

SOB O ESPLENDOR: MEDIÇÃO SOMBRIA E A ASCENSÃO DE TRUMP

Beneath the Shine: dark mediation and the rise of Trump

Bajo el resplendor: mediación sombría y la ascensión de Trump

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Resumo

O ensaio trata do lado obscuro ocultado sob a materialidade resplandecente das operações das mídias digitais. São abordados os aspectos incógnitos das dinâmicas de produção e circulação de informações que reforçam as inequidades políticas e econômicas, em benefício de grupos engajados na propagação de ideologias neofacistas. O texto propõe um ativismo tátil feminista como meio de ruptura da correlação entre o ambiente sombrio de ações baseadas em dados e a intoxicação social pelo ódio machista por trás de fenômenos como a eleição de Trump para a presidência dos EUA.

Palavras-chave: Dados obscuros. Capitalismo de plataforma. Tecnologia e sociedade. Hipervisibilidade. Algoritmos

Abstract

The essay deals with the obscure side concealed under the shiny materiality of digital media operations. It addresses the obfuscated aspects behind the dynamics of information production and distribution, which reinforce political and economic inequities in favor of groups engaged in spreading neofacist ideologies. The text suggests a tactile feminist activism as a means of breaking off the correlation between the shadowy domain of data-driven actions and the toxic masculinity linked to such phenomena as Trump's election to the US presidency.

Keywords: Dark data. Platform capitalism. Technology and society. Hypervisibility. Algorithms.

Resumen

El ensayo trata del lado oscuro que se oculta bajo la materialidad resplandeciente de las operaciones de los medios digitales. Se discuten los aspectos incógnitos de las dinámicas de producción y circulación de informaciones que refuerzan las inequidades políticas y económicas, en beneficio de grupos comprometidos en la propagación de ideologías neofacistas. El texto propone un activismo tátil feminista como medio de ruptura de la correlación entre el universo sombrio de las acciones basadas en datos y la intoxicación social por el odio machista detrás de fenómenos como la elección de Trump para la presidencia de EEUU.

Palabras-clave: Datos oscuros. Capitalismo de plataforma. Tecnología y sociedad. Hipervisibilidad. Algoritmos.

The Dust Beneath the Shine

Urban contemporary life is more and more about navigating shiny bubbles of mediated interaction: our cell phone screens shine, our smart cities shine – the digital afterglow has become all encompassing. Political protests shine¹ as well, via the coordinated glow of thousands of cell phones, irradiating rays of light onto the darkness of a country's corruption:



Fig. 3: Anti-corruption protest in Bucharest, Romania (Katz & Mutler, 2017)

Fashion glows, entertainment glows, mobile apps create automated glittery digital make up (Newman, 2017) for our profile photos, as we are blinded to the depths of personal data being exchanged for a layer of pixelated foundation². The shine of the digital is blinding. It blinds us not only to the exhaustion of resources inherent to its materiality, grounded in the dust of mineral extraction and energy consumption (Parikka, 2015), but also to the human exhaustion and labor exploitation (Fuchs, 2013; Parikka 2013) that is the backbone of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017).

Dark data, collected through the abusive exchanges hidden beneath the shiny digital transactions we engage in

everyday, is sold as part of a business model that thrives on digital rent: give us your data, and we will give you access to glowing functionalities. Dark labor, the cheap, outsourced and invisible human flesh that makes corporate digital profit a reality, lurks in the shadow of the California Dream of a free and progressive Silicon Valley-based ideology of Shine. The recent actions of Elon Musk³, who is in many aspects an icon of the progressive ideology of Silicon Valley in his successful efforts to develop clean energy technologies, are a prime example of the political blindness that is embedded deep into the bones of platform capitalism. His support of Donald Trump brings to light the many contradictions of the relationship between capitalism and technology:

