



REAL LIFE

FASCISM

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WITH THE RISE OF FASCIST LEADERS IN THE U.S. AND ELSEWHERE, it's natural to want to investigate the degree to which new communication technologies have facilitated it. Much as Horkheimer and Adorno indicted the incipient mass media and the “culture industry” for mid-20th century fascism, we might look at 21st century social media in the same light. Online platforms have become instruments for meting out brutality, suppressing freedom of thought, reinforcing marginalization and social exclusion, and enforcing orthodoxy. But it makes sense also to think of fascism itself as a political technology, an approach to social control that relies on negating the truth, sowing confusion, destabilizing shared values, and setting unmoored bureaucracies against the population and one another. We face an unprecedented combination of seemingly opposed ideologies that have come to reinforce each other: Big Data positivism generates an endless stream of uninterpretable information that post-truth demagoguery can triumphantly push aside. —*ROB HORNING*



APOCALYPSE WHATEVER

The making of a racist, sexist religion of nihilism on 4Chan by TARA ISABELLA BURTON

AMONG THE WHITE nationalists on 4chan’s “politically incorrect,” or /pol/ board and on “alt-right” Twitter—or anywhere you might run into a picture of Pepe the Frog—there is a cryptic but popular saying: “Praise Kek.” Kek is how *World of Warcraft* translates “lol” when it’s revealed to members of opposing alliances, but it is also, conveniently, a name for a serpent-headed Egyptian chaos god.

Among shitposters, these two identities have been conflated to make Kek a kind of ironized divinity invoked to account for “meme

magic”—when something espoused and affirmed in the digital realm also becomes true beyond it. Memes about Hillary Clinton being sick, for example, “came true” when she collapsed of pneumonia this past September 11. And Fidel Castro’s death—occurring on the capitalist holiday of Black Friday—has been making the Twitter rounds with the same “praise Kek” tag.

Most of the people posting about Kek don’t actually *believe* that Pepe the Frog is an avatar of an ancient Egyptian chaos god, or that the numerology of 4chan “gets”—when posts are assigned a fortuitous ID number—somehow predicted Donald Trump’s presidential victory. (Theodor K. Ferrøl goes into more detail about that claim here.) It’s a joke, of course—but also not a joke. As one self-identified active member of the alt-right told me, “I don’t believe in God. But I say ‘Praise Kek’ more than I’ve ever said anything about God.”

If I've learned anything as a historian of religion, it's that belief is flexible. The actual propositional content of doctrines has little to do with how religion works socially. Far more than the content of faith as such, what makes religion religion are the images and rhetoric loaded with atavistic and esoteric archetypes (chaos; order; Kek; frogs; a "God Emperor," to use a common 4chan appellation for Donald Trump) that tend to propagate virally, independent of a centralized source, because they tie into the cultural zeitgeist or answer some cultural need. They allow for a collective affirmation of identity that puts self-creation in dialogue with metaphysical questions about the universe. Religion often functions in this sense as a kind of dictionary: a compendium of symbols and their meaning that also allows for shared communal discourse: a "language" of stories we tell one another about our selves and our world.

From this perspective, it doesn't matter whether Kek is "really" a chaos god. Sociologically speaking, he might as well be. Likewise, meme magic, to the extent that that it serves as a record of cultural engagement, is real too. So too the "reality" of ubiquitous fake news sites, which, while being wildly inaccurate propositionally, nevertheless govern events—just look at the controversy over "Pizzagate"—to an extent that renders them functionally significant: narratives, no less than an account of the Fall or salvation, that govern who we are.

Given the ideological anarchy inherent in shitposting, it tends to defy analysis. Shitposters, who are bound by nothing, set a rhetorical trap for their enemies, who tend to be bound by having an actual point. Attempts to analyze what shitposters are doing, or what their posts really mean, does nothing to defuse them; instead it reinforces their project by amplifying their signal. Shitposting can't be refuted; it can only be repeated.



IN THEIR APPARENT INDIFFERENCE to content and their commitment to aestheticized irony, shitposters resemble the disengaged ironists the 19th-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard dis-

cussed in texts like *The Concept of Irony* and *Either/Or*. According to Kierkegaard, the ironist "poetically composes himself and his environment with the greatest possible poetic license" and lives "in this totally hypothetical and subjunctive way." Every act is an act of self-creation: Stories that are told are not descriptive of "true" facts out there but rather ways in which the ironist can prove his power, his philosophical strength, his verbal dexterity. He says things just to be the sort of person who says them. The ironist maintains his power by taking no position, starting every argument anew. "There is something seductive about every beginning, because the subject is again free, and it is this pleasure the ironist longs for," Kierkegaard writes in *The Concept of Irony*. "In such moments, actuality loses its validity for him; he is free, above it." For that freedom, the ironist is willing to say anything, make any argument, undeterred by any fear of being called to account. That is, the ironist is the proto-troll.

Kierkegaard's ironist came of age in the era of increasing technological production, urbanization, secularization, and—ultimately—alienation. Shitposters have come of age in an era no less turbulent. They too live in a time of economic uncertainty and spiritual apathy in which foundational myths about the self and its role in the cosmos seem to have been rendered obsolete. To fill the void, the ironist and the shitposter both create a self-image characterized by the freedom to say and do anything, beholden to nothing and to nobody—a freedom that finds expression through transgression, saying things (racist, sexist, etc.) "nobody else" will say—except, of course, for the shitposters. This is how the stories the "alt-right" tells about itself take on a religious quality. They are predicated on a desire for a meaningful narrative of the world that allows for participation.

Here, too, the narrative of individuality and freedom is illusory. The "anarchy" of the alt-right depends on that dictionary of symbols—and thus a shared discourse. The shitposter can say whatever he wants, but the second he says "praise Kek," he's tempering his individuality with solidarity. He's not a Lone Ranger but rather part of a group whose stated fascination with cowboy individualism is at odds with the intense collectivism of internet culture—a culture where likes, reposts,

up-votes, hearts, and other expressions of communal acceptance take on outsize importance. There is something intensely collectivist about even the most outrageously social-contract-breaking denizens of the internet. Just look at the way Reddit closed ranks around its ur-troll violentacrez.

The alt-righter defines himself, as he does his god of chaos, against the limitations of civilization, the restrictions placed upon him by the social contract. Yet he is “civilized,” to the extent that his discourse is dialogue. Every time a meme is replicated or a symbol is reused, it only strengthens the socially determined bond of meaning. The constructed narrative of uniqueness and freedom that an alt-righter adopts in fact depends on the collective meanings ascribed by his group to his actions. To put it simply: Shitposting only matters insofar as it lets you feel in on the joke, and being in on the joke demands an in-group agreement of what the joke actually is. No one shitposts alone. But shitposting nonetheless imbues a powerful sense of individual significance.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in his account of religion, famously defines it as a

system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

In other words, religion isn’t simply or simplistically an *order of existence* (which is to say, a metaphysical grand narrative), nor is it just the “collective effervescence” or affirmation of group identity as an older sociologist of religion like Emile Durkheim might have it. Rather it’s the space in between: the symbols (and memes) that a group creates and reinforces through communal discourse, and the individual conception of self (one’s “story,” even) that comes from the role the self plays with respect to these those symbols. If Pepe is a god, it’s not just because the alt-right has a need for religion (although, insofar as any contemporary group cries out for a meaningful narrative of self, I would argue that they do). It’s also because gods are made of memes.

Doing things for the lulz—spreading

joke-memes, reinforcing ideas and symbols within a community, promulgating them more widely—is, by Geertz’s definition, a supremely religious act.

That is not to say that white supremacy and white nationalism are not major parts of the alt-right movement; they are, and it absolutely is. To do something *for the lulz* and care nothing for the embodied consequences is the product and promulgation of a malignant structural racism. Only someone who has always had enough privilege to never have to reckon with the consequences of one’s words could participate in such a movement and keep up with the profound disengagement it demands. Kierkegaard’s ironist, in other words, has to be a straight white man.

But the average 4chan alt-righter does not see himself as a “real” racist, nor is racism necessarily what he would regard as his primary motivating factor. His racism is secondary to his understanding of himself as *free*, an Alamo-style resister (including against outside and/or non-white cultural forces), a masculine agent not subject to such feminized niceties as politeness and compassion. The way he sees it, he’s throwing rocks through the Overton window—regardless of what else gets smashed in the process.

The alt-righter doesn’t need a nation to be a white nationalist. When they praise Kek or joke about participation in the “meme wars of 2016,” they are taking part in a collective narrative that is no less powerful than, say, the primal patriotism of populist celebrity-statesman Gabriele D’Annunzio’s irredentist march to take the city of Fiume from Allied forces in 1919, or the no less heady Wagnerian nationalism of the German *völkische Bewegung* that helped spawn the Nazis. The alt-righter’s “nation” is a hero-narrative about how the freedom of the individual (masculine) self can be secured, in part by adopting the toxic rhetoric of overt white supremacy.



THERE’S A THEORY—the “lipstick effect”—that claims that spending on minor luxuries increases

during economic downturns. Being able to tell stories about ourselves rates high on the modern list of necessities. We may be broke, but we can at least like what we see in the mirror. It speaks to the centrality of identity as a human need, to feel like we matter even in the apocalypse. Praising Kek, in such a world, is more than a shibboleth, or even a battle cry. It's an affirmation of the self. If meme magic is real, it means the self is a little bit magic too.

