marginalized groups has been empirically verified in regards to certain conspiracy theories (e.g. Goerzel 1994), it does not hold well for anti-vaccine and QAanon conspiracy theories. Demographic research on the anti-vaccine movement illustrates that anti-vaxxers often exhibit *higher* levels of socioeconomic status and are *more* likely to be college educated than the general population (e.g. Hussain et al. 2018; Hornsey 2021). Compared to the general population, a greater proportion of QAnon believers graduated high school, attended some college, and even earned an associate's degree when compared to the general population (Pew Research Center; 2022). As Mar-Andre Argington, research fellow at the International study of Radicalization at the Accelerationism Research Consortium who studies QAnon puts it: "Can we stop saying these are uneducated people, that they are crazy and wear tinfoil hats?" Unlike previous psychological literature regarding other conspiracy theories, critical thinking style has not been found to be a significant predictor of Covid-19 beliefs (Gibson, Sanders, and Lamm 2021).

Additionally, despite the real and violent history of epistemological and physical violence perpetrated disproportionately against black and brown bodies, two-thirds of individuals that refused or failed to be vaccinated against the coronavirus identify as non-Hispanic white (Ndugga, Hill, Artiga, and Haldar 2022). The anti-vaccine movement also has a storied history with narratives of White Power, the effects of which regained national attention in the wake of anti-asian violence associated with the anti-coronavirus vaccination movement (Bodner et al. 2021: ch. 2-3). Contemporary quantitative studies find anti-vaccination to be a common theme in

white nationalist communities (Walter, Ophir, Lokmanoglu, and Pruden 2022; Whitehead and Perry 2020). Some studies have even found that attitudes amenable to anti-vaccine belief are especially high in areas heavily populated by affluent, white individuals (e.g. Yang, Delamater, Leslie,and Mello 2016).

An examination of QAnon's demographic information also casts doubt on the ability of the current literature on conspiracy theories to explain QAnon's social prominence. Compared with the general population, a *higher* share of QAanon supporters have a household income above $75,000 per year and a *lower* proportion of QAnon supporters have a household income below $30,000 per year (Pew Research Center, 2020). Although the demographics of the QAnon movement are not as closely documented as the anti-vaccine movement due to its recency, a 2021 study found that 22% of white evangelical protestants were QAnon supporters, the most of any other group. By comparison, of Black Protestants and Jewish individuals, only 13% and 2% respectively believed in the conspiracy (Public Religion Research Institute 2021).

There has been much work conducted throughout the social sciences and humanities investigating the rise of these conspiracy theories, and even more about the rise of populism, but the basic question of "why here and why now" about the concurrent rise of these phenomena has yet to be fully explained. Advancing towards this end, this thesis innovates in two main ways. First, the comparative nature of the cultural textual analysis allows for me to understand the broader structural reasons that transcend the particularities of both of my cases. In particular, an emphasis on the effects of the Enlightenment facilitates a more extensive historical framework than simply beginning with the recent techno-capitalistic iteration of social media, as does much contemporary scholarship (e.g., Dow, Johnson, Wang, Whitson, and Menon 2021; Hannah 2021b; Gerbaudo 2018). Second, through mobilizing empirical methodologies, I can add

empirical validity to some of the cultural theoretical work of scholars studying the rise of populism and conspiracy theories across time and place and, concurrently, gauge the contextualized effectiveness of theory that fails to effectively explain the present cases.

QAnon and Anti-Vaxx as "Big-Tent" Conspiracy theories

In this thesis, I examine both QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories. Both theories involve multifaceted, competing, and contradictory beliefs that are difficult to define succinctly. Below, I list their core tenets and explain my logic for analyzing them in tandem.

Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories have circulated since the invention of vaccination, but their political prominence waned significantly over the 20th century as medical technology made the vaccination process less prone to error. This trend reversed with the publication of Andrew Wakefield's 1998 study published in the *Lancet* that falsely linked the administration of the mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine with early-onset autism in infants, leading many more individuals to believe in the theory (Jolley and Douglas 2014). Today, anti-vaxxers claim that the administration of vaccines has dangerous or otherwise unwanted effects which, in one way or another, benefit a group of political and economic elites (Walter, Ophir, Lokmanoglu, and Pruden 2020; Hornsey 2021; Zuk and Zuk 2020).[9] Higher GDP countries have been shown to have the lowest confidence in vaccines, and the United States (31%) and Germany (34%), have among the largest share of their populations still not fully vaccinated (Mathieu et al. 2023).

QAnon came onto the scene much more recently. Although its core tenets have roots in a long history of xenophobia, anti-semetism, and white supremacy, QAnon formally began in 2017

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[9] Depending on the theory, these deleterious consequences can be immediate (including the early-onset of autism, loss of sexual functionality, "conversion to homosexuality," and death) or more delayed (governmental/private sector elites monitoring our behavior for their benefit over time, turning us into cyborgs devoid of autonomy, etc.) (Jolley and Douglas 2014; Kalil, Silveira, Pinherio and Kalil 2021)

when the mysterious figure "Q" told the world through a report on the Japanese network 4-chan

that the CIA had completed plans to arrest the then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. The

post gained a cult following overnight, and it would serve as the foundation of the conspiracy.

Like anti-vaxxers, "Qult"[10] members have diverse and wide-ranging beliefs. Core tenets of

QAnon include notions that the world is run by a group of pedophilic, lizard-like elites that

harvest the blood of children, Jewish-created space lasers control the climate, and Donald Trump

is the "chosen one," destined to overthrow the current political order (Bloom and Moskalenko

2021; Bodner, Welsh, and Brodie 2020; Moskalenko and McCauley 2021; Amarasingam and

Argentino 2020; Zuckerman 2019).

QAnon and the anti-vaccine movement are among the largest extant conspiracy theories.

Although the fragmented status of these conspiracy theories[11] make predictions difficult, current

estimations find that hundreds of millions of people world-wide express vaccine hesitancy tied to

conspiratorial thought[12] and that 20% of the U.S. take core QAnon tenets to be true.[13] QAnon and

the anti-vaccine conspiracy theories are also politically important. Anti-vaxxers constitute a

significant voting block, and candidates across the political spectrum call upon anti-vaccine

rhetoric to secure these votes and categorize themselves as oppositional to establishment politics

(Hornsey et al. 2021; Bodner et al. 2020). Many scholars today detail the dangers that QAnon

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[10] This is a term that Qanon conspiracy theorists use to refer to themselves collectively (Boom and Moskalenko 2021).

[11] Unlike some conspiracy theories of the past, current iterations of the anti-vaccine conspiracy theory and QAnon share no fundamental text (e.g.The Elders of Zion) on which they rely. Consequently, adherents have a wide-range of beliefs and engage in a wide range of practices, a fact that greatly limits the ability for demographic estimations to be definitive.

[12] As with other subjective demographic information, QAnon and Anti-vaccine conspiracy theories conducted through polling methods leave room for interpretation. Moreover, the fluid nature of conspiracy theory belief makes operational definitions especially difficult. Recent work in demography has shown that different ways of operationalizing conspiracy theory belief "lead to estimates that varied by a factor of eight" (Jensen 2013; Tingley and Wagner 2017).

[13] It should also be noted that QAnon is not a specifically U.S.-centered phenomenon, with members (sometimes hundreds of thousands) in over 80 countries (Argentino 2020).

and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories present. Thousands of individuals in the U.S. alone are dead because of QAnon, either because they pursued dangerous activities advocated by the theory or because they were killed at the hand of a crazed QAnon supporter (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). In 2019, the FBI categorized QAnon as a "domestic terror threat" (FBI, 2019). Multiple individuals have been elected to congress who self-identify with QAnon and spread its teachings while campaigning and while in office, and more continue to run. Although QAnon started in the U.S., it is quickly spreading around the Western World, with nations far and wide losing the fight against its misinformation (Barker 2020; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Similarly, the anti-vaccine conspiracy theory has been part of a social milieu in which tens of millions have died worldwide–the coronavirus.

Both movements thus have distinct origins, beliefs, and followers, raising the question of what analytical leverage might be gained by analyzing them in tandem. My reasons are threefold. First, both are "big tent" conspiracy theories, meaning that both conspiracies incorporate narratives drawn from other conspiracy theories that could be reinterpreted to fit the grander narrative of the movements (Zuckerman 2019). Second, unlike many conspiracy theories of the 19th century,[14] these conspiracy theories are leaderless,[15] textless, and internally-contradictory. Third, I argue that they are both symptoms of the same underlying social forces. Through the analysis of cultural texts associated with both conspiracies, I argue that the mass-popularity and political significance of these theories is due not merely to the anti-elite sentiment that characterizes our contemporary age. Instead, I argue that the reasons that people believe these theories have been many years in the making, and can be traced back as being consequences,

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[14] As a point of comparison, consider the particular form of anti-semitic conspiracy theorizing found in the conspiratorial text *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,* written in 1903.

[15] While particularly zealous conspiracy theorists may organize events or information to grow the social movement, these actions are largely ad-hoc and decentralized.

albeit largely unanticipated and contrary to the mission, of the Enlightenment. In particular, I focus on the Enlightenment's mission to disseminate knowledge.

Methods

To approach an explanation of the contemporary appeal of Big-tent conspiracy theories and nationalist populism, I analyzed cultural texts of three sorts: political speeches of nationalist populist candidates, social media messages circulated in QAnon and Anti-vaccine "groups" from the years 2018 to 2022, and propaganda documentaries created by affluent conspiracy theorists to spread their theories of interest. I follow the previous literature in studying conspiracy theories in a sociological context through the study of cultural texts. There is a long history of examining cultural texts to understand the zeitgeist of an era. Fredric Jameson (1991) analyzed hundreds of years of Western Literature to understand the "Postmodern Age," and Roland Barthes (1972) probed everything from advertisements to professional wrestling to the cover of Time magazine to understand the pervasive anti-black racism during colonial and neo-colonial times.

To study big-tent conspiracy theories, I investigated two categories of cultural texts. First, I looked into the content of television programs created by QAnon and Anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists. I focused particular attention on three of the most popular documentaries: "Vaxxed," "Vaxxed II," and "Plandemic." Second, I studied messages from Twitter, Facebook, Gab, and 4-chan. These are four of the largest sources of misinformation and places where QAnon and anti-vaxxine messaging is spread. To study nationalist populism, I examined the speeches of Trump, Bolsonaro, and Orban. These leaders were chosen on account of their implication in large-scale political demonstrations involving claims that elections were "stolen" through the actions of corrupt individuals. Trump's rhetoric facilitated the January 6th capital insurrection in

2021, Bolsonaro's rhetoric facilitated the storming of the capital of Brazil in 2023, and Orban's rhetoric facilitated the storming of the Hungarian state television headquarters, as well as weeks of violent confrontations with police in 2006 (Alaniz, Dodson, and Dmello 2021; Fogarasi 2016; Felinto and Grusin 2022).