Technology shapes society in complex ways, which means that frequently there are multiple effects that can stand in contradiction with each other. Because society and technology are complex systems, which means that they have many elements and many interactions between these elements, it is unlikely that the interaction of the two complex systems technology and society will have one-dimensional effects (Fuchs, 2012)

One of the main contradictions of the multidimensional relationship between technology and society refers to what is visible and invisible in its interplay. Transparency is unevenly distributed in fragmented pockets and environments that either belong to the realm of the individual or to alternative collective organisations. Platform capitalism has been instrumental to the rise of hypervisible layers of economic activity, such as digital social entrepreneurship. Some of these social businesses have achieved positive social outcomes, for example the *Bank for the Poor* of Muhammed Yunus (2007), has improved the living conditions of thousands via microfinance. Inspired by success stories of this kind, social and/or personal entrepreneurship has become an ideology that postulates that if we can only “hack” capitalism from within, we will be able to achieve social justice and prosperity for all. However, the digital mutations of capitalism have, so far, resulted in much higher levels of alienation and precarity than in actual social welfare. The very notion of the

¹ <http://time.com/4660607/romania-corruption-protest-law/>

² <https://www.wired.com/2017/01/meitu-viral-anime-makeover-app-major-privacy-red-flags/>

³ <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/02/elon-musk-is-all-in-on-donald-trump/515562/>

precariat (Standing, 2016) has been developed as a symptom of late capitalism. The paradoxical multidimensionality that is ingrained in the tension between what is visible and invisible in this context corresponds to Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s definition of semiocapitalism:

The process of invisibilisation of the world is the core of the abstraction process that is the main trend of the relationship between Real world and the Economy. “All that is solid melts in the air,” wrote Marx in The Communist Manifesto of 1948. But in the Indust-Reality the invisible goal of abstract valorisation was obtained by physical manipulation of visible things. Semiocapitalism dissolves the visible process of production, and financial capitalism, at last, is the utter dissolution of the sphere of visibility and the melting of capital accumulation into the abstract kingdom of virtual exchange (Berardi, 2014).

Our monetary and financial systems have become so highly abstract and virtual that to use the metaphor of a *black box* to describe their mode of operation seems entirely appropriate. Trying to unlock the black box of global finance, a game that is played entirely via control of digital data, has become the creative pursuit of both Hollywood and political filmmakers alike. From Hollywood’s fascination with the dark side of the stock exchange - *The Wolf of Wall Street*, *Inside Job*, *The Big Short*, etc – we get to the vivid description of a “fake world” in *HyperNormalisation*, by British filmmaker Adam Curtis. *HyperNormalisation* was released in 2016 by the BBC and has already achieved cult status as a prescient portrait of post-truth. It is against this bleak cultural landscape that Byung Chul-Han’s (2014) pessimistic take on the role of digital communication in political life starts to make new sense.

Data Darkness and Hypervisibility

One of the most complex areas of our present political reality is the sphere of data politics and the underlying information architectures structuring social and political life. We live within Byung-Chul Han’s transparency society (2015): the levels of exposure and availability of personal data are unprecedented. Paradoxically, such hypervisibility seems to be restricted to the surface of increasingly deeper levels of data darkness. Data algorithms that are unknown and uncomprehended by the vast

majority of its users determine not only what information each of us gets to see, but also create a personalised version of reality in which the distinction between fact and fiction becomes fuzzy. Digital acceleration entails dark media in the “age of post-truth, where not facts, themes and debate, but ideology, personalities and emotions shape politics” (Fuchs, 2017).

Counter-posing the death of privacy as a consequence of digital transparency (Han, 2015a) to the obscure architectures behind dark media’s “unattainable and invisible processes of technological mediation” (Lemos Morais, 2014) is a necessary and important critical effort. Dark is the mediation of pervasive surveillance (Lemos Morais, 2014), but darker seem to be the digital infrastructures behind our daily media habits. The hyperinvisibility of data can be as colossal a political phenomenon as its hypervisibility.