To promulgate meme magic is to claim for oneself a higher code, a deeper freedom that derives from seeing the world as constructed, and constructable, rather than given. From this perspective, the "real" world—with its rules, its restrictions on what you can and cannot say, what you can and cannot do in public—is secular, in the sense that it lacks meaning. It is an un-sacred space, and thus nothing there can or should be treated with respect. In the world of Kek, affecting the world with racist lies and memes—all with an ironic smirk—returns the possibility of free, meaningful action to believers, and makes them heroes. The freedom to not really mean anything you say becomes the only way to have meaning in life. Irony is the greatest freedom of all.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), Walter Benjamin characterized Europe as a society whose "self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order." But he also warned that "all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war." As an example of this aestheticization, he cited the Italian futurist F.T. Marinetti, who wrote in a 1912 manifesto:

War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamed-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.

We could take this language and apply it, with some modifications, to the rhetorical world of the

alt-right and the atavistic language surrounding Kek and meme magic. The cult of Kek fuses a pretense of freedom with the rhetoric of unbridled masculinity to try to make ironic disengagement seem sexy and heroic. It's an aestheticization of a religious need: a mock-heroic packaging of the desire of white men to *be men*. Meme magic allows them to see themselves as exercising an intoxicatingly masculine vision of ironic freedom while doing that requires little in the way of courage, physical strength, or personal sacrifice.

This is, of course, where the alt-righters and the *arditi* of Gabriele D'Annunzio or even the Nazis, part ways. Their principles were appalling; they nonetheless died for them. The glorification of war and bloodshed, the aesthetics of flowering roses and explosive tanks, had a real effect (the "moods and motivations" of Geertz's definition). That narrative of self demanded self-sacrificing.

The narrative of the alt-right, however, displaces the battlefield into the realm of the incorporeal (and so, the safe). A battle over the Overton window is not a bloody one. This uncomfortable truth sits at the heart of the contemporary ultra-ironist's disengagement and disembodiment: the suspicion that "real" masculinity, like the Wagnerian heroism of the past, demands that you actually die when your avatar does. Without that risk, the performance of masculine heroism may never cease to feel like a performance.

The narrative of the Lone Ranger, conducted like a drone strike from behind a keyboard, thus becomes both cause and effect of the alt-right's mythos. They participate in the "meme wars" in search of a narrative of self-determination that the incorporeality of their chosen battlefield will always deny them. But in the meantime, their mythologized war on conventionality inflicts concrete collateral damage. The battlefield of the meme wars may be largely incorporeal. But the Trump presidency is no less real. •

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CHAOS OF FACTS

In 2016, we got the campaign we wanted: enough news to confuse us all by NATHAN JURGENSON

AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS, we have rediscovered, are not in good faith. They are more performance than policy. They manipulate the media rather than articulate a philosophy of governance. The candidates are brands, and the debates have almost no discussion of ideas or positions, let alone much bearing on what being president actually requires. Instead, debates signify “politics” while allowing for depoliticized analysis: They are about assessing the candidate’s performance, style, tone, rhythm, posture, facial control,

positioning with respect to cameras, and so on. What they say matters only with respect to how they said it: Did they convey conviction? Did they smile enough?

The candidates and those who fund them are as invested in these same campaign-ritual fictions about the electoral system’s underlying dignity as the reporters are. And there is nothing profound anymore in demystifying this. Astonished dismay at the lack of substance in presidential politics, driven in part by some inherently cheapening new media technology, has become as ritualized

as the rest of the process, a point that pundits have been making at least since historian Daniel Boorstin published *The Image*, two years after telegenic Kennedy's election over pale, beady Nixon. Joe McGinniss's *The Selling of the President 1968* described Nixon's sudden interest in marketing through his next presidential run. Then, after nearly a decade of a president who was a movie actor, Joan Didion's dispatch from the 1988 campaign trail, "Insider Baseball," described presidential campaigns as merely media events, made to be covered by specialists "reporting that which occurs only in order to be reported"—a reiteration of Boorstin's concept of the "pseudo-event." Remember, too, George W. Bush's MISSION ACCOMPLISHED stunt—essentially a campaign stop even though it wasn't an election year—and more recently, the furor over the Roman columns erected for Obama's 2008 convention speech.

So it has been clear for decades that presidential politics have turned toward the performance of an image. But away from what reality? Boorstin admits that he doesn't have a solid idea: "I do not know what 'reality' is. But somehow I do know an illusion when I see one." Boorstin takes refuge in the assumption that the average American voter is dumb and uninterested in anything more than the surface impression and incapable of reasoning about the substance of any political position. Marshall McLuhan echoed this view in his widely quoted claim that "policies and issues are useless for election purposes, since they are too sophisticated."

Theories like Boorstin's may be strong in describing how we construct an artificial world, but they are often compromised by their nostalgic undertow. We might believe a preceding era was more "real," only to find that that generation, too, complained in its own time about the same sorts of unreality, the same accelerated, entertainment-driven reporting and bad-faith politics. This analysis has been rote ever since, complemented by the notion that the media dutifully supplies these highly distractible audiences the ever increasing amounts of spectacle they demand.

As media outlets have multiplied and news cycles have accelerated, the condition has wors-

ened: Our immoderate expectation that we can consume "big" news whenever we want means that journalists will work to give it to us, to make the reality we demand. The television, and now the social media "trending" chart, gets what it wants. All this coverage, ever expanding into more shows, more data, more commentary, and more advertisements, come together to form the thing we've accepted as "the election."

In this process, image-based pseudo-politics don't come to replace real politics; the real comes to look like an inadequate image. Boorstin argued that, for example, the image of John Wayne made actual cowboys look like poor imitations. (This is what Jean Baudrillard, writing after Boorstin, meant by "simulation.") Similarly, the heightened media coverage of campaigns has made ordinary politics—eating pie, kissing babies, and repeating patriotic bromides—seem insufficient, underwhelming. It's no accident that in the 2016 election, we got a candidate that gave us more and more outrageous news, a constant catastrophe perfectly tuned to our obsessive demand for horrifically fascinating entertainment. We might have hated every moment, but we kept watching and clicking, reproducing the conditions for the same thing to continue in the future.

If a politician's ability to get covered becomes their most important qualification, it flips the logic of campaigning: The presidency is merely the means to the end of harnessing attention. The distinction between a campaign and how it is covered is unintelligible and unimportant. Hence, a lot of the media coverage of the 2016 election was coverage of how the campaigns tried to get themselves covered. For instance, much of the news about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton was about the image they created, and how Trump specifically marketed and branded himself differently than those who came before, what conventions he happened to be violating. For much of the past two years, commentators would more often giggle at the way Trump's affect violated campaign norms of image maintenance than discuss his bigotry and the white nationalism that preceded and fueled his rise.

Playing to the circularity of this, Trump campaigned by discussing his campaign process.

Like a news-channel talking head, he spent many minutes at his rallies on poll numbers. He provided a similar running commentary on the debate stages, remarking about the venue, the crowd, and the performance of the moderators. He remarked on who was having a good or bad night, whose lines had or hadn't landed, and analyzed his own performance as it was happening. He was even quick to point out to Hillary Clinton, in real time, that she shouldn't have reused a convention zinger again in a debate.

With his steady supply of metacommentary, Trump embodied the pundit-candidate. While his repugnant politics have had material consequences, he campaigned more explicitly at the level of the symbolic, of branding, of the image. His representation of himself as the candidate who rejects political correctness epitomized this: How he talked about issues was trumpeted by the candidate and many of his supporters as the essential point, more important than any policy positions he could be irreverently talking about.

Much of the coverage of Trump followed suit: It wasn't punditry about a politician, but punditry about punditry, for its own sake. Trump's viability as a candidate demonstrates how far the familiar logic of the image has come, where a fluency in image-making is accepted to an even greater degree as a political qualification in its own right, independent of any mastery of policy or issues. Campaigning according to the image is not just using polls to pick popular stances but to relegate stances into fodder for talking about polls.

When politicians are concerned mainly with producing an "image"—not with what world conditions are actually there, which are heavy and can only change slowly and with great coordinated effort, but with what you see, what they want you to see, what you want to see—they are dealing with something that is light, something easily changed, manipulated, improved, something that flows from moment to moment. Trump appeared to understand intuitively the logic of lightness, that a candidate need only provide an image of a campaign.

Accordingly, he resisted building up much of the standard campaign infrastructure, from

the provision of a detailed platform on up to the development of an adequate ground-game operation to get out the vote on Election Day. These too are heavy, like a locomotive tied to its tracks. Trump's campaign floated above this, going wherever media expectations suggested it should go. Because there was so little depth anchoring the candidate and so little campaign machinery to weigh him down, Trump's white nationalism nimbly flowed across various stances and issues, much like a fictional president being written and rewritten in a writers' room. He could center his campaign on scapegoating Mexico and promising a border wall but then shift toward scapegoating Islam and preventing Muslims from entering the country in the wake of terrorist attacks, and then became the "law and order" candidate after police violence and anti-police protests dominated the news. It was no accident that Trump, at many of his rallies, used the theme from *Air Force One*, a movie about a president.