Historically, much work on conspiracy theories has focused on the actions of individuals. This includes the specific speech acts used by conspiracy theorists, the inability of scientists to effectively communicate information to the public,[16] and malicious acts of those in power to further increase their social and political standing (Blaskiewicz 2013; Bolsen, Palm, and Kingsland 2020; Zuckerman 2019; Butters 2022). More recently, there has been a contemporary sociological intervention that focuses instead on the structural issues that undergird contemporary conspiratorial belief (Jaworsky 2021; Boltanski 2014; Olmsted 2011; 2019). My project follows and builds upon this trajectory, investigating structural changes that occurred since the Enlightenment.

In the realm of populism, my work has more precedent in the literature. I follow in the history of scholars that hold that societal changes profoundly affect the appeal of populist tropes and narratives, referred to as "structure-based" populist explanations (e.g. Brubaker 2017; Berman 2021). My discussion of the importance of the dissatisfaction with burnout shares much resonance with "sociocultural grievances" inclined explanations, which form part of the "demand-side" literature (Berman 2021; Caldwell 2009; Murray 2017). In my discussion of contemporary media practices in chapter 2, my approach is indebted to the lineage of scholars that argue that populism is increasingly propagated "through" the media, rather than "by" the

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[16] Interestingly, such claims have been increasingly challenged by those even outside of sociology, even in political science (e.g. Iyengar and Massey 2018).

individual choices of specific media actors (Esser, Stepinska, and Hopmann 2017; Mazzoleni 2008).

Incorporating these perspectives, the thesis is organized as follows. In chapter one, I analyze QAnon, Anti-vaxx, and nationalist populist cultural texts to argue that the speed and scale of information flow stemming out of the Enlightenment facilitates conspiratorial belief and nationalist populism because of its association with the social-psychological issue of burnout. Tracing empirically documented social-psychological trends, I show how membership in conspiracy theories and nationalist populist communities functions as an ameliorative measure towards burnout. Chapter two examines the Enlightenment's commitment toward unabated spread of information in association with the development and frequent use of algorithms in the arena of social media. Since social media has become a key site for the spread of conspiracy theories and nationalist populism, I show that this is because the *content* of these conspiracy theories and nationalist populism have the very characteristics that algorithms select to spread like media wildfire. And even in cases where emboldened individuals seek to halt the spread of misinformation associated with the social movements under my purview, they have difficulty due to the infrastructures that modernity creates. I describe how the resulting situation is not unlike a runaway train in which even the most capable and eager conductor cannot steer the train onto a different and safer track. I conclude with a call to action inspired by the social-scientific "inoculation theory" as a preventative measure against dangerous spreads of mis and disinformation.

Chapter 1

A Little Bit of Everything All of the Time: Speed and Burnout

> Could I interest you in everything all of the time?
> A little bit of everything all of the time
> Apathy's a tragedy
> *And boredom is a crime*
> Anything and everything
> All of the time.
> (Bo Burnham)

Since the dawn of the Enlightenment's mission to render the social and material world knowable, technological advancements have greatly expanded the dissemination of new knowledge. The speed and scale of information flow has increased exponentially over the last half-century in multiple domains.[17] Since 1945, the average shot lengths in movies, advertisements, and documentaries has increased by a factor of at least fifty, and the speed with which speeches are delivered in parliament has risen by fifty percent (Cutting, Delong, and Nothelfer 2010; Wollen 2002; Eriksen 2001: 71). Since 1950, the number of lawsuits filed yearly has increased from 50,000 to 400 *million* (Federal Judicial Caseload Statistics 2021). And since the 1990s, media scholars have written of a "Fourth Information Revolution," whereby news and social-media platforms can disseminate information at unprecedented speeds and scales. The effect has been a condition that Bimber (2007: 16) refers to as "information abundance." In such a social milieu, contemporary news and social-media platforms can disseminate information even more quickly (Phillips 2012, 671; Bruns 2013).[18]

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[17] As the Ethnomusicologist Timothy D. Taylor (2016: 131) puts it "so much of neoliberal capitalism' is simply "a matter of speed and scale."

[18] The number of news sources has also greatly increased over the last few decades, further accelerating the speed and scale of information flow (Fenton 2010).

This acceleration in the dissemination of knowledge surely has important benefits. As Hardt and Negri (2009) describe, the technology that enabled the hyper-speed age may foster a more egalitarian order, providing more individuals with the means to make their voices heard. More recently, scholars have championed the utility of citizen-produced content as a form of "liberation technology," which allows for the monitoring of election processes and police actions (Diamond 2015; Jack and Tuli 2021). Other scholars highlight the ability of social media to quickly and effectively organize protests and create new methods of political participation (Jenzen, Erhart, Ezlen-Ziya, Korkut, and McGarry 2021; Karakaya and Glazier 2019).[19]

However, the increase in the speed and scale of information flow has also been accused of having more deleterious effects. Recent work in evolutionary biology shows that the human mind lacks the capacity to adequately process the sheer amount of information that individuals in advanced industrial societies are bombarded with on a daily basis. Particular attention has focused on social media, email and workforce settings (Rodriguez, Gummadi, and Schoelkopf 2014; Kooti et al. 2015).[20] Such findings are in concert with research that highlights how individuals are more likely to fall prey to psychological fallacies when encountering large quantities of information at great speeds (Kahneman, Sibony, and Sunstein 2021; Costello and Watts 2014; 2016). As cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker (2021: 288) puts it, many of our mental faculties "work well in some environments and for some purposes" but "go awry when applied at scale."

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[19] Certain instances of social media use towards the organization of political events have been more effective than others. On one side of the spectrum, a wide selection of social media platforms were instrumental in organizing the 2017 Women's March in Washington DC and to sustain the social movement in time periods between large events (Einwohner and Rochford 2019; Nicolini and Hansen 2018). Conversely, scholars have highlighted the relationship between performative support of the Black Lives Matter movement on social media and "social noise," a relationship that often obfuscates messaging of content and logistics (Madali, Alsaid, and Hawamdeh 2022; Apuke, Omar, Tunca, and Gerver 2022).

[20] It is here worth remembering Burrell and Fourcade's (2021:214) observation that the "flip side of this democratization of access and development was the intensification of user surveillance and manipulation."

On a societal level, the rapid increase in the speed and scale of information flow of late has been implicated in a variety of social problems. In this chapter I argue that burnout, a social problem enabled by speed, can help us better understand the contemporary appeal of big-tent conspiracy theories and nationalist populism. Towards this end, I first describe attempts of previous theorists to grasp how changes in the speed of information flow influences the thought of individuals living under industrial capitalism, and briefly detail the contemporary empirical work on burnout coming from psychology and cultural studies. Next, I engage in a cultural textual analysis of social media messages, propaganda documentaries, and political speeches. Armed with the information revealed from this analysis, I aim to trace the convergences and divergences between the empirical work on burnout and the theoretical foundations of the "social acceleration" thesis described by the contemporary cultural sociologist Hartmut Rosa. I conclude by more explicitly linking the aforementioned resulting social and political changes with the logic of the Enlightenment.

Speed and Burnout

Members of the Frankfurt School[21] believed that the biological and psychological maladies associated with the speedup of information flow led to serious issues on a societal level. Social theorists and sociologists Adorno, Horkheimer, Benjamin, and Marcuse theorized that it would lengthen the workday, alienate individuals in their labor while overwhelming their mental life, and render art a less revolutionary force–all of which they predicted would make misinformation and fascist domination more appealing and difficult to combat (Adorno and

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[21] The Frankfurt School was a group of sociologists and political philosophers who wrote throughout the 20th century, especially in the first half. Originally working out of Frankfurt, Germany, they operated as a diaspora after the rise of Adolf Hitler. Among their most notable contributions were investigations into the rise of Fascism and the merging of Freudian and Marxist theories.

Horkheimer 1994 [1947]: 122; Marcuse 2013 [1964]; Benjamin 2007 [1935; 1940]).[22]

Contemporary scholars in the sociology of culture continue to probe the relationship between the increase in the speed and scale of information flow and the changing character of social relations (e.g. Wajcman and Dodd 2016; Hassan 2007; 2009; Tredinnick 2008; Rosa 2013; 2019). As Hartmut Rosa (2013:10) puts it, "acceleration has manifold cultural, ethical, psychological, political and ecological consequences: it changes the core of our fundamental being in space and time."

Such observations are an essential starting point to fully understand the contemporary appeal of big tent conspiracy theories. This is due to the relationship between "social acceleration" and a social pathology that has come to dominate contemporary Western societies: burnout. Often discussed imprecisely in everyday discourse, burnout is a multifaceted psychological condition associated with distance from one's job, feelings of cynicism or depersonalization, a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment, exhaustion, and communal disengagement (Maslach, Shaufeli, and Leiter 2001; Schwarzer, Schimitz, and Tang 2000; Chen 2022).[23] Perhaps unsurprisingly, information overload is one of the prime drivers of contemporary burnout (Furlow 2020; Rutkowski and Saunders 2010).

Concomitant with the increase in the dissemination of knowledge, rates of various types of burnout (including the Maslach Burnout Inventory (the "gold standard for work on burnout")[24]

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[22] It should be noted that Benjamin, perhaps more than the other theorists, was less deterministic in this regard. For example, while he believed strongly that the mechanical reproduction of art had the potential to make art a tool for fascist domination, he also left open the possibility for this same technology to be utilized to create art for revolutionary purposes (Benjamin 2007 [1935]: 242).

[23] While there is much overlap between the categories of burnout and *anomie,* burnout has the distinctive association with information overload and the workforce. Also, for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to focus on burnout because it is more easily quantified in a consistent way than is *anomie.*

[24] The (MBI) measures burnout as defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). Although the ICD is clear that the MBI is specifically associated with workplace burnout, various forms of burnout related to the increase in the speed and scale of information flow (such as social

have risen greatly over the last few decades (Moss 2021). The social pathology currently looms so large that cultural theorist Byung-Chul Han (2015) characterizes our current political order as the "burnout society." Among a host of negative societal effects, burnout is associated with a heightened rate of social and political disengagement (Rogala et al. 2016; Halbesleben, Osburn, and Mumford 2006).[25]

Many social scientists have investigated the phenomenon of burnout (Maslach 2017; Hammer 2021; Simon, Holmes, and Schwartz 2020; Wei, Ji, Li, and Zhang 2016). Of the possible solutions advanced, contemporary scholars across disciplinary boundaries have found activities that promote community, "social connectedness," and meaning to be one of the few effective methods of alleviating burnout (Chen 2022; West, Dyrbe, and Shanafelt 2018; Southwick and Southwick 2020). However, finding avenues to pursue communal, restorative, and meaningful actions is easier said than done, as such activities have been on the decline in the U.S–and throughout the Western world—for decades (Putnam 2000; Shapira 2001; Redclift 1973).[26] Faced with a dearth of such opportunities, burned out individuals seek restorative activities wherever they can find them. In the next section, I analyze cultural texts associated with the anti-vaccine and QAnon conspiracy theories and argue that they provide an increasingly-rare opportunity for community, social support, and meaning.