Whistleblowing and data activism, for instance, have become as hypervisible as the memetic flows of the digital mainstream: Edward Snowden and Julien Assange have become de facto global celebrities. Meanwhile, recent events such as the selective release of Hillary Clinton’s emails by Wikileaks (widely recognised as having helped further Trump’s campaign) have made clear that even whistleblowers have their own political agenda. A similar dichotomy is that, while the spread of fake news (Amarasingam, 2011; Marchi, 2012) is intertwined with post-truth - “increasingly, what is highly visible and emotionally attractive is considered as truth” (Fuchs, 2017), most of the faces and forces enabling these media practices remain occult. The dark mediation implicit in the digital repackaging of lies as post-truth is a telling example of how dark media lurks as a shadow of hypervisible media.

The recent election of Donald Trump is a prime example of the paradoxes of hypervisibility vs. hyperinvisibility within media culture. Trump is the epitome of a hyper-individualism that becomes its own kind of neo-ideology (Fuchs, 2017):

Trumpism is not just a brand, a business strategy and a political strategy. Trump is also Trumpology, an ideology that stages itself as spectacle in public and in the media [...] Hyper-individualism is Trumpology’s first element. Trump is a brand. Trump is a strategy. Trump is entertainment. Trump is a spectacle. Trump is politics. Trump is the instrumentalisation of everything surrounding him. Trump is the absolute commodification of the self (Fuchs, 2017)

The hyper-individualism that characterises the rise of Trump is related to Byung-Chul Han's narcissistic and mediated self, described in *The Burnout Society* (2015b). A media culture that is obsessed with the imago cult of the self via *selfies* and an artificial and institutionalised "positivity" is further alienated by the cognitive acceleration of digital networks: intellectual reflection is replaced by mindless digital connection. The *always on* mode of media consumption generates cognitive exhaustion, leading to a "lack of being": "the acceleration of contemporary life also plays a role in [its] lack of being. The society of labouring and achievement is not a free society. It generates new constraints" (Han, 2015b).

Our cultural obsession with Big Data is problematic at best. Trump's election, for example, might have benefited from it, however ideology has played a much bigger role than mere data analytics:

Big data does not win and cannot predict elections. It is a techno-fetishistic myth to believe that the more money a campaign invests into data analytics, the larger the likelihood of electoral success [...] Data, algorithms and tech form just one of many relevant factors. In the 2016 US presidential election, right-wing ideology trumped over big data politics (Fuchs, 2017)

Big data is not necessarily better data (Boyd & Crawford, 2012). Large amounts of dark data that are inherent to big data lead to errors in assessment, and the loss of nuanced interpretations that are only possible in small data analysis. Another example is Trump's lockdown on Big Data science that has resulted in the #DataRefuge⁴ social media campaign. These issues take us to the crucial question posed by Rafael Capurro (2000): "Is the Internet a threat to democracy"?

Dark data has been defined by data science and the computer industry as the informational shadow of light data. While light data is data that is known, linked, observed, recovered, retrievable" (Berghel, 2008), dark data refers to vast oceans of data waste that are automatically stored without having ever been brought to the surface. Dark data is believed to be "an order of magnitude larger than light data" (Berghel, 2007). Therefore, big data is composed of a small fraction of light data in proportion to massive amounts of dark data (Heidorn,

2008). John Kelly, creator of IBM's Watson artificial intelligence program, has stated that "80% of all data is dark and unstructured. We can't read it or use in our computing systems. By 2020, that number will be 93%" (Babcock, 2015).

Media overload is another side-effect of big data networks - the daunting pressure of being able to process, assimilate and digest immense quantities of information daily results in coping strategies such as filter bubbles, usually tainted by ideological lenses. The result is a deeper level of political alienation in what Christian Fuchs describes as "the post-truth regime": "the post-truth regime means distrust in experts and established politicians and the replacement of arguments and evidence by pure ideology" (Fuchs, 2017).