If the contest is between images, candidates only need an improvised script; everything else leads to inefficiency. The role of a campaign apparatus, from this perspective, is not to conceal how its candidate is "manipulating an image" but to emphasize the degree to which everything is image, including, supposedly, the election's stakes. By being so transparent in playing a part, by making the theatrics of it all so obvious, Trump offered catharsis for viewers so long served such obvious fictions as "my candidacy is about real issues" and "political coverage cares about the truth." Accompanying any oft-repeated lie is a build-up in tension, of energy that gets tied up in sustaining it. Part of the Trump phenomenon was what happens when such energy is released.

It's easy to see how Trump's rise was the culmination of image-based politics rather than some unprecedented and aberrant manifestation of them. Yet much of the political apparatus—conventional politicians and the traditional media outlets accustomed to a monopoly in covering them—still rarely admits this out loud. Instead, it tried to use Trump's obvious performativity as an opportunity to pass off the rest of the conventional politics it has been practicing—the image-based, entertainment-driven politics we've

been complaining about since Boorstin and before—as real. Perhaps it was more real than ever, given how strenuously many outlets touted the number of fact-checkers working a debate, and how they pleaded that democracy depends on their gatekeeping.

Before the campaign began, comedian Seth Meyers quipped that Trump would not be running as a Republican but as a joke. Commentators said he had no chance to become the Republican nominee—or about a two percent chance, according to statistician Nate Silver. The *Huffington Post* decided to single out Trump’s campaign and label it “entertainment” instead of “politics,” as if the rest of the candidates were something other than entertainment. Many pundits put forward the idea that Trump was *trolling*, as if candidates like Ben Carson and Ted Cruz were actually preoccupied with pertinent political topics, and the press coverage of them was fully in earnest.

Trump was hardly a troll: He didn’t derail a conversation that was in good faith; he gave the media exactly what it demanded. He adhered to the unspoken rules of horse-race presidential-election coverage with a kind of hypercorrectness born of his respect for the reality-show format. The race was long made to be a bigger reality show, demanding more outsize personalities and outrageous provocations and confrontations. Trump may not have been a good candidate, but he made for an entertaining contestant.

The fact that Trump was a performer manipulating audiences without any real conviction in anything other than his own popularity made him *more* like other candidates, not less. Trump wasn’t uniquely performative, just uniquely successful at it. If the performance was bombastic, so much the better for its effectiveness. After all, the image is the substance.

In contrast, Obama’s performance as a symbol of hope and change was more coy and less overtly pandering. It more closely mimics what McGinniss, citing Boorstin, described in *The Selling of the President 1968*

Television demands gentle wit, irony, and understatement: the qualities of Eugene McCarthy. The TV politician cannot make a speech; he must engage in intimate conversation. He

must never press. He should suggest, not state; request, not demand. Nonchalance is the key word. Carefully studied nonchalance.

McGinniss says selling the president is like building an Astrodome in which the weather can be controlled and the ball never bounces erratically. But Trump took a very different approach; he wasn’t nonchalant, and he rarely hinted or suggested. He was consistently boisterous. In 1968, to build a television image was to make someone seem effortlessly perfect. Trump was instead risk-prone, erratic, imperfect, and unpredictable. Playing to an audience more savvy about image-making, Trump knew his erratic spontaneity played like honesty. In appearing to make it up as he went along, his calculations and fabrications seemed authentic, even when they consisted of easily debunked lies. It feels less like a lie when you’re in on it.

Some of the most successful advertisements make self-aware reference to their own contrivances. In this way Trump was like P.T. Barnum: He not only knew how to trick people but how much they like to be tricked. Deception doesn’t need to be total or convincing. Strategically revealing the trick can be a far more effective mode of persuasion.

We shouldn’t underestimate how much we like to see behind the curtain. There’s some fascination, morbid or not, in how things are faked, how scams are perpetrated, how tricks are played. The 2016 campaign gave us exactly what we wanted.



ANY NATIONAL ELECTION IS necessarily chaotic and complex. The fairy tale is that media coverage can make some sense of it, make the workings of governance more clear, and thus make those in power truly accountable. Instead, the coverage produces and benefits from additional chaos. It jumps on the Russian email hacks for poorly sourced but click-worthy campaign

tidbits, even as, according to a cybersecurity researcher quoted in a BuzzFeed report, they are likely driven by Russian “information operations to sow disinformation and discord, and to confuse the situation in a way that could benefit them.” Or as Adrian Chen wrote in his investigation of the Russian propaganda operation, Internet Research Agency:

The real effect, the Russian activists told me, was not to brainwash readers but to overwhelm social media with a flood of fake content, seeding doubt and paranoia, and destroying the possibility of using the Internet as a democratic space ... The aim is to promote an atmosphere of uncertainty and paranoia, heightening divisions among its adversaries.

If that is so, the U.S. news media has been behaving like Russian hackers for years. From 24-hour television to the online posts being cycled through algorithms optimized for virality, the constant churn of news seems to make everything both too important and of no matter. Every event is explained around the clock and none of these explanations suffice. Everything can be simultaneously believable and unbelievable.

It’s been repeated that the theme of the 2016 campaign is that we’re now living in a “post-truth” world. People seem to live in entirely different realities, where facts and fact-checking don’t seem to matter, where disagreement about even the most basic shape of things seems beyond debate. There is a broad erosion of credibility for truth gatekeepers. On the right, mainstream “credibility” is often regarded as code for “liberal,” and on the left, “credibility” is reduced to a kind of taste, a gesture toward performed expertism. This decline of experts is part of an even longer-term decline in the trust and legitimacy of nearly all social institutions. Ours is a moment of epistemic chaos.

But “truth” still played a strong role in the 2016 campaign. The disagreement is how, and even if, *facts* add up to truth. While journalists and other experts maintain that truth is basically facts added up, the reality is that all of us, to very different degrees, uncover our own facts and assimilate them to our pre-existing beliefs about

what’s true and false, right and wrong. Sometimes conspiracy theories are effective not because they can be proved but because they can’t be. The theory that Obama was not born in the United States didn’t galvanize Trump’s political career because of any proven facts but because it posed questions that seemed to sanction a larger racist “truth” about the inherent unfitness of black people in a white supremacist culture.

Under these conditions, fact-checking the presidential campaigns could only have been coherent and relevant if it included a conversation about why it ultimately didn’t matter. Many of us wanted a kind of Edward R. Murrow–like moment where some journalist would effectively stand up to Trump, as Murrow did on his news program with Joseph McCarthy, and have the condemnation stick. But our yearning has precluded thinking about why that moment can’t happen today. It isn’t just a matter of “filter bubbles” showing people different news, but epistemic closure. Even when people see the same information, it means radically different things to them.

The epistemic chaos isn’t entirely the media’s fault. Sure, CNN makes a countdown clock before a debate, and FiveThirtyEight treated the entire campaign like a sports event, but there was a proliferation of substantive journalism and fact-checking as well. Some blamed Trump himself. Reporter Ned Resnikoff argues this about Trump and his advisers:

They have no interest in creating a new reality; instead, they’re calling into question the existence of any reality. By telling so many confounding and mutually exclusive falsehoods, the Trump campaign has creative a pervasive sense of unreality in which truth is little more than an arbitrary personal decision.

But as much as Trump thrived within a system sowing chaos and confusion, he didn’t create it. He has just made longstanding dog-whistle bigotry more explicit and audible.

The post-truth, chaos-of-facts environment we have today has as much to do with how information is sorted and made visible as with the nature of the content itself. For example, in the name of being nonpolitical, Facebook has in fact

embraced a politics of viral misinformation, in which it passively promotes as news whatever its algorithms have determined to be popular. The fact of a piece of information's wide circulation becomes sufficient in itself to consider it as news, independent of its accuracy. Or to put it another way, the only fact worth checking about a piece of information is how popular it is.

Trump exploited this nonpolitical politics by taking what in earlier times would have been regarded by the political-insider class as risks. He would read the room and say what would get attention, and these "missteps" would get reported on, and then it would all get thrown into the churning attention machinery, which blurred them in the chaos of feeds that amalgamate items with little regard to their relative importance and makes them all scroll off the screen with equal alacrity. The result of having so much knowledge is the sense of a general mess. More and more reporting doesn't open eyes but makes them roll.

The proliferation of knowledge and facts and data and commentary doesn't produce more understanding or get us closer to the truth. Philosopher Georges Bataille wrote that knowledge always comes with nonknowledge: Any new information brings along new mysteries and uncertainties. Building on this, Baudrillard argued in *Fatal Strategies* that the world was drowning in information:

We record everything, but we don't believe it, because we have become screens ourselves, and who can ask of a screen to believe what it records? To simulation we reply by simulation; we have ourselves become systems of simulation. There are people today (the polls tell us so!) that don't believe in the space shuttle. Here it is no longer a matter of philosophical doubt as to being and appearance, but a profound indifference to the reality principle as an effect of the loss of all illusion.

Media produce not truth but spectacle. What is most watchable often has little to do with accuracy, which conforms to and derives from spectacle and remains inconclusive. The media produce the need for more media: The information they supply yields uncertainty rather than clarity; the more information media pro-

vide, the more disorientation results.