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media burnout) have also risen greatly in recent decades (Han 2018; Wu, Ma, Wang, and Wang 2021; Liu and Ma 2021)

[25] As Rosa (2019: 42) eloquently puts it, a person suffering from burnout experiences the world as "cold, dead, pale, empty, and mute."

[26] Theorizing these developments of communal decline in a new fashion, Rosa (2019: 42) asserts that "the resonant axes of family and work so central to modernity… fall silent in a state of burnout."

Big Tent Conspiracy Theories as an Avenue for Social Support in a Burned-Out State

Against the enervation that characterizes burnout, the internally-contradictory, textless, leaderless "big tent"[27] QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories of provide an avenue for meaning, collective solidarity and social support. A first-time visitor to the website 8-kun (the formal home of QAnon) might expect to be bombarded with bitter, inflammatory, and sexist rhetoric–rhetoric that led FBI agents to characterize the movement as a "domestic terror threat." Instead, one will be welcomed with a greeting of comfort and refuge: "New Here? Welcome home, digital soldier."

An emphasis on community is a prominent and commonly-recurring theme in QAnon posts. Q-drops are social media posts sent by the mysterious and anonymous supposed founder of QAnon, "Q." Figures 1 and 2 below display a pair of Q-drops that share a frequently employed two-part construction. First, Q lists a series of binary oppositions, purported to be goals of division fostered by the decried elite. Second, Q implores his/her followers to remain united against this attempt to divide the 99% of us that are not part of the cabal.

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[27] As I describe in the introduction, both QAnon and anti-vaccine movements can be conceptualized as "big tent" conspiracy theories, as both theories quickly evolve and add new conspiracies into their systems (Marwick and Partin 2022; Stein 2017).

(Figure 1)

Q-Drop 2174, written September 15, 2018.

(Figure 2)

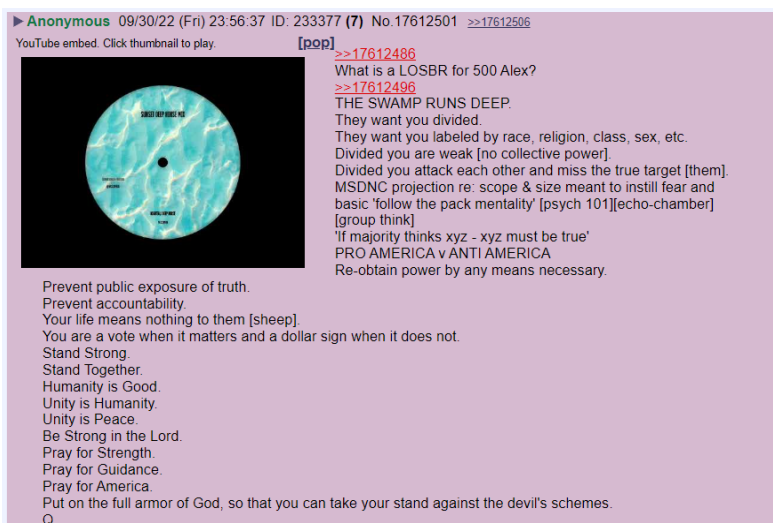

Q-Drop 2994, written March 9, 2019.

According to Q, an emphasis on unity is an essential element in being a part of QAnon. In effect, Q asserts that while elites try to divide us, we must remain united, as unity represents "love," "humanity," and "peace" (see Figures 3 and 4 below).

(Figure 3)
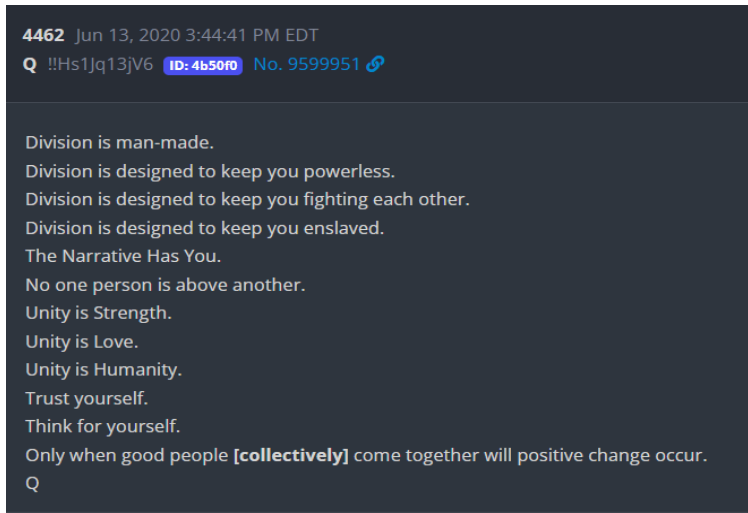
Q-Drop 4462, written June 13, 2020

(Figure 4)

Q-Drop 4397, written June 3, 2020

This same emphasis on unity in the face of divisiveness carries over in the rhetoric of QAnon supporters on Gab (see Figure 5 below). Gab is a social media platform founded on the principle of unabridged freedom of speech, and is a platform in which big tent conspiracy theories widely circulate (Zeng and Schafer 2021; Cinelli, Etta, Avalle and Quattrociocchi 2022). Far from the fringes, the website has over four million registered users (individuals that have created a personal account), though the number of individuals who have encountered discussions of big tent conspiracy theories on Gab is likely much higher.[28]

(Figure 5)

https://time.com/collection/great-reset/

This is not about R v D.

This is about preserving *our* way of life.

If America falls, the World falls.

Patriots on guard.

A social media post in the Gab group QAnon Patriots.

Communal discourse associated with QAnon is not limited to 8-kun and Gab. An emphasis on community-making is evident throughout a diverse selection of mediums, including Parler, Truth Social, and many others (Sipka, Hannak, and Urman 2022; Blom and Moskalenko 2022; Oxford Analytica 2022). Reminiscent of Benjamin Franklin's "Join or Die" Civil War Snake, prominent phrases of the movement include "divided you are weak, together you are

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[28] Investigating the proliferation of misinformation over social media, the Pew Research Center found that six percent of U.S. adults "regularly" get news from Gab and/or the similar platforms of Bitchute, Gettr, Parlor, Rumble, Telegram, and Truth Social (Stocking et al. 2022).

strong," "We, the people," and"Where we go One We go all! (WWG1WGA),[29] a phrase which has become the de-facto tagline of the movement (Chandler 2020; Hodson and Gosse 2022).

One might also expect bitter, divisive rhetoric from anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists–perhaps lambasting corrupt scientific elites for subjecting future generations to the dangers of vaccination. Yet, an examination of cultural texts of anti-vaxxers once again reveals a peculiar emphasis on communal unity. A turn to the anti-vaccine propaganda documentary film Vaxxed II–widely streamed on mainstream media including Amazon Prime Video and Google Play–highlights this focus. The documentary emphasizes the communal engagement purportedly found among the anti-vaccine community, characterizing this as a central tenet of the anti-vaccine mission. Accompanied by a soothing piano harmony set in G major (a key long associated with "true friendship and faithful love"[30]), anti-vaccination enthusiast Dana Gorman made sure to emphasize that a central goal of her work is "allowing people to feel like they were at [an in-person anti-vaccination event]" and receive the corresponding social support.

Anti-vaxxers are often creative in their messaging, using technology to further amplify the movement's communal appeal. In an effort to create a seemingly-unified imagined community out of geographically-disparate anti-vaxxers, the anti-vaccine documentary filmmakers utilized the application "Periscope," live streaming supporters living throughout the world. As anti-vaxxers "liked" the page, expressing their support of the content on the screen and the anti-vaccine movement as a whole, hundreds of colorful miniature hearts ascended, as if to say "everything's going to be OK as long as we're all in this together" (see Figures 6 and 7 below).

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[29] Interestingly, this phrase was taken from the mostly-forgotten Ridley Scott film *White Squall* released in 1996 (Savage and Sommer 2023).
[30] Steblin 1983.

(Figure 6)

Anti-vaccine activist Polly Tommey and an uncredited black woman expressing their support for the anti-vaccine movement through the online medium of Periscope. One anonymous anti-vaccine activist comments "I love you all!"
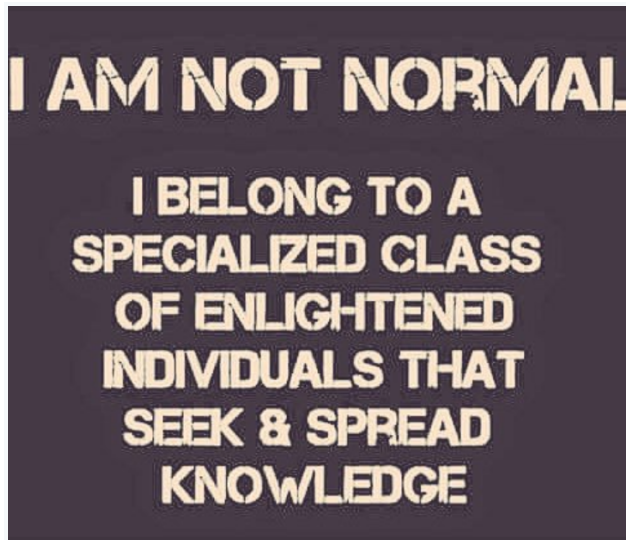
(Figure 7)

An unvaccinated, smiling child held by a parent wearing an anti-vaccine shirt, reading "VAXXED: FROM COVERUP TO CATASTROPHE." At this moment in the documentary, the narration reads "our community grew, and grew, and grew, and grew."

Elsewhere, the rhetoric of QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists provides supporters with a second mechanism for those coping with burnout–an opportunity to find their conspiratorial activities and lives meaningful. Often, the theme of "meaning-making" is invoked through rhetoric that validates the knowledge and experiences of big tent conspiracy theorists, helping to facilitate a process in which they feel part of a community larger than themselves. This form of rhetoric predominantly serves to mitigate burnout in three ways. First, it provides meaning to followers' lives and experiences, identifying followers as the select few who can shed *true* light on the deliberately labyrinthian nature of contemporary politics. Second, this form of rhetoric functions as a method of avoiding feeling invisible, against the degrading and fungible environment which characterizes contemporary capitalist workplaces. Third, "meaning-making" rhetoric sets members of conspiratorial communities apart from the amorphous and ineffable group that QAnon members believe control society and are responsible for their ills.[31] This process of group formation manifests itself through oppositional politics—one of the more effective methods of developing robust and sustained social movements (Almeida 2010) (see Figures 8 and 9).
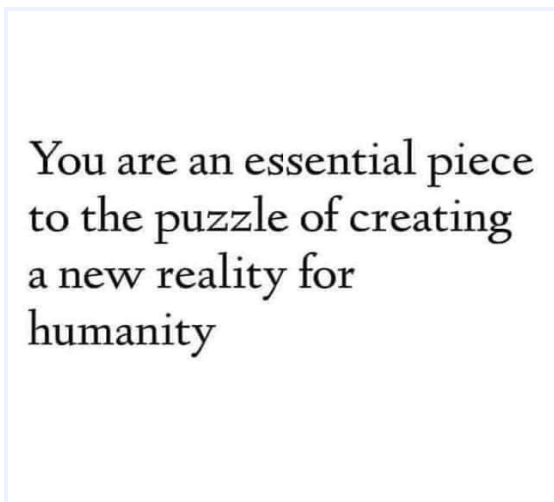
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[31] For Q, the world is divided into three groups of people. QAnon members, who understand the world in which they live; the political elite who control the lives of the masses; and non-QAnon masses, (often referred to as "sheeple.")