The media stage has been ready for Trump, a political persona built on the hypervisibility of social networks and reality television.

Anon is afraid of the dark

While the hypervisible aspects of Trump's political ascent are nothing other than astonishing, the darker corners of this trajectory are as important elements in his electoral victory as his hyper-individualism. His use of Cambridge Analytica illustrates how dark data has also played a crucial role in the results of the 2016 election. This is the company's self-description: "We collect up to 5,000 data points on over 220 million Americans, and use more than 100 data variables to model target audience groups and predict the behaviour of like-minded people"⁵. By merging data science and psychometrics, Cambridge Analytica was able to put the approximate \$15 million dollars paid to them by Donald Trump to a good use: increasing the clickthru rate of Trump's Facebook ads by more than 60% and the conversion rate (measured as votes), "by a staggering 1400%" (Grasseger & Krogerus, 2017):

The company divided the US population into 32 personality types, and concentrated on only seventeen states. And just as Kosinski had determined that men who like MAC cosmetics on Facebook are probably gay, Cambridge Analytica found that a prediction for American-produced cars is the best predictor of a possible Trump voter. Among other things, this kind of know-

⁴ <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23datarefuge>

⁵ <https://cambridgeanalytica.org/about>

ledge can inform Trump himself which messages to use, and where (Grasseger & Krogerus, 2017)

Beneath the visible surface of big data, there are vast spaces populated by opaque data bubbles. Such data bubbles can be constituted out of cutting-edge algorithms designed to serve the super-rich, as in the case of the psychometric targeting done by Cambridge Analytica, or by nomadic and rogue online communities that use digital cloaks to hide and move. Also connected to Donald Trump are the dark digital networks of white supremacist organisations and the neo-fascist alt-right movement. It is no coincidence that we find Steve Bannon, one of the major leaders of the alt-right movement, on the board of Cambridge Analytica.

The online practices and meeting places used by the alt-right have usually been dim. The origin of the movement has been described as an “obscure racist cabal” located at “dark subreddits” (Ellis, 2016b). These are communities that, although having a public handle, operate using fake user profiles and develop complex strategies for validating new member affiliations. Similarly to other criminal digital networks that operate via anonymity, the alt-right has been using subreddits to house illegal activities such as blatant hate-speech and racially motivated crimes. Reddit’s social responsibility in handling these issues has come to the fore in a controversial profile of the network published by *The Guardian* in 2015. The article provides a data visualisation of some of the subreddits associated with illegal or unethical activities while calling them “dark reddits”:

the subreddits of the darker side of reddit are linked to those which the community is happier to present to the outside world. In the top 500 subreddits, there are 80 subreddits which we’ve classified as belonging to “dark reddit” (Hern & Bengtsson, 2015)

Not only does the alt-right have its own dark algorithmic engines and subreddits, but also their own mainstream digital networks. After Twitter enacted an extensive purge on white supremacist accounts, the social network Gab became an alt-right hotbed:

[Gab] looks like an artifact from a dystopian universe where the alt-right completely took over Twitter. Gab has over 42,000 people on its waitlist, more than 11,000 active members, and

among them are nearly all the alt-right’s online kingpins, including the Internet’s self-styled super-villain, Breitbart writer Milo Yiannopoulos himself, who was recently banned for life from Twitter (Ellis, 2016a)

The language and aesthetics that characterise these online communities, be they a part of the digital mainstream or underground, is one and the same: hate-speech semiotically translated into hashtags and memes that are, for the most part, only comprehensible to the initiated. Part of the digital ethnography done for this proposal included direct observation of dark subreddits associated with the alt-right. A striking experience happened while exploring these subreddits that illustrates how inconspicuous alt-right communities can be. While analysing the posts and interactions of /r/4CHR, an apparently harmless community that presents itself as being composed of users with 4 character names, a malicious animated cursor was activated by trojan malware that was implanted on the subreddit by an alt-right hacker. The trojan animated cursor came into effect once I clicked on an unrelated post at /r/4CHR. Once I had clicked in it, its text would switch to “If you can read this message, then you are cool”, while this sexist and abusive animation of Pepe The Frog took over my cursor image:



Figure 1. /r/4CHR accessed on 26/01/2017

This malware seems to be a signpost to alt-righters who might be reaching out to fellow haters on Reddit.