Trump helped these streams scroll even faster. He did not have to be right but instead absorbed the energy sparked by being wrong. He wasn't the TV candidate or the Twitter candidate but a fusion of media channels, each burning at their core to accelerate. For example, cable news networks put members of the Trump campaign on TV ostensibly to tell "the other side," yet their uniform strategy was to yell over the conversation with statements that often contradicted what the candidate himself was saying. They would be invited back the next day.

The 2016 election showed once again that journalism's role is not to clarify the chaos around politics. Rather, an election and its coverage lurch along in a frothing, vertigo-inducing symbiosis. Every news event is at once catastrophic and inconsequential. War and terror seems everywhere and nowhere. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls this a "liquid fear," nihilistic in its perpetual uncertainty. Such fear fosters demand for a simple leader with simple slogans and catastrophically simple answers.

Perhaps we've come too close to the sun. The first rule of virality, after all, is that which burns bright burns fast. And the news cycle spins so rapidly we can't even see it anymore. In this campaign, virality had nothing left to infect. Our host bodies were depleted, exhausted. The election ended too soon, well before Election Day. Amid this attention hyperinflation, can the currency of news be revalued?

If you push something too far along a continuum in one direction, it inevitably becomes its opposite. Perhaps the next election can't produce anything as outrageous as Trump. We'll return to politics as usual, to the performance of "issues" and "debates" that will seem more fully in good faith than before, in comparison to the embarrassment of this cycle. The election process will be as contrived and image-centric as ever, but we'll be desperate to make it great again. •

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WHAT WAS THE NERD

The myth of the bullied white outcast loner is helping fuel a fascist resurgence by WILLIE OSTERWEIL

FASCISM IS BACK. Nazi propaganda is appearing on college campuses and in city centers, a Mussolini-quoting paramilitary group briefly formed to “protect” Trump rallies, the KKK is reforming, and all the while, the media glibly participates in a fascist rebrand, popularizing figures like Milo Yiannopoulos and the “alt-right.” With the appointment of Stephen Bannon to the

Trump administration, this rebranded alt-right now sits with the head of state.

Of course, the fascists never really left: They’ve just tended to wear blue instead of brown the past 40 odd years. But an openly agitating and theorizing hard-right movement, growing slowly over the past few years, has blossomed in 2016 into a recognizable phenomenon in the U.S. Today’s American fascist youth is neither the strapping Aryan jock-patriot nor the skinheaded, jackbooted punk: The fascist millennial is a pasty nerd watching shitty meme videos on YouTube, listening to EDM, and harassing

black women on Twitter. Self-styled “nerds” are the core youth vanguard of crypto-populist fascist movements. And they are the ones most likely to seize the opportunities presented by the Trump presidency.

Before their emergence as goose-stepping shit-posting scum, however, nerds—those “losers” into video games and comics and coding—had already been increasingly attached to a stereotypical set of political and philosophical beliefs. The nerd probably read Ayn Rand or, at the very least, bought into pseudo-meritocracy and libertarianist “freedom.” From his vantage, social problems are technical ones, merely one “disruption” away from being solved. The sea-steady, millennial-blood-drinking, corporate-sovereignty-advocating tech magnates are their heroes—the quintessential nerd overlords.

When it was reported in September that Oculus Rift founder Palmer Luckey was spending some of his fortune on racist, misogynist “meme magic” and shit-posting in support of Donald Trump, it sent nervous ripples through the video-game community. Many developers, to their credit, distanced themselves from the Oculus, pulling games and ceasing development. But many in the games-journalism world were more cowardly, either not covering the story at all or focusing their condemnation on the fact that Luckey made denials and seemed to have lied to try to cover his ass, rather than the spreading of racism and misogyny.

These were the same sorts of gaming journalists who rolled over in the face of Gamergate, the first online fascist movement to achieve mainstream attention in 21st century America. The Gamergate movement, which pretended it was concerned about “ethics in games journalism,” saw self-identifying gamers engage in widespread coordinated harassment of women and queer people in the gaming world in a direct attempt to purge non-white-male and non-right-wing voices, all the while claiming they were the actual victims of corruption. The majority of professional games journalists, themselves mostly white men, in effect feebly mumbled “you gotta hear both sides” while internet trolls drove some of the most interesting voices in game writ-

ing and creation out of the field. The movement was a success for the fuckboys of 4Chan and the Reddit fascists, exhausting minority and feminist gaming communities while reinforcing the idea that the prototypical gamer is an aggrieved white-boy nerd. It has meant that—despite the queer, female, and nonwhite contingent that makes up the majority of gamers—gaming’s most vocal segment is fashoid white boys who look and think a lot like Luckey.

Surely, those communities of marginalized gamers have just as much claim to the subject position of the “nerd,” as do queer shippers and comic-book geeks, to say nothing of people who identify as a nerd to indicate their enthusiasm for an esoteric subject (e.g. “policy nerds”). But the reason a tech-enabled swarm of fascists have emerged in the nerd’s image today and claimed it as territory necessary to defend is because of the archetype’s specific cultural origin in the late 20th century, and the political purpose for which it was consolidated.

The nerd appeared in pop culture in the form of a smart but awkward, always well-meaning white boy irrationally persecuted by his implacable jock antagonists in order to subsume and mystify true social conflict—the ones around race, gender, class, and sexuality that shook the country in the 1960s and ’70s—into a spectacle of white male suffering. This was an effective strategy to sell tickets to white-flight middle-class suburbanites, as it described and mirrored their mostly white communities. With the hollowing out of urban centers, and the drastic poverty in nonwhite communities of the ’80s and ’90s, these suburban whites were virtually the only consumers with enough consistent spending money to garner Hollywood attention.

In the 1980s and ’90s, an obsession with comics, games, and anime might have made this suburban “nerd” a bit of a weirdo. But today, with comic-book franchises keeping Hollywood afloat and video games a \$100 billion global industry whose major launches are cultural events, nerd culture *is* culture. But the nerd myth—outcast, bullied, oppressed and lonely—persists, nowhere more insistently than in the embittered hearts of the little Mussolinis defending nerd-dom.

Of course, there are outcasts who really are intimidated, silenced, and oppressed. They tend to be nonwhite, queer, fat, or disabled—the four groups that are the most consistently and widely bullied in American schools. In other words, the “nerds” who are bullied are *being bullied for other things than being a nerd*. Straight, able-bodied white boys may also have been bullied for their perceived nerdiness—although the epithets thrown often reveal a perceived lack of masculinity or heterosexuality—but the statistics on bullying do not report “nerdiness” as a common factor in bullying incidents. Nevertheless, the myth of nerd oppression and its associated jock/nerd dichotomy let every slightly socially awkward white boy who likes sci-fi explain away his privilege and lay his *ressentiment* at the feet of the nearest women and people of color.



THE MYTH OF THE bullied nerd begins, perhaps, with college fraternities. Fraternities began in America in the mid-19th century, as exclusive social clubs designed to proffer status and provide activity to certain members of the student body. In practice these clubs worked primarily to reproduce masculinity and rape culture and to keep the ruling class tight and friendly. But by the '60s, fraternities were dying: membership and interest were collapsing nationwide. Campus agitation for peace, Black Power, and feminism had radicalized student populations and diminished the popularity and image of these rich boys' clubs. Frats sometimes even did battle with campus strikers and protesters, and by 1970, though absolute numbers were up, per capita frat participation was at an all-time low.

Across the '70s, right-wing graduates and former brothers began a concerted campaign to fund and strengthen fraternities at their alma maters to push back against campus radicalism and growing sexual and racial liberation. Decrepit frat houses were rebuilt, their images rebranded, and frat membership began growing again. As

the wave of social upheaval receded in the late '70s, these well-funded frats were left as a dominant social force on campus, and the hard-partying frat boy became a central object of culture.

This manifested in movies like the 1978 mega-hit *National Lampoon's Animal House*, where scrappy, slightly less attractive white freshmen aren't let into their college's most prestigious frat, and so join the rowdy, less rich one. Steering clear of frats altogether is not presented as plausible, and the movie stages campus conflict not as a question of social movements or broader societal tensions but as a battle between uptight social climbers and cool pranksters. The massive success of *Animal House* immediately inspired a number of network sitcoms and a dozen or so b-movie and Hollywood rip-offs.

The threatened, slightly less attractive white male oppressed and opposed by a more mainstream, uptight, wealthy white man became a constant theme in the canonical youth films of '80s Hollywood. This quickly evolved into the nerd-jock dichotomy, which is central to all of John Hughes's films, from *Sixteen Candles*' geeky uncool Ted who gets in trouble with the jocks at the senior party to *The Breakfast Club*'s rapey “rebel” John and gun-toting “nerd” Brian, to *Weird Science*, whose nerd protagonists use their computer skills to build a female sex slave. Both *Sixteen Candles* and *Weird Science* are also shockingly racist, with the former's horrifically stereotyped exchange student Long Duk Dong and the latter's protagonist winning over the black denizens of a blues club by talking in pseudo-ebonic patois—a blackface accent he keeps up for an unbearable length of screen time. In these films the sympathetic nerd is simultaneously aligned with these racialized subjects while performing a comic racism that reproduces the real social exclusions structuring American society. This move attempts to racialize the nerd, by introducing his position as a new point on the racial hierarchy, one below confident white masculinity but still well above nonwhite people.