(Figure 8)

A social media post in the Gab group *QAnon Patriots,* a public group with over 150,000 members as of September 2022.

(Figure 9)

A social media post in the Gab group "Vaccine Injuries and deaths," a public group with over 60,000 members. Other Gab groups that advance the anti-vaccine conspiracy theory include "The Truth, the Whole Truth about Vaccines," "VACCINES- Exposing the Systemic Genocide of The Entire World," and "Covid/Vaccine Hoax"

The drumbeat of collective engagement, unity, and meaning in the cultural texts associated with anti-vaccine and QAnon movements may tempt one to criticize the producers of this is content for creating a 'community' that is both passive and atomistic. However, QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy movements provide a wide variety of avenues for active engagement. "Qult" members[32] and anti-vaxxers collectively aim to discover the "truth" underlying contemporary society–including who is responsible for their ills, how the plot works, and what forms of action they can take to improve their lives. Much of this activity, including engagement in youtube live-streams, participation in social media message chains, and membership in virtual groups, occurs online. However, unlike conspiracy theories of the past (and many extant conspiracy theories as well), QAnon has been described as "radically participatory" due to its emphasis on "active engagement with social media" and its "collaborative, participatory dynamic" (Zuckerman 2019; Thompson 2022; Hannah 2021a; 2021b; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Similarly, scholars have found that community building "has been central to the growth of the anti-vaccination movement online" (Duchsherer et al. 2020: 420; Van Raemdonck 2019).

Moreover, in an environment of mass-burnout, Qult members and anti-vaxxers often engage in well attended in-person events, a rare development in the current era of communal decline. The success of these in-person gatherings can be tied to the strong sense of community cultivated in the digital realm. Organized events are found throughout all corners of the Western and Eastern world, and include conferences, symposia, rallies and–in extreme cases–violent acts. Recent examples include the "Patriot Double-Down Convention" in Las Vegas, the "God and Country Patriot Roundup" in Dallas, "YamatoQ" demonstrations in Shibuya Japan, the storming

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[32]"Qult" is a neologism that QAnon supporters regularly utilize to categorize themselves as a unified part of the movement (Bodner, Welch, Brodie, Muldoon, Leech, and Marshall 2021: 6).

of the German Parliament in August 2020, and hundreds of "Save the Children Rallies" held worldwide, ranging from Los Angeles to London (Bracewell 2021; Yomiuri Shimbun 2022; Keady 2021). At the U.S. Capital insurrection on January 6th, 2021, QAnon supporters sporting garb of the conspiracy were found widely throughout the crowd.[33] Recently, mainstream in-person events have been appropriated by the QAnon movement, as the 2021 Conservative Political Action Committee saw an open embrace of QAnon followers, with the organizers selling QAnon merchandise at the event (Monacelli 2021). May 2022 saw a "Secret Space Conference" in which QAnon believers relayed memories of the trauma they experienced in past lives at the hands of aliens, including being killed and re-animated hundreds of times, being abudcted into reptilian sex slavery rings on Mars, and fed dog food by their alien overlords (QAnon Anonymous 2022).

Like the structural changes examined at length by critical theorists of modernity, the effects of a blind commitment towards the increase in the speed of information has not been confined to the realm of conspiratorial belief. Instead, the speedup of information and social life has wide-ranging societal impact. In what follows, I examine the relationship between the increase in the speed and scale of information flow and the rise of a second large-scale social movement—the contemporary appeal of nationalist populism.

Brothers in Arms: The Appeal of Selectively Communal Populist Rhetoric in the Burnout Society

Against the staleness of burnout, populist nationalist rhetoric also presents a refreshing source of perceived–and in many cases, actual–community. A core tenet of nationalist populism is the deification of "the people," (citizens of a given national community) contrasted against

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[33] The "QAnon Shaman" attracted particular focus in the public eye, due in no small part to his dawning of a fur headdress during his time trespassing on the senate floor.

some party deemed Other and inferior (Laclau 2005). While the Othered party varies by place, time, and culture, perennial candidates include arcane elites and ethnic minorities (Canovan 1999, 3; Turk 2018). Contemporary populist leaders emphasize the importance of "the people'" as a core aspect of their rhetoric. Bernie Sanders on the campaign trail proclaimed frequently the importance of pitting "the power of the people against the billionaire class" (Judis 2016: 60). Tayyip Erdogan followed a similar strategy, "[communicating] with the people in a common manner as one of them" while demonizing the population and institutions of the West for being "inferior" to Turkey on political and economic grounds (Duzgit 2016: 55). In a state of burnout, the prospects for being a part of a unified populus is especially appealing.[34]

A key aspect of the broad socio-political appeal of populism in a state of burnout is the "deeply ambiguous" category of "the people" (Brubaker 2017: 359). Since populism is conceptualized in many different ways, individuals of various backgrounds, ideologies, and political leanings can see themselves as part of "the people." The *nationalist* dimension of nationalist populism adds a further layer of ambiguity, as individuals invoke various components of "the nation" to emphasize as constitutive of their identity. Populist leaders take advantage of this fact, emphasizing different demographics of "the nation" in different scenarios. When speaking to rural agricultural communities, Trump waxes poetically about how "our nation was founded by farmers" (Trump 2018). When speaking to religious audiences, Trump suggests that "real Americans are precisely two things: white and Christian" (Johnson 2019: 2).[35]

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[34] Medical professionals have even advocated a "populist approach" to alleviating the public health crisis of mass burnout (Rehder, Adair, and Sexton 2021).

[35] For a specific example, Trump's birtherism attacks on former president Obama were centered on accusations that the mixed-race president was neither American nor Christian (Gerardo 2020).

Of course, populist leaders are not the only rulers to use comforting rhetoric when speaking with strategic demographics to secure political support. Strategic emotional rhetoric is characteristic of many political movements. Weber was among the first to note that charismatic authority is not limited to that particular form of politics, and much contemporary work has shown that political movements of various forms rely heavily on emotional rhetoric (Ioanide 2015; Benjamin, Bernstein, and Motzafi-Haller 2011). Perhaps unsurprisingly, scholars specializing in public health have found emotional appeals to be central in movements advocating for social work and child protection (Warner 2015; 2018; Parton 2014). However, aspects of populist discourse are especially appealing in the burnout society, setting it apart from the political movements described above. A crucial facet of the populist rhetorical style is an attempt by rulers to situate themselves as members close to the category of "the people" (Esktrom and Merton 2017). Scholars have found this tactic to be particularly effective in fostering powerful political-group formation, an especially appealing characteristic in the current "burnout society."

Taking a similar approach to propagators of big-tent conspiracy theories, nationalist populists implore their supporters to remain united, an especially appealing prospect in the burnout society (Condor et al. 2018: Tomz and Houweling 2009). Nationalist populists insist that their supporters' feelings of division and burnout are not due to a single ossified and unchanging group. Instead, nationalist populists avow that many disparate and often contradictory groups are responsible for this division, an amorphous "the they." In this way, a burned-out populus can envision various, often contradictory, groups as being responsible for their troubles–ranging from immigrants to silicon-valley elites to sexual minorities (Ferrari 2020; Lazaridis, Campani, and Benveniste 2016.)

Trump, Orban, and Bolsonaro all aim to situate themselves as members of the porous category of "the people" in their discourse. Orban uses various techniques to accomplish this, a few of which can be seen in his opening remarks at the 2022 Conservative Political Action Convention (CPAC). Using metaphors and symbols indicative of "Americanness" while introducing himself to the thunderous applause of the Texas crowd, Orban characterizes himself as an "old-fashioned freedom fighter," claiming proudly to share this quality "in common" with his American supporters. Following Donald Trump's political endorsement, Orban indexed America's pastime with the phrase "Yesterday's home runs don't win today's games" when speaking about his political success. Orban's attempts to situate himself as a member of "the people" is not restricted to this speech, as various scholars have found topos of "we" and "other" to be central to Orban's discourse (Lamour and Varga 2020: 344; Visnovitz and Jenne 2021).

Trump also often attempts to situate himself as a member of "the people" in his rhetoric and through his public performances. Years before his campaign for president, Trump wrote in 2011 that "Washington needs to get tough and fight for 'We the People'" (Judis 2016: 52). As president, Trump's rhetoric continued to situate himself as a member of "the people." Towards this end, Trump regularly characterizes himself as a "political outsider," a man of humble upbringing (Gallagher 2019; Finley and Esposito 2020). In this way, Trump constructs a persona capable of relating and providing comfort to his supporters. This action has a dual function; it allows Trump to simultaneously provide sympathy for his burned-out supporters while scapegoating "othered" elites, a long-successful technique for driving up political support in a divisive political climate.

Given his affluent upbringing and elite social status, it may seem that Trump would have a difficult time positioning himself as a member of "the people." Famously, Trump's comments

to NBC news that he received a "small loan of a million dollars" to jumpstart his real estate business received backlash in the mainstream media, one of the many political scandals that pundits believed would generate his political downfall (Gass 2015). Yet, such scandals have had little effect on Trump's popularity among his core-supporters. Indeed, Trump supporters across place and time relay that the former president shares their concerns, goals, and even his socio-economic status, his social standing and wealth notwithstanding (Hochschild 2017; Silva 2019). In some cases, Trump has even appropriated the concept of "the elite" for his own political benefit. Speaking to a crowd of supporters in Phoenix Arizona, Trump quipped "I think–you know what? I think we're the elites. *They're not* the elites." The crowd responded with clamoring applause.

Bolsonaro also situates himself as a member of the people rhetorically. Analyzing the leader's speech patterns, Garcia (2019) argues that Bolsonoaro performs "simultaneously as charismatic leader and man of 'the people,' someone *sharing* their language, tastes, and culture." Tamaki and Fuks (2020) note that Bolsonaro uses the terms "we" and "our" disproportionately often in his speeches to highlight his identification with popular ideas among his supporters. Like Trump, Bolsonaro regularly characterizes himself as a "political outsider," opposing himself to establishment politicians and likening himself to "the people" (Winter 2020; Renno 2020). Also like Trump, Bolsonaro often discusses his previous forms of hard work, distrust of political elites, and commitment towards "traditional" values in his image-forming activity (Lakkanen 2021; Renno 2020; Nunes 2020; Rocha and Medeiros 2021; Araujo and Prior 2021). A master of social media, Bolsonaro can effectively situate himself as a member of "the people" without the use of words. Analyzing 845 photographs posted on Bolsonaro's instagram account over a

two-year period, Mendoca and Caetano (2021: 222) found a prominent and recurring theme of the account to be an attempt to depict Bolsonaro as a "mirror of the people."