Unsurprisingly, access to these communities is difficult and could be dangerous to outsiders. It was a frightening experience to have my computer invaded by simply trying to observe what kinds of social interaction were happening in these dark subreddits. Pepe The Frog has been the meme of choice of white supremacists and it has been catalogued in the Anti-Defamation League's hate symbol database since late 2016, after continuous remixing of Pepe's image to Nazi propaganda by white supremacist groups (Roy, 2016). These remixes have been used in social media posts by Donald Trump, his family and supporters:



Figure 2: Image posted by Donald Trump Jr. on Instagram (Roy, 2016)

As problematic as the recent upsurge in the quantity and availability of hate symbols online are the weird occult and esoteric sub-tones found beneath their contemporary usage. Pepe The Frog is a meme so pervasive in the alt-right subculture that it has become its own obscure cult - the Cult of Kek:

It's easy to understand why the Alt-Right turned the ugly, bile-green amphibian into their flagbearer of choice [...] Hijacking (Pepe The Frog) and morphing him into their propaganda vehicle allowed the Alt-Right to attract the attention of a whole lot of young internet users who would never have bothered reading a traditional political article or op-ed. Not so easy to understand [...] has been the Alt-Right's obsession with a mythical ancient Egyptian deity called Kek [...] On Reddit's The_Donald sub-forum, the possibly largest Alt-Right influenced space on the internet, Kek has been mentioned over 4000 times (Cortbus, 2016)

The meme lore of the alt-right's culture wars runs deep in the internet. Viral memes flowing through anonymous dark subreddits and on 4Chan.org are nothing new in the digital underworld, where conspiracy theories are born and raised. What is new is the correlation between what happens in these virtual spaces and the actual, real life political effects of these underground memes. The accelerated pace in which new (and weird) terms are evolving to describe this correlation is revealing. Take the terms *cult of kek* and *meme magic*, for example. Starting out with the use of Pepe The Frog as a hate symbol, a connection between the use of the meme and Kek, the Egyptian God of "primordial darkness"⁶ was established by alt-righters based on what they understand to be *meme magic*, a kind of supernatural power that makes one capable of influencing real life outcomes by using digital memes (Cortbus, 2016; Spencer, 2016).

In a seminal analysis of meme magic as an anthropological event, Tara Isabella Burton brilliantly dissects this phenomenon in relation to the toxic masculinity that is the cultural backdrop of the alt-right:

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. To promulgate meme magic is to claim for oneself a higher code, a deeper freedom that derives from seeing the world

⁶ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kek_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kek_(mythology))

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 (Burton, 2016)

Meme magic is the digital version of the mediating role usually played by horror as a media genre, as in Eugene Thacker’s (2015) particular approach to dark media. For Thacker, the notion of dark media is not restricted to its means of operation or of information sharing and transmission. It is deeply connected to the realm of the Occult, religion and the supernatural: “mediation is really a mediation between different realities, or between different ontological domains—the natural and the supernatural, the normal and the paranormal, life and the afterlife” (Thacker, 2015: 102). Meme magic represents a literal expression of Thacker’s dark media in the collective imagination of the alt-right. This dark mediation between different realities also manifests itself as concrete fact: while “the battlefield of the meme wars may be largely incorporeal”, the “Trump presidency is no less real” (Burton, 2016).