The picked-on nerds are central in films across the decade, from *Meatballs* to *The Goonies* to *Stand by Me* to the perennially bullied Marty McFly in the *Back to the Future* series. The outcast

bullied white boy is *The Karate Kid* and his is *The Christmas Story*. This uncool kid, whose putative uncoolness never puts into question the audience's sympathy, is the diegetic object of derision and disgust until, of course, he proves himself to be smarter/funnier/kinder/scrappier etc., at which point he gets the girl—to whom, of course, he was always entitled.



NEW HOLLYWOOD, the “American new wave” movement of the '60s and 1970s, remains to many film historians the last golden age of serious Hollywood filmmaking. Though often reactionary and appropriative, the films of the period were frequently dealing with real social problems: race, class, gender violence. Though our memories tend to collapse all of the social unrest and revolutionary fervor of “the '60s” into the actual decade ending in 1969, the films of the '70s remained exciting and socially conscious partly because social movements were still tearing shit up well into the '70s. The Stonewall riots kicked off the gay rights movement in the last months of 1969, Kent State and the associated massive student strike was in 1970, while the Weather Underground, Black Liberation Army, George Jackson Brigade and other assorted guerrilla groups were at their height of activity in the first half of the '70s. At the same time, the financial crises of 1972–73 led to deep recession and poverty across the country: The future was uncertain, mired in conflict and internal strife.

This turmoil, as much as anything else, produced the innovative Hollywood cinema of the period, and films like *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Serpico*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Network* attempted to address that social conflict. People often lament how these sorts of films gave way to the miserable schlock output of the 1980s. This transformation tends to be traced in film-history, not unreasonably, to the rise of the blockbuster—the historic profitability of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) pivoted studio attention

toward big-budget spectacles with lowest-common-denominator subject matter.

Now, of course, these films are subjects of much high-profile nostalgia. Netflix's retro miniseries *Stranger Things*, for instance, looks back wistfully to the '80s, re-enchanting the image of nerds as winning underdogs (rather than tyrannical bigots). *Stranger Things* does so in the face of reinvigorated political movements that advocate for actually oppressed people, including Black Lives Matter, the migrant justice movement, and growing trans and queer advocacy communities. So in *Stranger Things*, the nerdy interests of the protagonists prove crucial to their ability to recognize the sinister happenings of their world. Their openness to magic and their gee-whiz attitude toward scientific possibility allow them to understand the monster from another dimension and the psychic supergirl more readily than the adults around them. The boys play *Dungeons & Dragons* in the series's opening scene and get crucial advice from a beloved A/V club adviser. They are mercilessly bullied for their nerdiness, but the bullies are barely even discussed: They are so naturalized that they are merely a minor plot point among others. What comes across more directly is that the nerds are heroes. This is then mirrored by the faux nerdiness of viewers, who can relate to these boys by tallying up all the nostalgic references.

The films celebrated in *Stranger Things* as fun 1980s camp at the time were functioning as reactionary cultural retrenchment: They reflected Hollywood's collusion in the Reaganite project of rationalizing and justifying a host of initiatives: privatization, deregulation, the offloading risk to individuals by cutting safety nets and smashing labor unions. These were explained as “decreasing the tax burden,” and “increasing individual responsibility,” while the nuclear family and “culture” were re-centered as the solution to and/or cause of all social problems. As Hollywood attention swung toward the white suburbs, its ideology followed in lockstep.

Reagan's main political move was to sweep social conflict under the rug and “unify” the population in a new “Morning in America”

through an appeal to a coalition of whites concerned about “crime” and taxation. This was matched by a cultural move to replace Hollywood representation of social struggle (as idiosyncratic, individualistic, and bourgeois as these filmic depictions were) with narratives of intra-race, intra-gender interpersonal oppression. Hollywood in the 1980s worked hard to render social tensions invisible and project a safe and stable white suburban America (as opposed to urban hellscapes) whose travails were largely due to bureaucratic interference, whether through meddling high school principals like in *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* or the tyrannical EPA agents in *Ghostbusters*.

Meanwhile, social movements had largely lost their fight against state repression and internal exhaustion, with most militant activists in prison, in graves, or in hiding. Local and federal governments rolled back the victories made over decades of struggle, the Cold War was stoked to enforce ideological allegiance, AIDS decimated the queer movement and black communities faced intensified police persecution tied to drugs, which were suddenly flowing at greater and greater rates into the ghetto.

Central to this program of making social conflict disappear, oddly enough, is the nerd. And no film shows this as clearly as the fraternity comedy which inaugurated the nerd as hero: *Revenge of the Nerds*. The plot of this 1984 film follows two computer-science freshman at fictional Adams College. After they are kicked out of their dorms and forced to live in the gym by a group of displaced frat boys, they assemble a gang of assorted oddballs and rent a big house off-campus, living in a happy imitation of campus frat life. The frat guys hate this, so they prank and bully the nerds relentlessly. The nerds discover that the only way they can have the frat boys disciplined by an official university body is to be in a frat themselves and appeal to a fraternal council.

Looking around for a national frat that doesn’t yet have a chapter at Adams, they find Lamda Lamda Lamda, an all-black fraternity. When they visit the president of the fraternity, he refuses to give them accreditation. Surveying the room of (mostly) white boys, he says, “I must tell you gentlemen, you have very little chance of becoming Tri-Lambs. I’m in a difficult situation here. I mean after all, you’re nerds.” The joke is that he didn’t say “white.”

In the imaginary of the film, being a nerd

The jock is forever cool, the nerd perennially oppressed.

replaces race as the key deciding factor for social inclusion, while black fraternities are situated as the purveyors of exclusion and bias—despite the fact that black fraternities (though often participating in the same patriarchal gender politics as white frats) have historically been a force of solidarity and safety at otherwise hostile universities.

Nonetheless, one of the nerds looks over the bylaws and sees that Lamda Lamda Lamda has to accept all new chapters on a trial basis. So the nerds now have a frat. On Adams’s campus, this sparks a prank war between the nerd frat and the prestigious frat that includes a party raid on a sorority, the distribution of nude photos of a woman (made fair game by her association with one of the jock frat brothers), and a straight-up rape (played as comic), in which one of the nerds uses a costume to impersonate a sorority sister’s boyfriend and sleeps with her while wearing it. All these horrific acts toward women are “justified” by the bullying the nerds have ostensibly received for being nerds, and

by the fact that the women aren't interested in them—or at least, at first. Eventually the nerds' rapey insouciance and smarts win their hearts, and they steal the jocks' girlfriends.

In the film's final climactic scene, at a college-wide pep rally, the main nerd tries to speak about the bullying he faces but gets beaten down by the jocks. Just as all looks lost, black Tri-Lamb brothers from other colleges march in and line up in formation, arms crossed in front of the speaker platform in a clear echo of images of Black Panther rallies. The white college jocks thus held back, the national president of Lamda Lamda Lamda hands the nerd back the microphone, who in what amounts to an awful parody of Black Power speeches, announces, "I just wanted to say that I'm a nerd. And I'm here tonight to stand up for the rights of other nerds. All our lives we've been laughed at and made to feel inferior ... Why? Because we're smart? Because we look different. Well, we're not. I'm a nerd, and I'm pretty proud of it."

Then, with the black fraternity president over his shoulder and the militant black frat brothers bordering the frame, the other nerd protagonist declares, "We have news for the beautiful people: There's a lot more of us than there are of you." It is the film's emotional climax. And thus these rapists appropriate the accouterments of black power in the name of nerd liberation.

This epitomizes the key ideological gesture in all the films named here: the replacement of actual categories of social struggle and oppression with the concept of the jock-nerd struggle. The jock is forever cool, the nerd perennially oppressed. And revenge is always on the table and always justified. In the nerd's very DNA is a mystification of black, queer, and feminist struggle: As a social character, the nerd exists to deny the significance (if not the existence) of race, class, and gender oppression.

The rise of the internet economy and the rise of nerdy cultural obsessiveness, collecting, and comics—not to mention the rise to power of the kids raised on *Revenge of the Nerds* and its 1980s ilk—means that the nerd is now ful-

ly ascendant. But perpetually aggrieved, these "nerds" believe other oppressed people should shut the fuck up and stop complaining, because they themselves didn't complain! They got jobs! They got engineering degrees! They earned what they have and deserve what they take.

As liberals sneer at the "ignorant" middle American white Trump voters, Trump's most vocal young advocates—and the youthful base of American fascist movements going forward—are not the anti-intellectual culture warriors or megachurch moralists of the fly-over states. Though the old cultural right still makes up much of Trump's voting base, the intelligence-fetishizing "rationalists" of the new far right, keyboard warriors who love pedantic argument and rhetorical fallacies are the shock troops of the new fascism. These disgruntled nerds feel victimized by a thwarted meritocracy that has supposedly been torn down by SJWs and affirmative action. Rather than shoot-from-the-hip Christians oppressed by book-loving coastal elites, these nerds see themselves silenced by anti-intellectual politically correct censors, cool kids, and hipsters who fear true rational debate.