Orban too regularly embraces communal rhetoric imploring his followers to remain united against the porous and broad category of "the they." This approach can be seen in a 2002 political speech in which Orban advocates for an integration approach to immigration, replete with rhetoric of comfort and communal unity. Explaining the justification for immigration policy, Orban notes that "Integration meant that **we** wanted to belong to a **community** of values, such as freedom, independence, nationalism, sovereignty, democracy, individual responsibility….and so on." Positioning himself as a member of "the people" while continuing to advocate for integration for reasons of community, Orban continues his speech. "**Our** attitude towards [integration] has not changed. Hungarians continue to believe in the same values, and want to be part of the European and the trans-Atlantic **community**. **We** would like to be part of it because **we** feel **home** there" (emphasis added).[36]

Trump also frequently embraces rhetoric of community and unity. In his speech, Trump primarily relies on "collective terminology" in order to create a sense of unity and common ground with his followers (Aswad 2018). Bucking gendered trends, Trump exhibits much higher levels of communal charismatic constructs than does Hillary Clinton (Aswad 2018). Key aspects of a communal charismatic construct includes a focus on the collective, a similarity to followers, and cooperation (Waldman and Yammarino 1999; Shamir, Arthur, and House 1994; Bligh, Kohles and Meindl 2004). Analyzing over 100 political speeches, two themes of communal

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[36] For Orban, the communal unity that integration afforded is under threat by a divisive force: NATO. Specifically, Orban claims that Nato's actions following the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 11, 2001 led to a loss of "long-term strategic cohesion" and "disunity within Europe." As integration became a more popular political option, Orban too found trouble with the practice on two grounds–that it failed to jive with national interests and was associated (contradictionary enough) with a division–one between the East and West (Meseznikov 2003).

charismatic rhetoric were found to be statistically significant in Trump's speech: collective focus and cooperation (Aswad 2018). Trump often appeals to communal desires and values and calls for unity through his use of *ad populum* (appeals to the crowd) and his emphasis on American exceptionalism (Kauffman 2021; Mercieca 2020). Claims toward remembering American exceptionalism "functioned to unite his supporters behind a hopeful vision of Trump's America, and at the same time … [were] a warning that Americans had abandoned the principles that had made the nation great in the first place" (Mercieca 2020: 64). In his inaugural speech, Trump "unifies the audience by reconstituting its members as "the people " and "rehearses communal values drawn from the past" (Molden 2017: 54-57). Trump references the milestones of the "Trump administration" and refers to himself in the third person to a disproportionate degree, both as strategies to instill a sense of community and camaraderie among his followers (Aswad 2019; Peters and Woolley 2016) .

Bolsonaro, too, frequently urges his supporters to remain united through the use of communal rhetoric (Junior and Gagliardi 2021; Tamaki and Fuks 2020; Foley 2019; Gontijo and Ramos 2020; 2021). While swearing in as president during his inauguration, Bolsonaro spoke at length about his commitment to "unite the people, cherish the family, [and] respect the religions and our Judeo-Christian values." In a 2018 speech, Bolsonaro loudly proclaims, "I have always preached the union of all of us, all under one banner, one green and yellow heart. We cannot be divided. The left divided us and we kept fighting each other. I want a union for all." In a seemingly paradoxical statement coming from a conservative leader staunchly opposed to interracial mixing, toleration of various religions, and non-heterosexual sexual projects,

Bolsonaro reminded his constituents after his 2019 electorate victory that Brazil "is a country for all of us, Brazilians born or at heart. A Brazil of diverse opinions, colors, and orientations."[37]

Of course, Orban, Trump and Bolsonaro also frequently mobilize racially divisive rhetoric in their speech.[38] Trump frequently recites the anti-immigrant "snake poem" at his political speeches and rallies, and is perhaps most famous for referring to Mexican immigrants as "rapists"' while on the campaign trail in 2016. Scholars analyzing Trump's rhetoric have coded it "aggressive" and indicative of "rage" and "malice" (Canizales and Vallejo 2021; Konrad 2018; Pullido et al. 2019; Wang and Liu 2018). Orban celebrates his self-proclaimed role as Europe's only "anti-immigrant politician" and frequently uses racially-charged rhetoric, especially that which vilifies racial and sexual minorities (Kovats 2020; Batten 2019). Bolsonaro too is "notorious for his repeated racist, sexist, and homophobic statements" (Foley 2019; da Silva, Bacelar and Larkins 2019). Speaking to a large group of supporters, Bolsonaro openly embraced violence with the statement: "We will gun down these petralhas here in Acre. I will make all these scoundrels run away from here. Since they like Venezuela so much, they should go there" (Junior and Gagliardi 2020). Indeed, Bolsonaro's entire political project has been described as an "aversion to difference" (Feltran 2020: 95).

The vitriol of these political candidates may seem incompatible with their attempts to foster community among their supporters. However, the exact opposite is in fact the case. A Trump supporter attending a rally in Springfield Missouri in September of 2018 explains this seeming contradiction well. Speaking to New York Times reporter Katie Rogers, the supporter tells Katie that, "If you feel the country is divided, come to one of these rallies. There's a lot of

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[37] Political sociologists Junior and Gagliardi assert that Bolsonaro embodies the persona of "conciliator," a persona which "declares that he will govern for everybody" (Junior and Gagliardi 2020).

[38] In Moffit's' (2016) view, "bad manners" (being unpolished and incorrect) is a key part of the populist style.

unity here." At these political rallies, folks from many different walks of life stand together for a common purpose. They shout the same words at the same time. These communal rallies provide supporters the ability to engage in what French sociologist Emile Durkheim referred to as "collective effervescence." They generate feelings of unity, meaning and community. Of course, feelings of solidarity have been appealing throughout human history. They were appealing when Durkheim analyzed the native peoples of Australia in the early 20th century, and thousands of years before in collective hunting practices of the Huns and the communal intoxication of Dionysian Bacchanals. However, these feelings are uniquely appealing today because they have the ability to ameliorate the pervasive and pressing social problem of burnout.

To review: an unabated commitment towards the speed and scale and information flow leaves individuals living under late capitalism overwhelmed, stressed, and ultimately suffering from the psychological condition of burnout. In the resulting situation, they look for avenues to satisfy their drives for meaning, social support, and a form of community. But they have difficulty in doing so. In an era of continued communal decline, they satisfy these needs increasingly through membership in conspiracy-theory groups and through supporting nationalist populist candidates. This notion holds true both in the imagination, (the mental-life of these individuals) and through participation in in-person events associated with both political movements. So what is the resulting situation? Social movements that have been the epitome of political danger, misinformation, and falsity thrive, fueled by basic human needs. The Enlightenment looms heavy over the entity of this situation. Through the naturalization of the notion that faster is better, the Enlightenment has helped to prepare individuals for belief in these conspiracy theories.

Chapter 2 Because the Machine Told me to: The Submission to Algorithms and the Reification of Speed

Developments in media technology have long affected how individuals view their social world. In early modern Europe, for instance, Anderson (1983) famously theorized that the change from small-scale craft publishing to large-scale commodity production of print media was a key factor in leading individuals to conceptualize the world along nationalist lines. Along with technology, decisions over content—whether made by state policies or by the policies of profit-oriented firms—are significant in influencing public opinion.[39] The Federal Communications Commission's abolition of the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, which removed the requirement for broadcasters to provide contrasting views on matters of public interest, was associated with an increase in misinformation and partisanism (Simmons 2022). As media critic Denis McQuail (1979: 28) put it, the media plays a significant role in "[establishing] an order of priorities in a society about its problems and objectives."

In this chapter I show how the Enlightenment's commitment towards increasing knowledge dissemination helped to reify the speed and scale of information flow and facilitate the contemporary situation in which speed in reporting is one of the most valued considerations. Although this commitment has many benefits, I highlight one of its problems: it increases the appeal of big-tent conspiracy theories and nationalist populism. This is because stories that news corporations are inclined to report on involve highly emotional rhetoric, controversial topics, and anti-elite messaging--the bedrock on which both big-tent conspiracy theories and nationalist populism stand. Far from being harmless, I show how recent work in social-psychology has

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[39] These outcomes are part of a larger literature that has shown the historic (although often limited logistically) power of states to censor content.

empirically documented that repeated exposure to stimuli in the area of news is frequently

equated with increased favorability, and even acceptance, of the stimuli presented.

This chapter further argues that the algorithm–the latest stage in the unabated

commitment towards speed in the arena of news— facilitates the spread of populist and

conspiratorial messaging in unprecedented ways. Armed with the power of the algorithm,

messages are uniquely primed towards increased attention and amplification and also have the

ability to resist censorship. Building upon contemporary sociological and anthropological theory,

I conclude that the effective censorship of such messages necessitates structural changes,

changes that are outside the purview of individual actors. By examining the specific example of

Trump announcing his run for president, I argue that the resulting situation is not unlike a

runaway train, leaving even the most capable and willing conductor unable to change tracks.

Divisive Rhetoric and the Submission to Algorithms: A New Sovereign in the Proliferation of Big
Tent Conspiracy Theories

Media sources have long valued speed in reporting, often to their detriment; the Chicago

Daily Tribune's premature headline "Dewey Defeats Truman" in 1948 remains arguably the most

infamous case. Since then, technological advancements have allowed media sources to distribute

information at speeds previously unthinkable. Due to a near-universal belief that faster is better

("the reification of speed"),[40] social media platforms have largely deferred their news-choosing

powers to non-human actors in the form of algorithms to accomplish this goal (van Dalen 2012;

Cornia, Sehl, Levy, and Nelsen; 2018; Thorson 2020).

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[40] Marx was among the first to note that the maintenance of capitalism necessitates continuous acceleration in the efficiency of the means of production (Marx 1992: Chapters 1, 5). Later social theorists have found that speed itself has been reified to an extent that it constitutes a "speed is progress trope," a notion in which greater speeds were thought to be inherently good due to their association with the teleological aspects of the Enlightenment (Duclos, Criado, and Nguyen 2017). Today, software engineers deem codes "perfect" when their run-times are optimized.

Algorithms are digitized instructions designed to carry out a task; in the case of social media and news organizations, algorithms are tasked with maximizing viewership—whether calculated by views, clicks, likes, or retweets. When programmed to perform this task, algorithms are capable of increasing these metrics far faster and more cheaply than individuals. While speed was always important, the shift away from traditional news-gathering sources towards those on social media (and other alternative news sources)—an arena in which conspiracy theories are invoked more frequently and spread more quickly—has made the pursuit of speed ever more lucrative (Dimmick, Chen, and Li 2004; Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, and Madden 2015; del Vicario et al. 2016).