The Darkness of the Womb

“Our deepest revolution will come when we understand this truth; only love can give us the strength to go forward in the midst of heartbreak and misery. Only love can give us the power to reconcile, to redeem, the power to renew weary spirits and save lost souls. The transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change” — bell hooks

“What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb — but the darkness of the womb?” — Valarie Kaur

The rise of Trump signals the strengthening of a toxic masculinity that is being channelled through dark media networks that are often below all radars. How can we ef-

fectively mobilise against what we can not see? How can we begin to heal the wounds that toxic masculinity continues to inflict to the world? I would like to end this article by telling a story that might help us come to answers to these questions. It is a story about the power of female resistance to the hatred generated by toxic masculinity within digital networks. It begins in 2001.

The post-9/11 backlash against Muslims and Muslim-looking populations has significantly increased the rate of hate crimes against Muslims especially in the United States and Europe, and the rate of cultural assimilation of Muslim immigrant communities has been declining in correlation to it (Gould & Klor, 2017). When Valarie Kaur, a Sikh American lawyer and political activist, was 20 years old, 9/11 happened. As the shadow of intolerance descended upon her environment, she had to face a wave of discrimination for being a brown-skinned person. In the infowars that followed 9/11, there was a lot of skepticism about the reality and the scope of post 9/11 backlash (Friedersdorf, 2012). Since expressions her own culture had been invisible in mainstream media, she assigned to her own self the task of recording and disseminating the truth about what was happening to her community:

“I thought about all of the stories that my grandfather passed down to me that would go invisible unless someone was recording them, telling the story,” she said. “I grabbed my camera, got in my car with my parents’ blessing, and started driving in the car toward the fires. I went from city to city, home to home, capturing the stories of my community, stories that weren’t making the evening news. The first person killed in a hate crime after 9/11 was a man I called uncle. I was there with my camera, 20 years old, trying to capture it” (Kaur, 2017)

Valarie Kaur was able to document hatred and transform it into the driving force of a movement for social change. She created the #RevolutionaryLove project at University of Southern California to “champion the ethic of love in an era of rage”. Her present day advocacy against Trump’s administration policies has the female body as a symbol of active resistance:



Valarie Kaur @valariekaur · Feb 4

Why I vow to fight this administration with #RevolutionaryLove as a Sikh, American & mother -- 6 min video:
[facebook.com/GroundswellMov](https://www.facebook.com/GroundswellMov) ...



Fig. 4: From Valarie Kaur's Twitter feed. Accessed 08/02/2017.

She reminds us of the darkness of the womb as the space in which the new is born, nurtured and protected, so that it can come to light as a life of its own. In the darkness of the womb, the passivity of not knowing becomes full of potentiality. This potentiality grows through the love of a mother, made flesh in the womb. No other symbol of life and renewal is more powerful to represent the darkness of the present political moment, accurately described by Luce Irigaray:

We are in a labyrinth, searching for the light that marks the way out, wondering who and what we are, what humanity is or what it has become, if we have not already given up asking questions all together and become simply cogs in a machine which functions without us, reduced to numbers in a History which unfolds beyond our control" (Irigaray, 2001: 23)

When we cannot see, we must grope. We must reach out into the unknown, conquering fear, striding forward even when we are not certain of where are headed. All of our senses must be activated, open to the intake of any new sensations and perceptions. In order to find our way out, we must embrace vulnerability and open ourselves:

We have to open our ears to other meanings, other sounds, other accents and rhythms in speaking, other tones and pronunciations. We also have to open our eyes on other gestures, behaviours, but also other clothes and ways of investing the body. We have to accustom ourselves to other tastes, other fragrances or flavours, and even to other manners of meeting with: touching or not the other, greeting with a sound, a word or a gesture (Irigaray & Marder, 2015)

To fight against the toxic masculinity housed in the darkness of obscure digital networks and to burst the filter bubbles that prevent recognition of the full reality of another we must embrace a feminist *politics of touch* - "an utterance geared toward an other to whom I have decided to expose myself, skin to skin" (Manning, 2003). Touch can show us a way out of data invisibility so a new political landscape can be born from the darkness of the womb.

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