Though sports culture continues to be a domain of intense patriarchal production and violence—rape jokes are just locker room talk, after all—these days jocks in the news are just as likely to be taking a knee against American racism in the image of Colin Kaepernick. The nerds, on the other hand, are shit-posting for a new American Reich. The nerd/jock distinction has always been a myth designed to hide social conflict and culturally re-center white male subjectivity. Now that the nerds have fully arrived, their revenge looks uglier than anything the jocks ever dreamed. ♦

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BROKEN WINDOWS BROKEN CODE

The problem with predictive policing algorithms is not that they can “become” racist, but that they’re imitating a racist system by R. JOSHUA SCANNELL

THIS YEAR, THE federal government announced it will phase out its use of all privately operated prisons. Many progressives have heralded this as a victory. It is not.

Although for-profit prisons are transparently

evil, they house a very small percentage of people ensnared by American mass incarceration. The problem with for-profit prisons is prison, not profit. Without an accompanying effort to draw down the reach, power, and discretion of

criminal-justice institutions, the injuries these institutions inflict will be redistributed rather than redressed. When, for instance, federal courts have ordered states to reduce prison inmate populations, the effect has mainly been to increase the strain on already overburdened state and local courts, while inmates are merely reassigned from state to local jails or “resentenced” (as when judges retroactively change sentences after legal statutes change). In large states like California and Michigan, this has forced courts to “do more with less” in expediting the criminal-justice process. That means that judges have had to industrialize how they sentence people.

Government, and especially the overburdened criminal justice system, is supposed to do two things at once: to be more economically efficient and more ethically just. That is where the U.S.’s most spectacularly capitalized industry sector steps in: Silicon Valley caters to the fantasy that those two incompatible goals can be met through a commitment to data and a faith in the self-evident veracity of numbers.

This spirit animates a software company called Northpointe, based in the small, predominantly white town of Traverse City, in northern Michigan. Among other services, Northpointe provides U.S. courts with what it calls “automated decision support,” a euphemism for algorithms designed to predict convicts’ likely recidivism and, more generally, assess the risk they pose to “the community.” Northpointe’s stated goal is to “improve criminal justice decision-making,” and they argue that their “nationally recognized instruments are validated, court tested and reliable.”

Northpointe is trying to sell itself as in the best tradition of Silicon Valley startup fantasies. The aesthetic of its website is largely indistinguishable from every other software company pushing services like “integrated web-based

assessment and case management” or “comprehensive database structuring, and user-friendly software development.” You might not even infer that Northpointe’s business is to build out the digital policing infrastructure, were it not for small deviations the software-company-website norm, including a scrubber bar of logos from sheriffs’ departments and other criminal-justice institutions, drop-down menu items like “Jail Workshops,” and, most bizarrely, a picture of the soot-covered hands of a cuffed inmate. (Why

Silicon Valley caters to the fantasy that the incompatible goals of efficiency and ethical justice can be met through commitment to data.

are those hands so dirty? Is the prisoner recently returned from fire camp? Is it in the interest of Northpointe to advertise the fact that convict labor fights California’s wildfires?)

Moreover, in the Silicon Valley startup tradition, Northpointe has developed what it views as an objective, non-ideological data-driven model to deliver measurable benefits to a corner of the public sector in need of disruption. If only the police, the courts, and corrections departments had better data or a stronger grasp of the numbers—if only they did their jobs rationally and apolitically—we could finally have a fair criminal justice system. This is essentially the neoliberal logic of “smaller, smarter government,” spearheaded in the U.S. by Bill Clinton and Al Gore, who ran a “reinventing government” task force as vice president, and it has defined what is regarded as politically permissible policy ever since.

But Northpointe’s post-ideological fantasies have proved to be anything but in practice. At the end of May 2016, ProPublica published a

thorough and devastating report that found that Northpointe's algorithms are inaccurate—in that they have assigned high risk values to people who are not recidivist—as well as racist, consigning a lot of brown, black, and poor white bodies to big houses under the cover of the company's faux-progressive rhetoric about “embracing community” and “advancing justice.”

The ProPublica report confirmed the suspicions of many activists and critics that emerging technological approaches designed to streamline the U.S.'s criminal justice system and make it fairer might in fact do the opposite. Northpointe, of course, disputes ProPublica's analysis. In a letter to the publisher, they wrote that “Northpointe does not agree that the results of your analysis, or the claims being made based upon that analysis, are correct or that they accurately reflect the outcomes from the application of the model.”

Of course, their model is proprietary, so it is impossible to know exactly how it works. ProPublica did manage to find that it is based on 137 Likert-scale questions that are broken down into 14 categories. Some of these have obvious relevance, like criminal history and gang membership. Others are specious and confusing, like leisure/recreation (“Thinking of your leisure time in the past few months ... how often did you feel bored?”), social isolation (“I have never felt sad about things in my life”), and “criminal attitudes” (“I have felt very angry at someone or something”).

Northpointe makes for an easy target for critics of predictive analytics in contemporary criminal justice. It's a for-profit company, with an inherent interest in expanding the state's carceral reach. Its business model depends on a criminal-justice system oriented toward perpetually churning people through its courts and being overburdened. The more overtaxed a court, the more attractive a program that can tell a judge how they ought to rule. But to blame mass incarceration on companies like Northpointe would be akin to blaming private prisons (which house about 11 percent of prisoners) for mass incarceration. The public sector may work with the private sector to outlay some costs and provide some services, but the government makes the market.

A common critique of algorithmic systems like Northpointe's is that they replicate existing bias. Because people program algorithms, their biases or motives get built in. It seems to follow, then, that were we to open up the algorithms, we could train them out of their prejudicial ignorance and thereby solve the problems of racism, sexism, queerphobia, and so on that are otherwise written invisibly into the source codes of everyday life. We may not be able to reprogram humans to be unbiased, but we can rewrite algorithms.

But the problem with predictive policing goes beyond Northpointe or biased algorithms. Focusing on the algorithms relies on a delimited analysis of how power works: If only we could have woke programmers, then we would have woke systems. Swap out “programmers” for “cops” and you have a version of the “few bad apples” theory of policing, which ignores the way in which violence and repression are inherent and structural within law enforcement. The problem with predictive policing algorithms, and the fantasy of smart government it animates, is not that they can “become” racist, but that they were built on a law-enforcement strategy that was racist all along.



NORTHPOINTE IS EMBLEMATIC OF the sort of predictive and data-driven approaches that have become accepted commonsense policing practices, techniques such as hot-spot policing and situational awareness modeling. And while these methods are often presented as social or politically “neutral,” there is an enormous body of research that has demonstrated repeatedly that they are not. But what made data-driven predictive policing seem like common sense?

To begin to answer that question, one must trace the disparate histories of predictive policing's component parts through a series of crises and conjunctions. Actuarial techniques like Northpointe's (or the older Level of Service Inventory–Revised, another recidivism-risk-as-

assessment battery) emerge out of insurance companies' demand for risk management during the late 19th and early 20th centuries' chronic economic crises.

Two more pieces of the puzzle, biometrics and organized surveillance, emerge in the 18th and 19th centuries out of the shifting tactics for maintaining white supremacy in both southern slave plantations and northern cities. Simone Browne, for example, has shown that New York's colonial "lantern laws," which forbade unaccompanied black people from walking the streets at night without carrying a lit lantern, were originally instituted because of white fear of antislavery insurrection.

And lastly, statistical techniques of crime prediction come down to us through the early-20th century Chicago School of sociology, which swapped cruder theories of physically inherent racial difference for more refined spatio-cultural theories of industrial capitalist "social disorganization." These shored up sexuality and the color line as the key arbiters of cultural degradation, as in studies positing a "culture of poverty" that generates criminality. This is Roderick Ferguson's point in *Aberrations in Black* when he argues that "the Chicago School's construction of African American neighborhoods as outside heteropatriarchal normalization underwrote municipal government's regulation of the South Side, making African American neighborhoods the point at which both a will to knowledge and a will to exclude intersected."

All these histories are individually crucial. But there is a particular point when they all converged: at the 1993 election of Rudy Giuliani as mayor of New York City. A combination of white resentment against David Dinkins, the city's first black mayor; a referendum on Staten Island's secession from New York City; and incessant dog whistling about "improving the quality of life" in the city allowed Giuliani to win the mayoral race. The "quality of life" issue stemmed from the unprecedented spike in homelessness and poverty in the wake of the city's 1970s fiscal crisis. The racist political economy of New York City ensured that poverty and homelessness—coded as "disorder"—fell disproportionately to people of color.

None of this was accidental. Robert Moses was a key player in a power elite that famously engineered New York as an apartheid city in the 1950s and 1960s, just as many people of color were immigrating there, particularly from Puerto Rico and the American South. They were largely renters, living rent-gouged in the subdivided former homes of white families who had taken advantage of the GI Bill and home-loan programs to move to the suburbs. When New York City's industrial core collapsed in the 1960s, it devastated working class neighborhoods, where poverty skyrocketed and landlords systematically abandoned property. Aside from industry, black and Latinx workers had won the greatest labor victories and made the deepest inroads in the public sector. After the federal government induced the fiscal crisis of the '70s and crippled the municipal government, the city cut one-third of its workforce, further decimating the black and Latinx working and middle classes.