Although surrendering the reins of news choice to algorithms was an economic success for many news organizations, the social ramifications have proven much more pernicious. To quote Durkheim (2010 [1897]: 216), news platforms that embrace the use of algorithms, "instead of regulating economic life… have become its tool and servant." Once algorithms are coded for a particular purpose, they aim to achieve that purpose as efficiently and accurately as possible—regardless of all other considerations. If the algorithm is programmed to maximize viewership, it soon "learns" that certain posts attract more views than others. Posts that are controversial, attack elites as the source of problems, and/or engage in emotional rhetoric (i.e. characteristics that are the very essence of big tent conspiracy theories and their posts) therefore become selected for special treatment by the algorithm.

Contemporary research has documented that the most popular, and thus economically profitable, news stories center upon elites, controversial figures, and emotional debates (Harcup and O'Neill 2001; 2017; de los Santos and Nabi 2019). Discussions of QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories serve well the needs of for-profit media, as the stories are virtually

guaranteed to gain an audience. Anti-elite sentiment is a crucial component of the anti-vaccine and QAnon conspiracy theories. Many anti-vaxxers believe that political elites profit from vaccines they know to be deadly, while many Qult members hold that pedophilic elites are responsible for a litany of social and political problems (Kata 2012; Hughes et al. 2021; Bloom and Moskalenko 2021). Additionally, leaders of both movements characterize themselves as "outsiders" to the current order (whether epistemological or political). Thus, it is hardly surprising that news stories about QAnon and the anti-vaccine conspiracy theory are often referred to, categorized, and coded as "controversial" by the algorithm (Xu and Sasahara 2022; Maci 2019; Dube, Vivion, and MacDonald 2015). Finally, emotional appeals are key in the discourse of both camps (Bloom and Moskalenko 2021; Cuesta-Cambra, Martinez and Gonzalez 2019).

The desire for "clicks" also causes information to be disseminated repeatedly even to those who do not seek it out. News stories covering QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories are widely broadcasted over various media, as the motive for profit encourages the spread of arresting mis/disinformation.[41] These structural constraints are especially pernicious in a social environment thoroughly permeated by media sources that deify sensationalism and conflict. Note the difference between the saturation of conspiracy theories today with the partisan or ideological media of the past. Consumers of a different generation could purchase the Republican *Chicago Tribune* or the Democratic *Chicago Times*, or even the Chicago Socialist newspaper *The American Appeal*. Conversely, today's consumers find it almost impossible to avoid QAnon and anti-vaccine sentiments. Even aimlessly viewing "shorts" on YouTube featuring humorous

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[41] Misinformation and disinformation are often conflated concepts, but they are categorically distinct. Misinformation refers to the spread of false information as the result of an error: "getting the facts wrong." Disinformation refers to the deliberate spread of false information in an effort to mislead (American Psychological Association 2022; Guess and Lyons 2020).

TikTok clips is no respite from conspiracy theories, as these shorts are interspersed with QAnon and anti-vaccination propaganda (Cho 2022). Media scholars Couldry and Hepp (2016) insist that media participation is no longer an individual choice, arguing that we are entering a new phase of "deep mediasation" that overarches "every domain of life." Expressing a similar notion, media culture professor Mark Deuze (2012: xiii) argues that, "we do not live with, but in media" in our contemporary hyper-real age. When events occur that involve the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, ideas associated with them spread quickly through digital means. When Q made his/her first post in nearly two years in July of 2022, media attention was immediate and overwhelming–covered by CNN, Fox News, Mashable, the Guardian, the Daily Beast, Vice, and the NY Times, among others.

Many social media corporations continue to take little or no action to curb misinformation on their platforms–both for the reasons discussed above, but also for the significant cost of monitoring literally billions of posts.[42] Some social networks advocate and openly celebrate a complete lack of censorship. Gab opens its page by proudly claiming its status as a "social network that champions free speech, individual liberty, and the free flow of information online." When Elon Musk took over as Twitter's CEO, a central tenet of his corporate mission was to foster "an inclusive arena for free speech," a stance he largely maintained in the following months in which hate speech and misinformation ballooned on the social network.

Some social media corporations have recently attempted to curb the propagation of big tent conspiracy theories, fearing repercussions for their role in disseminating disinformation. These actions have had limited success. In 2019, Facebook executives promised their website

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[42] Like Adorno theorized, (1966: xix-xvi) their "own commercial character…has long since been an excuse with which it evades responsibility for [their] lies."

would no longer recommend groups, advertisements, and pages that "spread hoaxes about vaccines"(Ortutay 2019). Yet, even after implementing changes, a Facebook search of the term "vaccine" continues to direct one to groups that oppose all vaccinations and consider vaccinations to be part of a pharmaceutical conspiracy.[43] Remarkably, the group "Anti-Vax" has nearly five times as many members as the group "Pro-vaxxers."[44]

Similarly, executives at Facebook, Youtube, Vimeo, and Twitter had great difficulty removing the propaganda documentary *Plandemic* from their platforms.[45] Due to the success of the film–despite a concerted effort at censorship–a sequel (creatively titled *Plandemic 2*) was released and a third film is currently under development. Executives at Twitter who banned then-President Trump from their platform find themselves unable to prevent the spread of tweets, podcasts and pseudo-science documentaries devoted to furthering QAnon, and Elon Musk's takeover of the website as CEO has led to even greater spreads of false information. Three years after the movement started, digital QAnon groups maintain millions of followers on Facebook, and membership remains strong today (Uscinski 2022; MacMillen and Rush 2021.[46]

Of course, exposure to conspiracy theories does not necessarily equate to changes in beliefs. Yet, research has shown that, in many instances, repeated exposure results in a heightened likelihood of a favorable stance, if not full acceptance, of worldviews. Especially important was Robert Zajonc's discovery of the mere exposure effect: a psychological

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[43] Such outcomes on social media differ from less accelerated forms of mass media, which are "in general…flexible and relatively easy to plan and control" (McQuail 1979: 33).

[44] Johnson et al. (2020) found anti-vaxxers to be "better positioned" on Facebook to efficiently target clusters of vaccine neutral users than pro-vax groups.

[45] On Facebook and Youtube, the film received more than 1 million views before being removed (Graham 2020).By comparison, youtube videos providing highlights of games of the National Football League (NFL) on the official NFL youtube page regularly receive hundreds of thousands of likes less, despite persisting on youtube for years.

[46] It should be noted that the plethora of studies currently investigating QAnon and anti-vaccine discourse over social media are a strong indication that such information still lives on the internet in various capacities (e.g.; Hannah 2021a; Argyris, Kim, Roscizewski and Song 2021)

phenomenon in which individuals tend to develop a preference for familiar stimuli (Zajonc 1968; 2001; Bornstein, and D'Agostino 1992). Scholars have demonstrated that repeated exposure to news stories is associated with more favorable opinions towards the topics that the stories cover—ranging from transgender rights to political candidates (Flores et al. 2018; Kim 2021). Other scholars have linked mere exposure and several social pathologies, including smartphone addiction and anti-Black racism (Chen et al. 2016; Ramasubramanian and Martinez 2017).

Although a troubling amount of material on various social-media platforms encourages belief in QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, not all media promote conspiratory theories. Many cast doubt on their truthfulness and call attention to their danger to contemporary societies. On Twitter, a search for the term "Anti Vaccine" yields the following warning: "To make sure you get the best information on vaccinations, resources are available from the US Department of Health and Human Services."[47] Similarly, a search for the term "QAnon" on Facebook elicits the disclaimer: "this search may be associated with Harmful Content."[48]

Such warnings may dissuade some individuals from falling prey to the allure of conspiratorial thought. However, the phenomenon of apophenia tends to minimize the effects of such efforts. Apophenia is the tendency to see linkages between events and data points that are random and unrelated–a constitutive element of both QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories (Hannah 2021a: 2). Big tent conspiracy theorists are often "self seeing," meaning that "any objection or disproof can be [and is often] turned into support for their worldviews." With apophenia, contradictory evidence is rationalized by claiming that information must be withheld

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[47] A link sending the user to the Department of Health and Human Services website is even presented below the message.
[48] The entire message reads as follows: "This search may be associated with QAnon, a violence-inducing conspiracy theory. Experts say QAnon and the violence it inspires are a significant risk to public safety. For more information about QAnon, go on the Global Network on Extremism and Technology website.

to protect the power and secrets of the decried elite. Facts that would otherwise doom the theories are transformed into evidence that those behind the conspiracy are clever beyond understanding (Zuckerman 2019). Examples of this phenomenon include Trump's welcoming of establishment elites into his political circle after promising to "drain the swamp" and the dearth of peer-reviewed studies that conclude that vaccines are dangerous to the general public.

We are left with a conundrum. Evidence that contradicts the central tenets of big tent conspiracy theories often functions to further legitimate the worldviews of their followers. It is a situation not dissimilar to what Baudrillard described as the "hyper-real," a condition marked by the diffusion of mass media where it is nearly "impossible…to prove the real," (1994: 21). When news organizations report on the falsehoods and deleterious effects related to QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories, they are in many cases adding fuel to the fire, and only increase the appeal of the theories–especially among those already indoctrinated. In the hyper-real age marked by burnout and the widespread use of algorithms, information alone is often insufficient to combat the rise of dangerous conspiratorial belief.

The Enlightenment promised that a free exchange of ideas would promote reason and rationality, culminating in emancipatory outcomes--freedom from the passions, freedom from disease through medical breakthroughs, and freedom from the despotic rule of kings. However, members of the Frankfurt school–notable critics of the Enlightenment project–were more pessimistic.[49] Writing in the mid–20th century, Frankfurt school members theorized that misinformation propagated by capitalist media corporations would lead individuals to embrace false consciousness, searching for "false needs" mobilized by capitalist interests (Adorno and

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[49] Consistent with Adorno's affirmation of contradictions in the human condition, I will "flout tradition" by attempting to utilize Adornian-inspired theory for emancipatory purposes, against the pessimism of Adornian Negativity (Adorno 1981: xi).

Horkheimer 1994 [1947]; Marcuse 2013 [1955]; 1994[1964]).[50] These theorists held that people living under capitalism in the 1950s, even more than previous ages, were "made ignorant by their daily intake of information and entertainment," forming opinions about truth due to repeated tropes and narratives rather than rational inquiry (Marcuse 1955: 102).[51] In the intervening years, rhetoric has become no less divisive or inflammatory (perhaps it has become more so), but the speed of distribution has increased exponentially.

While the Frankfurt School theorists' Olympian theoretical distance left them hazy in articulating the particularities in which this would play out in practice, this section has laid out the pathways by which extreme forms of information flow will generate negative effects, most notably increasing the appeal of big tent conspiracy theories. A media landscape infused with news stories surrounding the QAnon and anti-vaccine conspiracy theories and supported by the algorithm facilitates a situation in which big tent conspiratorial narratives are adopted with less resistance than otherwise. That is, as the content of these big tent conspiracy theories is more widely distributed, individuals are more likely to accept them. There are surely various perspectives to consider in the study of this outcome, but the ubiquity and taken-for-granted nature of acceleration makes it worthy of attention.