As the city sought to lure major corporate headquarters, financial houses, and wealthy real estate investors back from the suburbs in the 1980s, controlling this racially coded "disorder" became the city government's paramount concern. The police did this by combining a generalized ratcheting up of displays of spectacular violence meant to "retake" places like Tompkins Square Park from the queer and homeless communities that had set up there, with a "community policing" strategy that focused on outreach to "community leaders" to make the department more responsive. Dinkins' administration also made harassing black "squeegee men" a centerpiece of its crime fighting effort, a tactic that Giuliani, while campaigning, would point to as a matter of "restoring the quality of life." That was thinly veiled code for aggressively targeting the poor, people of color, queer people, sex workers, and teenagers as part of a general campaign to, as Police Strategy No. 5 put it, "reclaim the public spaces of New York."

This policing strategy "worked" in that, by the early 1990s, crime rates had begun to fall, real estate values skyrocketed, and "undesirable" populations had been pushed further to the margins. It also fomented the toxic electoral mood

that got Giuliani elected. He appointed William Bratton as police commissioner (the first of his two tours of duty in the position), and Bratton would implement the infamous policing strategy known as “Broken Windows.”

Broken Windows is usually explained as the idea that police should rigorously enforce violations of small crimes with maximum penalties to both deter people from committing larger crimes and incapacitate people who cannot be deterred.

But while that is an accurate depiction of how Bratton and other backers have described the approach to the press, the actual Broken Windows theory, developed in the early 1980s and revised through the mid-1990s, is never so coherent.

Critics (who have often been cops) have repeatedly pointed this out from the moment the *Atlantic* first published the article by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling that gave the approach its name in 1982. I

am partial to Rachel Herzog’s recent description of Broken Windows in *Policing the Planet*, where she describes the theory as “not much of a theory at all,” but rather “an incantation, a spell used by law enforcement, advocates, and social scientists alike to do everything from designing social service programs to training cops.”

To the extent that Wilson and Kelling’s case can be condensed into a logical argument, it is this: Reforms designed to address corruption and racism in American police departments have incapacitated their ability to fulfill the order-maintenance component of their mission. This crippled American cities in the 1970s by instilling a culture of disorder in the streets and a fatalist sense of impotency in police departments. To fix this, these reforms must be abolished. In their stead, police should walk around more than they drive, because it is hard to be scared of someone when they are in a car (?). They should “kick ass” more than they issue summonses or arrests, because it is more efficient and the criminal justice system is broken (??). They should use their

subjective judgment to decide who will be on the receiving end of this order maintenance, rather than defer to any legal regime (???). They should do all this without worrying about whether what they do would stand up in a court of law, because the interests of the community far outweigh the individualized injustice that police may mete out (????). That, plus a chilling nostalgia for Jim Crow and the befuddling decision to rest the entire scientific basis for their case on a study organized

Anybody can look at a map and see if there are more or fewer dots than before. More dots mean the cops are failing

by Philip Zimbardo, who also ran the Stanford Prison Experiment (among the most unethical social science studies ever performed), gives the gist of the thing.

Even Bratton’s second-in-command during his first stint as NYPD commissioner in the Giuliani years, Jack Maple, thought that the Broken Windows theory was bogus. He called it the “Busting Balls” theory of policing and said that it was the oldest and laziest one in the history of the profession. He thought that only academics who had never actually worked on the street could ever think it would effectively drive down crime. In practice, he argued, non-systematically attacking people and issuing threats would displace unwanted people to other neighborhoods, where they could continue to “victimize” innocents. Because Broken Windows did not advocate mass incapacitation through mass incarceration, Maple thought it ineffective.

So the strategy that Bratton implemented was not the Broken Windows detailed in the *Atlantic* essay. Nor was it, as it is sometimes de-

scribed, a hardline interpretation of Wilson and Kelling's ideas. But Broken Windows theory did offer Bratton and Maple an intellectual scaffold for reversing what had been considered the best practices in policing for decades. Over more officers and equipment, Bratton and Maple wanted more intelligence. Broken Windows provided a reason to replace six-month or annual target benchmarks for reduction of "index crimes" (crimes reported in Part I of the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports: aggravated assault, forcible rape, murder, robbery, arson, burglary, larceny-theft, and motor-vehicle theft) with the monitoring of granular crime data on a geographic information system in near real time, to meet day-to-day targets for reductions in the full range of crimes, and not just the most serious.

What Bratton and Maple wanted was to build a digital carceral infrastructure, an integrated set of databases that linked across the various criminal-justice institutions of the city, from the police, to the court system, to the jails, to the parole office. They wanted comprehensive and real-time data on the dispositions and intentions of their "enemies," a term that Maple uses more than once to describe "victimizers" who "prey" on "good people" at their "watering holes." They envisioned a surveillance apparatus of such power and speed that it could be used to selectively target the people, places, and times that would result in the most good collars. They wanted to stay one step ahead, to know where "knuckleheads" and "predators" would be before they did, and in so doing, best look to the police department's bottom line. And they wanted it to be legal.

For this corporate restructuring of policing to be successful, they had to populate the city's databases with as many names as possible. But these institutions were reluctant to adopt new tech—for reasons of expediency (people hate learning new systems, especially when they are untested) as well as for moral reservations about automating criminal justice.

If Bratton and Maple could expand the number of arrests the system was handling, they could force the issue. By their own admission, they created a deliberate crisis in the accounting capacities of New York City's criminal justice

institutions to necessitate the implementation of digital technologies. For instance, they ordered enormous sweeps aimed at catching subway fare-beaters, in which the police charged everyone with misdemeanors instead of issuing warnings or tickets. This flooded the courts with more cases than they could handle and overwhelmed public defenders. To cope, the courts automated their paperwork and warrant-notifications system, and public defenders turned increasingly to plea deals. This piled up convictions, inflating the number of people with criminal records and populating interoperable databases.

Case information was then fed to the NYPD's warrant-enforcement squad, which could then organize their operations by density (where the most warrants were concentrated) rather than severity of the crime. Most warrants were served for jumping bail, a felony that many don't realize they are even committing. Faced with the prospect of abetting a felon, many people that the police questioned in the targeted enforcement areas were willing to give up their friends and acquaintances to stay out of trouble. The surveillance net expanded, and the data became more granular. Officers in areas with high concentrations of incidents, newly empowered to determine how to police an area based on their idea of how risky it was, would step up their aggression in poor, black, Asian, and Latino neighborhoods, in queer spaces, and in places where they believed sex workers did their jobs. It was, and is, Jim Crow all over again, but this time backed by numbers and driven by officers' whims.



BY PROVIDING THE FRAMEWORK for a massive increase in aggressive police behavior, Broken Windows made this possible. It gave a rationale for why officers should be permitted to determine criminal risk based on their own subjective interpretations of a scene in the moment rather than abiding strictly established protocols governing what was and was not within their jurisdiction.

This helped support the related notion that police officers should operate as proactive enforcers of order rather than reactive fighters of crime. That is, rather than strictly focus on responding to requests for help, or catching criminals after a crime occurred, Broken Windows empowered cops to use their own judgment to determine whether someone was doing something disorderly (say, selling loose cigarettes) and to remove them using whatever force they deemed appropriate. Broken Windows plus Zero Tolerance would equal an automated carceral state.

A carceral state is not a penal system, but a network of institutions that work to expand the state's punitive capacities and produce populations for management, surveillance, and control. This is distinct from the liberal imagination of law and order as the state redressing communal grievances against individual offenders who act outside the law. The target of the carceral state is not individuated but instead group-differentiated, which is to say organized by social structures like race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and so on. As Katherine Beckett and Naomi Murakawa put it in "Mapping the Shadow Carceral State," the carceral "expansion of punitive power occurs through the blending of civil, administrative, and criminal legal authority. In institutional terms, the shadow carceral state includes institutional annexation of sites and actors beyond what is legally recognized as part of the criminal justice system: immigration and family courts, civil detention facilities, and even county clerks' offices."

In a liberal law-and-order paradigm, individuals violate norms and criminal codes; in the carceral state, racism, which Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines "specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" is the condition of possibility for "criminality." The political economic structures of a carceral state deliberately organize groups of people with stratified levels of precarity through mechanisms like red-lining, asset-stripping, predatory lending, market-driven housing policies, property-value funded schools, and so on.

The consequence of these state-driven political decisions is premature death: Poor peo-

ple, who in American cities are often also black, Latinx, Asian, and First Nation, are exposed to deadly environmental, political, sexual, and economic violence. Efforts to survive in deliberately cultivated debilitating landscapes are determined to be "criminal" threats to good order, and the people who live there are treated accordingly. Lisa Marie Cacho argues that the effect is social death: The "processes of criminalization regulate and regularize targeted populations, not only disciplining and dehumanizing those ineligible for personhood, but also presented them as ineligible for sympathy and compassion." This is how technically nonpunitive institutions become punitive in fact, as in immigration detention, civil diversion programs that subject bodies to unwanted surveillance and legal precarity, educational institutions that funnel children into a pipeline to prison, and civil-injunction zones that render traversing space a criminal act.