Algorithms and Populism in News Media

The practices of media organizations have also been central in facilitating populism's electoral success. As populism evolved historically, so too did the media that buttressed it. When the proto-populist Andrew Jackson ran for president in the early 19th century, it was the

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[50] Adorno in particular pathologized such forms of thought, noting that "delusions within opinions…ultimately tends to increase the predominance of alienation in totalitarian systems" (Adorno 1997: 231).

[51] The thesis was distilled most compactly by Jean Baudrillard a few decades later, with his claim that individuals take to be real "that which can be replicated for the purposes of mass text media propagation" (Baudrillard 1983).

newspaper that helped propel him into office (Brown, 2022). Today, televised digital media has

served as one of the prime factors that facilitated populism's contemporary success. Indeed, a

growing body of scholarship has shown that the media's influence has been pivotal in both the

electoral success of specific populist candidates,[52] as well as the appeal of populist tropes

throughout the globe (Junior and Gagliardi 2021; Bobba and Legnante 2016; Sinha 2017).

Why do news stories associated with populist themes and techniques spread so quickly?

One central reason is that, like big-tent conspiracy theories, the content and rhetorical devices

that populist appeals spread quickly and broadly through media as users are eager to read, listen,

and watch about them.[53] One category of such content is the use of divisive rhetoric, a strategy in

which the populist leader antagonizes a group and contrasts it against the so-called deserving

populus. With the terms "divided-times," "polarized opinions," and "partisan politics" reaching

cliché status, such tactics need little introduction. Think of Donald Trump contrasting "legal

American citizens" to "snake-like illegal aliens," Bolsonaro praising those who embody

"traditional values" while decrying those who "deviate," or even Bernie Sanders proclaiming

that the Democratic party should serve the interests, not of the "liberal elite," but instead the

"working class of this country." Upon first glance, the divisive rhetoric of these nationalist

populist leaders may seem incompatible with their appeals for communal unity and their

attempts to situate themselves as a member of "the people," as described in chapter 2. However,

far from being a strategic impediment, divisive rhetoric is instead necessary to the success of the

communal appeals of populist leaders. This necessity is born out of the fact that populist

categories are always constructed negatively,[54] meaning that the "deserving us" cannot exist

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[52] To see two particularly salient cases, see the electorate success of the Swedish Democrats and Donald Trump into office (Jutel 2018; Ekstrom, Patrona, and Thornborrow 2020).

[53]It is also true that leaders of populist movements and parties "in most cases possess a great deal of media savvy."

[54] The centrality of this divisive aspect, as well as the group(s) that are deemed "other" varies greatly in populisms of different forms, places, and times.

without the "Othered them."[55] As populist leaders attack other parties that they deem inferior, they simultaneously legitimate the virtuous moral standing of their own political agenda.

Unsurprisingly, this divisive rhetoric often finds its target in racial, gender, sexual, and national minorities (Vieten and Poynting 2016; Mudde and Kalktwasser 2015; Kende and Kreko 2020). Writing on the origins of totalitarianism in the early 20th century, political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1958; 1951) argued that the human condition is one of great paradox, in which humans will malign and degrade others, even when such activity is wholly antithetical to their own self-interest. Contemporary social-psychological research has overwhelmingly supported Arendt's thesis. We are drawn to divisive and anger-inducing rhetoric, either because we agree with the content or are repulsed by it and want to set things straight (Ryan 2012; Webster 2020). When nationalist populist leaders employ such rhetoric, we find ourselves hooked, at least long enough to give it a look, a skim, or a click. Being "hooked" need not constitute endorsement of content, but it will lead to some form of engagement, which is enough to leave the algorithm satisfied.

Populist movements are anti-elite by definition (Moffitt 2020). Today, elites of various stripes continue to receive the most frequent attacks from populists of all political affiliations. Regardless of the continued deification of the successful business-person that is endemic of late-capitalism, elites are poorly regarded in the United States, and the West more broadly (Gage 2017; Davis 2018). For this reason, the anti-elite sentiment found in populist appeals are very well received by consumers of mass media, and anti-elite sentiment continues to grow as

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[55]The structuralist philosophers argued that all meaning-making procedures are conducted this way. Certain categories are categorized as "sacred"; their opposites are categorized as "profane." This theory can be read in the works of Jaques Lacan, Claude Levi-Strauss, and even the metaphysician Georg Hegel. I would not recommend discovering the theory in such places. I myself find Structuralism: A Helpful Overview and Hawkes' introductory text *Structuralism and Semiotics* a very helpful starting point)

previously-fringe news sources that frequently use anti-elite rhetoric become mainstream. Conspiracy theorists often label journalists (and mainstream media actors more generally) as a vital facet of an "elite conspiracy" that collaborates with the ruling elite to subvert the will of the people (Esser et al. 2017; Hanitzscheh et al. 2016; Kramer 2018). If trends remain unchanged, the rise of alternative media sources–at the expense of traditional media and growing economic divide between the rich and poor–will manifest itself in even greater anti-elitism for many years to come.

The emotional appeals that serve as the bedrock of populist nationalist media and appeals also play an important role in the spread of populist news stories. Max Weber (1978 [1922]) theorized their relationship over a century ago when discussing theories of "charismatic" leadership and authority, and emotion-inducing rhetoric has continued to serve as an indispensable ingredient in the contemporary populist brew. Sociologists and communications scholars have used experimental methods to empirically verify that populist appeals elicit stronger emotional responses than non-populist ones when used in political advertising (e.g., Dominique 2018). Because successful populist appeals necessitate both the presence of an in-group and an out-group, emotional appeals on the grounds of fear and anger (often mobilized against the out-group) are among the most frequent methods employed by populist candidates and leaders (Rico, Guinjoan, and Anduiza 2017; Nai 2021; Wodak 2015). For this reason, the "turn to emotionality" in media is an important reason for the contemporary appeal of nationalist populism (Higgins 2017; Bobba 2019; Salmela and Von Scheve 2017).

Members of the news media know well that news stories containing populist material and rhetorical devices spread quickly and are appealing to the public. One CNN executive even boasted to *New York Times* contributor Alex Ross that his network's billion-dollar profit in 2016

can be credited to "a general fascination" under Trump's rule that " that wouldn't be the same as under a Clinton Administration." In November 2018, *The Guardian* launched "The New Populism," a "six-month investigative series to explore who the news populists are, what factors brought them to power, and what they are doing in office" (The Guardian, 2018). Speaking at a Morgan Stanley conference in February 2016, CBS CEO Les Moonves said the following of Trump's presidential run "It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS" (Weprin, 2016).

Digital means, and the speed they afford, have even more greatly enabled the propagation of nationalist-inclined news stories. Social media platforms are especially important in this process, and have even recently been described as having an "elective affinity" with populist messaging and candidates (Gerbaudo 2018). Like the spread of big-tent conspiracy theories, the algorithm has played a large part in this process (Hopster 2021; Crilley and Gillespie 2019; Franc and Abreau 2022). As algorithms select and prioritize popular content tied to nationalist populism, this content can reach a greater audience than even the most popular traditional media sources. Social media algorithms in particular allow sensational claims to spread easily (Hopster 2021). Some scholars have even argued that the populism of the last decade is a wholly distinct category from the past, referring to the new category as "algorithm-driven populism" (Franca and Abreu 2022; Maly 2018).

The proceeding provides a general description of the overall trend. Below, I turn my attention to a specific example of how contemporary media practices magnify news stories that are conducive to populist belief. News stories involving Donald Trump's considering submitting his run for president were one of the most reported-on topics in the run up to the 2016 election. Trump's initial media coverage was highly out of proportion with his early levels of political

support, measured in a wide array of metrics (Francia 2018; Azari 2016; Confessore and Yourish 2016; Schroeder 2016). Trump's frequent anti-elite and anti-minority diatribes were controversial, and thus were highly profitable for news organizations. This mass reporting on Trump was initially seen as benign. Asked about how he felt about the situation, political activist and comedian Jon Stuart replied "I hope he runs! The man puts his name on buildings and private planes." Explaining this comment later in the interview, the comedian remarked with a hefty chuckle that he "[did not] take Trump's run seriously."

Over time, the laughter stopped. In the months that followed the initial media explosion, Trump wasn't dying politically; his message was spreading to disenfranchised workers in rural America, to the far-right, and crucially, to affluent political donors that would help to propel him into the White House. Scholars and media personalities alike pleaded with media corporations to refrain from covering news stories concerning the soon-to-be president. Yet, conventions did not change. Trump received far more airtime than did any other Republican presidential hopeful in the 2016 news cycle (Silver 2015; Sides 2015).

(Figure 10)

Donald Trump's Share of News Coverage of GOP Presidential Field

Data are generated using social analytic tools provided by Crimson Hexagon. Other candidates are Christie, Bush, Perry, Santorum, Walker, and Cruz. Graph by John Sides.
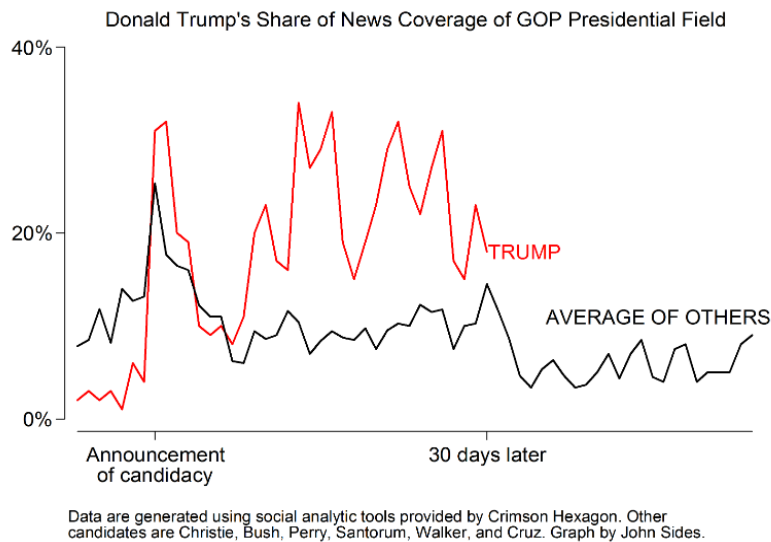
(Sides 2015: 1)

And due to their being categorized as especially "controversial" by media actors and algorithms alike, Trump's speeches that involved racially, sexually, and xenaphobic forms of Othering continued to be among the most heavily covered (Bell 2021). As these messages spread, his popularity increased, sustaining enormous leads over traditional party republicans and Tea-Party sympathizers alike (Sides 2015). These leads continued to grow, which led to even greater media coverage in a self-reinforcing cycle that eventually secured Trump the nomination and eventually the presidential appointment.