The carceral state's institutions and cadres are both public and private. For example, a company like Northpointe that develops tools designed to rationalize and expedite the process of imprisoning people, is not technically a part of any criminal justice institution, but it automates the mechanics of the carceral state. Securitas (née "Pinkerton") might not be a state agency, but it does the labor of securing the circulation of capital to the benefit of both corporations and governments.



FOR ANY BUILDUP IN surveillance to be effective in sustaining a carceral state, the police must figure out how to operationalize it as a management strategy. The theoretical and legal superstructures may be in place for an expanded conception of policing, but without a rationalized command-and-control process to direct resources and measure effectiveness, there is little way to make use of the new data or assess whether the programs are accomplishing their mission of "driving down crime." In 1994, the NYPD came

up with CompStat to solve this problem, and we are living in its world.

Depending on who is recounting CompStat's origin story, it stands for "Compare Statistics," "Computerized Statistics," or "Computer Statistics." This spread is interesting, since all three names imply different ideas about what computers do (as well as a total misunderstanding of what "statistics" are). Let's take these from least to most magical. "Compare Statistics" designates computers as capable merely of the epistemological function of rapidly comparing information curated and interpreted by people. "Computerized Statistics" implies an act of ontological transformation: The information curated and interpreted by humans is turned into "Big Data" that only computers have the capability of interpreting. "Computer Statistics" instantiates, *prima facie*, an ontological breach, so that the information is collected, curated, and analyzed by computers for its own purposes rather than those of humans, placing the logic of data squarely outside human agency.

These questions aren't just academic. The Rand Corporation, in its 2013 report on predictive policing, devotes an entire section to dispelling "myths" that have taken hold in departments around the country in the wake of widespread digitization of statistical collection and analysis. Myths include: "The computer actually knows the future," "The computer will do everything for you," and "You need a high-powered (and expensive) model." On the spectrum of Compare Statistics to Computer Statistics, Rand's view is closest to Compare, but companies like Northpointe are at the other end. That industry believes itself to be in the business of building crystal balls.

And were one to embark on a project of separating out industry goals from the ideologies and practices of smart government, one would find it impossible. Massive tech companies like

Microsoft, IBM, Cisco Systems, and Siemens, as well as smaller, though no less heavy, hitters like Palantir, HunchLab, PredPol, and Enigma are heavily invested in making government "smarter." Microsoft and New York City have a profit-sharing agreement for New York City's digital surveillance system, called AWARE (the Automated Workspace for the Analysis of Real-Time Events), which has recently been sold to cities like Sao Paulo and Oakland.

How do police determine which bodies must be policed? They do it based on what "feels" right to them

CompStat sits at the fountainhead of an increasingly powerful movement advocating "responsive," "smart" government. It has become ubiquitous in large police departments around the world, and in the U.S., federal incentives and enormous institutional pressures have transferred the burden of proof from those departments that would adopt it to those departments that don't.

Major think tanks driving the use of big data to solve urban problems, like New York University's Center for Urban Science and Progress, are partially funded by IBM and the NYPD. Tim O'Reilly explicitly invokes Uber as an ideal model for government. McKinsey and Co. analysts advocate, in a Code for America book blurbed by Boris Johnson, that city government should collect and standardize data, and make it available for third parties, who can then use this to drive "significant increases in economic performance for companies and consumers, *even if this data doesn't directly benefit the public sector agency.*" In the context of a carceral state, harassing and arresting poor people based on CompStat maps

delivers shareholder value for Microsoft, speculative material for some company whose name we don't know yet, and VC interest in some engineers who will promise that they can build "better" risk analytics algorithms than Northpointe.

A hybrid labor management system and data visualization platform, CompStat is patterned on post-Fordist management styles that became popular during the 1980s and early 1990s. Although it draws liberally from business methodologies like Six Sigma and Total Quality Management, it is most explicitly indebted to Michael Hammer and James Champy's *Re-engineering the Corporation*, which calls for implementing high-end computer systems to "obliterate" existing lines of command and control and bureaucratic organization of responsibility. Instead of benchmarks and targets set atop corporate hierarchies in advance of production, Hammer and Champy advocate a flexible management style that responds, in real time, to market demands. Under their cybernetic model, the CEO (police commissioner) would watch franchisees' (precincts) performance in real time (CompStat meetings), in order to gauge their market value (public approval of police performance) and productivity (crime rates, arrest numbers).

Under CompStat, responsibility for performance and, in theory, strategy, devolves from central command to the middle managers (a.k.a. precinct commanders), who must keep their maps and numbers up to date and are promoted or ousted based on their ability to repeatedly hit target numbers (in their case, crime rates and arrests). Because the responsibility for constantly improving the bottom line has been transferred to the precinct commanders, they lean on their sergeants when the numbers are bad, and the

sergeants in turn lean on their patrol officers.

CompStat also gives police managers a simple, built-in way of easily telling whether or not their cops are doing their jobs. They can look at maps to see if they've changed. This simplicity has the added bonus for governments of providing easy "transparency," in that anybody can look at a map and see if there are more or fewer dots on it than there were a week ago. More dots mean the cops are failing. Fewer dots mean they're doing their job.

This appeals to the supposed technocratic center of American politics, which regards numbers as neutral and post-political. It lends apparent numerical legitimacy to suspicions among the privileged classes about where police ought to crack heads hardest. It also, in theory, saves money. You don't have to deploy cops where there aren't incidents.

CompStat is rooted in a sort of folk wisdom about what statistics are: uncomplicated facts from empirical reality that can be transformed automatically and uncontroversially into visual data. The crimes, the logic goes, are simply happening and the information, in the form of incident reports, is already being collected; it merely should be tracked better. Presumably, CompStat merely performs this straightforward operation in as close to real time as possible. Departments can then use these "statistics" to make decisions about deployment, which can be targeted at spaces that are already "known" to have a lot of crime.

But this overlooks the methodological problems about how data is to be interpreted as well as the ways in which the system feeds back into itself. Statistics are not raw data. Proper statistics are deliberately curated samples designed to reflect broad populational trends as accurately as possible so that, when subjected to rigorous mathematical scrutiny, they might reveal descriptive insights about the composition of a given group or inferential insights about the relationships between different social variables. Even in the best of cases, statistics are so thoroughly socially constructed that much of social science literature is devoted to debating their utility.

When CompStat logs arrest information in a server and overlays it on a map, that is not statis-

Numbers are treated as more real than social structures

tics; it is a work summary report. The “data” collected reflects existing police protocol and strategies and are reflective of police officers’ intuitive sense of what places need to be policed, and what bodies need to be targeted, and not much else. New York City cops don’t arrest investment bankers for snorting their weight in cocaine because they are not doing vertical patrols in Murray Hill high rises. They are not doing vertical patrols in Murray Hill high rises not simply because the police exist to protect rather than persecute the wealthy, but because they have labored for 20 years under a theory of policing that effectively excludes affluent areas from routine scrutiny. It so much as says so in the name: These high-rises don’t have broken windows.

Similarly, the National Center for Women and Policing has cited two studies that show that “at least 40 percent of police officer families experience domestic violence,” contrasted with 10 percent among the general population. Those incidents tend not to show up on CompStat reports.

The reverence with which CompStat’s data is treated is indicative of a wider fetishization of numbers, in which numbers are treated as more real than social structures or political economy. Indeed, it often seems as though metrics are all that there is.



THE TRANSPARENT/RESPONSIVE/SMART GOVERNMENT MOVEMENT argues for reconstituting governance as a platform, transforming the state into a service-delivery app. Its thought leaders, like Michael Flowers and former Maryland governor Martin O’Malley, routinely point to CompStat as the fountainhead of postpolitical governance, as if such a thing were possible. But as feminist critics of technology like Donna Haraway and Patricia Ticineto Clough have long pointed out, technology is political because it is always, everywhere, geared toward the constitution, organization, and distribution of differentiated bodies across time and space. And bodies are politics

congealed in flesh. CompStat is designed to maximize the efficiency and force with which the state can put police officers’ bodies into contact with the bodies of people that must be policed.

And how do police determine which bodies must be policed? They do it based on what “feels” right to them, the digital inheritance of Broken Windows. Even cops that are not racist will inevitably reproduce racialized structures of incarceration because that is what policing is. In a city like New York, in a country like the U.S., that level of police discretion always points directly at the histories of unfreedom for black, brown, and queer people that are the constitutive infrastructures of our state.

Northpointe’s algorithms will always be racist, not because their engineers may be bad but because these systems accurately reflect the logic and mechanics of the carceral state—mechanics that have been digitized and sped up by the widespread implementation of systems like CompStat. Policing is a filter, a violent sorting of bodies into categorically different levels of risk to the commonweal. That filter cannot be squared with the liberal ideas of law, order, and justice that a lot of people still think the United States is based on. Programs like CompStat are palliative. They seem to work in data, in numbers, in actual events that happened outside of the context of structural inequalities, like racism or patriarchy, or heteronormativity. But CompStat links the interlocked systems of oppression that durably reproduce the violence of the carceral state to a fantasy of data-driven solutionism that reifies and reproduces our structural evils. Whether or not a human is remanded to a cage because of their race and sex, or because of a number on a dashboard, means very little once the door slams shut.” •

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