(Figure 11)

Donald Trump's Share of News Coverage and National Polling Numbers

Data are generated using social analytic tools provided by Crimson Hexagon. Media coverage is calculated as Trump's percent of the coverage received by him, Christie, Bush, Perry, Santorum, Walker, and Cruz. Graph by John Sides.
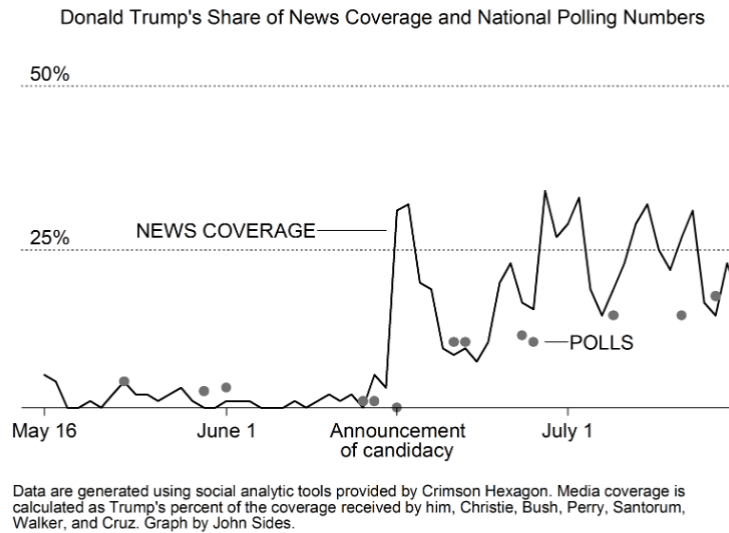
(Sides 2015: 3)

The situation resulting from the frequent use of the algorithm is not unlike a runaway train, leaving even the most capable and willing conductor unable to change tracks. Emboldened individuals can rebel against the profitability of populist-inducing news stories by reporting on different stories. However, even such noble actions are largely insignificant. Unlike the traditional media sources of newspaper, radio, and television, the power of the algorithm allows news stories and posts to *replicate themselves*. The spread of information that the algorithm affords has been linked to the process of transmitting genetic data, in that combating dissemination is incredibly difficult (Blackmore and Dawkins 2000). Without the implementation of much broader structural changes, the environment in which nationalist-populism is propelled by the news will not be halted.

Conclusion

In the previous pages, I have aimed to demonstrate that a desire for community and the appeal of divisive and emotional rhetoric that Enlightenment commitments engender increases the appeal of conspiracy theorizing and nationalist-populism. In Chapter 1, I first connected the increase in speed and scale of information flow to the contemporary social problem of burnout, and demonstrated the corresponding relationship with increased belief in big-tent conspiracy theories and nationalist populism. In Chapter 2, my focus shifted to the ills of algorithms in the arenas of media, connecting this technological innovation to the social-psychological phenomena of the mere exposure effect. Taken together, it presents a powerful new explanation for the concurrent rise of the big tent conspiracy theories and nationalist populist movements under my purview.

It is certainly tempting to view anti-vaxxers, Qult members, and supporters of authoritarian varieties of nationalist populism as uneducated teeming masses that, once excised or enlightened, would never re-emerge or believe these thoughts again. Yet, this view simply does not align with the facts. Conspiracy theorists and populist candidates have existed throughout the entirety of U.S. history, and some scholars have argued that conspiracy theories and proto-populism have existed thousands of years throughout the world. Also, as noted in the introduction, demographic data suggests that conspiracy theorists and supporters of authoritarian forms of populism are not merely remnants of the anti-intellectual tradition of the "Paranoid Style in American Politics" that Hofstadtor discussed in the mid 20th century. To make sense of this, I have attempted to demonstrate that their belief systems are the result of more complex social phenomena. Changes in workplace settings and media practices have real effects on how people think and act. What we find is that ignorance is not merely the dearth of information; in

some cases, it can result from excess. Thus, I have hoped to demonstrate the relevance of the

Freudian (1966: 382) truth that "there is more than one kind of ignorance."[56]

The question remains: where do we go from here? What possible remedies exist that

could help ameliorate these social problems? Finding a solution to the dangers of conspiracy

theories and the pernicious iterations of nationalist populism is an issue that has evaded decades

of scholars throughout the social sciences and humanities. We might think that a turn to the

authors of the Critical Theories of Modernity—whose penetrating insights on the shortcomings

of the Enlightenment Project that I build upon in this thesis– for such solutions would be a

profitable starting place. Unfortunately, these theorists overwhelmingly shrank away from

instrumental reason, and thus from advocating ways forward.[57]

In attempting to forge ahead, I am tempted to follow much 20th-century and

contemporary Marxist theory–that is, concede that no significant and far-reaching changes can

occur until significant changes to neoliberal capitalism are enacted. Claims of this sort have been

made since at least since the 18th century with the works of the French utopian-socialist

philosopher Charlies Fourier. And three-hundred years of capitalist-supremacy later, where do

we find ourselves but ensconced in even more oppressive, totalizing, and unquestioned forms of

capitalism throughout our broader society. The social problems found in late forms of capitalism

also remain pervasive as ever. Speed and scale of information flow, far from slowing down,

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[56] Interestingly, sociologist Andrew Abbot (2010) came to a very similar conclusion when attempting to formally operationalize ignorance in the early 21st century.

[57] Adorno theorized that it was impossible that negative dialectics could have any emancipatory power, Baudrillard advocated embracing "Fatal Strategies" that would be devoid of any truly change-inducing solutions, and Barthes, the most explicitly nihilistic of the bunch, recoiled from the socio-political world altogether embracing the "Pleasures of the Text" in a distant labyrinth, in which one should read fiction purely for enjoyment.

continues to accelerate.[58] Identities continue to be fragmented, people have increasing difficulty making sense of their world in a unified way, and *anomie* is ever on the rise.

If the revolution is nowhere close on the horizon, immediate, material solutions (such as changes in minimum wage or protests against working conditions perceived to be unjust) should not constitute the sole place of investigation. Instead, analysis could benefit from peering into the often-neglected realm of ideas for pragmatic solutions.[59] As has been shown in this thesis, repeated exposure to narratives and stories leaves individuals more likely to believe them. While the mere exposure effect can have harmful effects, when deployed properly, it can also lead to more socially-beneficial outcomes. Social-psychological research has shown that exposure to weak counterarguments can protect against persuasion in a similar fashion that a body can be protected against a disease (McGuire 1961). This "inoculation theory," has been found to have significant benefit in halting the spread of mis and disinformation, even in the elusive realm of social media (Roozenbeek et al. 2022; Van Linden et al. 2017; Lewandowsky and van der Linden 2021; Pfau and Burgoon 1988).

Practically speaking, the social-psychological literature highlights the importance of two actions. First, it is important to speak with people of all backgrounds and political affiliations and to bring up weak counterpoints to the appeal of big-tent conspiracy theories and authoritarian forms of populism. Like other social pathologies, big-tent conspiracy theories and authoritarian populist need as many "shots in arms" as possible. Unlike physical vaccines, the supply of effective doses to protect against the spread of misinformation is not constrained by material

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[58] Rosa's theory of "dynamic acceleration" documents the propensity for modern societies to be geared towards continuous progress by means of growth and acceleration. See Rosa's 2017 article, co-written with Klauss Dorre and Stephan Lessenich, for an abridged explanation of the theory.

[59] In other words, I'm aligning myself with Zizek's argument about the importance of locating a space "to think, not to act" and Debord's (1967) urging to affirm a cyclical conception of time instead of the repressive forms of linear time found under late capitalism.

considerations. We can all be the shots in arms that folks need, just by accomplishing the inoculation effect.

The second action is taking the time to speak meaningfully with those individuals who have already thoroughly embraced misinformation. As tempting as it may be to refrain, talk to "that" uncle at Thanksgiving dinner. Ask a strategic question to the "Karen" you run into at the pharmacy. These acts serve a tripartite function. First, these opportunities provide instances in which the inoculation effect can operate. Second, they provide a new source of community for individuals that might not find a socially-acceptable one otherwise. This thesis has demonstrated the relationship between communal-decline the appeal of big-tent conspiracy theories and nationalist populism. If bowling leagues are a far cry from the present, we can create our own forms of community. Third, taking the time to meaningfully speak with those individuals who have already thoroughly embraced misinformation has the potential to alleviate group polarization, one of the largest contributors to the turbulent nature of contemporary politics (Whitt 2020; Korostelina 2020; Del Vicario 2016).

These localized acts may seem too small-scale to engender large-scale change. And it is true that substantial changes to policy and form of government would lead to drastic consequences. But it is also worth remembering the micro-sociological dimension. When amalgamated, the actions of individuals can accumulate in substantial outcomes. This has always been the case throughout the history of social movements, whether in protests surrounding the Vietnam war, the changing view of gay rights in the U.S., or allowing minoritized religions an avenue to be practiced in mainstream society in the 16th century. As trite as it sounds, we can truly be the change we want to see in the world.

Throwing the Baby Out with the Bath Water?

In 2009, the rock band Green Day released the highly decorated album, "21st century Breakdown." The Grammy award-winning group chose to end the album with the song "American Eulogy" in which they sing "I don't wanna live in the modern world" upwards of 20 times in under 4:30 minutes.

I disagree with Green Day's thesis statement. Scientific and social advances spurred from the commitments of Enlightenment philosophers are some of the greatest to have occurred in the last few centuries. However, like all modes of thought, the Enlightenment's commitments work best when embraced in moderation, checked by social opinions about the material outcomes of our time. Theories of the problematization of the Enlightenment have been well applied to contemporary forms of neocolonialism, anti-Blackness, and the contemporary climate crisis (e.g. Carey and Festa 2009; Broeck, Brock-Sallah, and Carsten 2014; Banerjee and Diane-Laure 2021). The effects of a persistent commitment to, and sometimes bastardization of, Enlightenment ideals, may also prove fruitful when analyzed in relation to contemporary politics as well. After all, if the structural trends spawned from these Enlightenment-induced commitments are truly structural, then they have far-reaching implications throughout all realms of society. As thinkers since before Plato have shown, politics is one of these realms.

When envisioning future dystopias, we often imagine explicit violence–enormous, sentient robots destroying our homes, mass sickness of plagues infecting our bodies, and violent uprisings putting our political institutions and loved ones at risk. Our current age is not without such circumstances. As paradoxical as it seems, perhaps even more concerning are the dangerous effects of a seemingly more gentle commitment: the seemingly harmless commitment towards

knowing more and the efficiency and speed that comes with it. Of course, the spread of information is in most cases an unambiguous positive good: medical breakthroughs brought about by digital communication have saved countless lives and education is the "great equalizer" with its vast social, political, and economic benefits.

However, when the speed and scale of information flow is valued above all other considerations—considerations including truth value, practical utility, and political impact—something rather interesting occurs. Popularity, also referred to as the market, decides what information is deemed worthy of dissemination and what information is not. The market chooses not only what is spread, but, because information affects how the world is constituted, the market also chooses the material reality that results from its spread. In an era sometimes overly marked by a desire to seek out immediate answers, as a concluding remark, I simply want to ask an open question which, its appearance notwithstanding, is not a leading one: is this good? Is this what we want? Are we content with the material reality that a largely uninhibited commitment to the market and speed has brought forth?

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