At the Breaking Point: Media and Politics in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

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At the Breaking Point: Introduction

Albion M. Butters | albion.butters [a] utu.fi | Editor | PhD | The John Morton Center for North American Studies | University of Turku

Oscar Winberg | owinberg [a] abo.fi | Editor | PhD, post-doctoral researcher | History Department | Åbo Akademi University

Pekka M. Kolehmainen | pmkole [a] utu.fi | Editor | PhD, post-doctoral researcher | The John Morton Center for North American Studies | University of Turku

This special issue of *WiderScreen* explores the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election through the lens of media. The effort has been coordinated at the John Morton Center for North American Studies (JMC) at the University of Turku, with a group of researchers who followed the long presidential campaign since before the first candidates announced their run. Many of the contributors writing for this issue previously worked with the JMC on a special journal issue on the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election for the *European Journal of American Studies* (see Heiskanen and Butters 2017). This current issue can be seen as a continuation of that work: to explore the U.S. Presidential Election as comprised of events that encompass a wide strata of signification, involving cultural and social influences as much as political ones.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 marked all political campaigns, movements, and institutions in the four years that followed (Masket 2020; Lozada 2020; Zelizer 2022; Sides et al. 2022). It loomed over the presidential challenge to come, which then proved to be an exceptional year in its own right. If the election of 2016 was widely understood as "unbelievable" (Tur 2017), that was arguably even more the case for what happened in 2020. Even today, many Republicans continue to deny the validity of the election, while the insurrection at the Capitol in its aftermath continues to shock.

The 2020 election year was extraordinarily rocky from the outset. It began with the impeachment of the President of the United States, when the House of Representatives found that Trump had abused the power of the presidency and obstructed Congress in attempts to solicit foreign interference in the upcoming election. When the Republicans in the Senate voted to acquit, the President celebrated on social media with a video depicting his victory not only in 2020 but also 2024 and beyond, with the message "TRUMP 4EVA" (Morgan et al 2020).

Soon thereafter, however, the COVID-19 pandemic would transform political life—and, indeed, everyday life. Political campaigning moved from the streets, town halls, and stadiums to screens. Health officials became familiar faces, while checking infection rates and death counts became a part of many voters' daily routines, and government briefings became must-watch TV. The efforts to combat the pandemic turned into an expression of political identity through media debates over everything from mask-wearing to enforced lockdowns. Before long, the virus and the government's handling of the outbreak became a defining issue of the election.

Politics returned to the streets in late May following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis police, when Black Lives Matter demonstrations spread across the nation. Continuing for months, these grew into one of the largest protest movements in the history of the United States (Buchanan et al 2020). In response to the civil unrest, the President called up the National Guard, demanded a strong response by law enforcement, and even made an infamous media appearance in Lafayette Square outside the White House, flanked by the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in a move of defiance intended to project strength.

Democracy itself came under assault in the election campaign. With the pandemic still raging in the fall of 2020, states around the country expanded or restricted access to polling places. Voting by mail, early voting, and ballot drop boxes provided some voters the opportunity to participate in the democratic process without risking their health; in other cases, the election process was marred by closed voting locations and inordinately long lines. The President charged fraud, reflecting a larger campaign to sow distrust toward the election and thereby contest any defeat. This effort culminated, of course, in the events at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. And the long election year ended as it began, with Donald Trump facing impeachment in Congress.

For this special issue on the election, the media is broadly understood as encompassing the traditional realms of print, radio, and television as well as new platforms such as social media, message boards, and podcasts. Each contributor approaches a particular event, topic, or theme within the broader context of the interplay between media and the election. The goal is to study the political dynamics formed and informed by the media, and throughout the issue, media has accordingly been approached as a site where politics happens—where meaning is created and contested around political phenomena by different groups of users. Each article contains its own articulation of how politics, media, and user agencies coexist and become mutually entangled.

What defines many of the contributions here is their focus on outliers, sides, and peripheries. The story of the 2020 election told in this issue is one of struggle and conflict, often being waged in marginal spaces by various ideological actors operating on the fringes of political culture. This signals one of the clearest functions that new types of media environments have for contemporary politics, namely, providing avenues of communication and fostering community for groups that in the past would have been too disparate to organize in a meaningful way. The aim is not to give a comprehensive view of the election but instead to provide insight into the developments on the fringes often left out of political overviews. Donald Trump looms larger over the special issue than Joe Biden, as he does in most accounts of the election and did in the minds of the voters.

In his well-known work of intellectual history, Daniel T. Rodgers (2011) dubbed the last quarter of the twentieth century in the United States an "age of fracture"—a time when the U.S. began to lose its sense that there could be a governing consensus of ideas that enjoyed mutual acceptance across the ideological spectrum. Both political and cultural fractures widened over the decades since, driving animosity and resentment. Of course, the history of the United States is a history of division and fractures. The idea of a collective national identity was never a lived reality. Yet, an amplified sense of "us versus them" is driving contemporary political and cultural life (Mason 2018). Media, including the ascendance of social media, has been a particularly important vehicle for this development. What the United States experienced in 2020— and what the country continues to face today—is akin to a breaking point. Within a year, the nation witnessed two impeachment trials of the President, the largest mass demonstration in history, and a violent insurrection against democracy.

The divide is the starting point for the special issue, as Niko Heikkilä examines the use of history in protest and political narratives during the long presidential election. Focusing specifically on the Black Lives Matter protests and the insurrection at the Capitol, he outlines how these were framed by the news media and various commentators as "historic." In addition, he notes, the discourse came with inherent moral, ideological, and political functions of history. He identifies how the protests themselves represented a story of the times, a moment of contested visions for the U.S., in which identity politics and culture war politics were marshalled to both build communities and divide them. As Heikkilä argues, the debate over history not only concerned historical facts but represented how historical narratives can have very different claims and functions in relation to contemporary struggles.

Albion M. Butters continues the discussion of the dramatic polarization in the 2020 election by investigating the phenomenon of QAnon through the lens of religion, for example, comparing the posts of the mysterious Q to a canon and their amplification—through various media—to evangelism. This approach reveals entanglements between politics and religion: on one hand, QAnon enacted a clear agenda to reelect the President; on the other, while leveraging the Christian worldview of many of its followers, it positioned Trump as a savior figure who promised to bring about "The Great Awakening." On both of these levels, QAnon can be seen as exploiting the attention given by mainstream media and using alternative media platforms in an epistemological battle over what was real, paralleling the President's own use of Twitter to drive a rhetoric of fake news. Butters concludes that belief in QAnon defied political or journalistic debate through its oppositional interpretative frame, employing a hermeneutics of faith to contest the conventional hermeneutics of suspicion, which ultimately led the movement's followers and critics to talk past each other.

Oscar Winberg deepens the analysis on fake news by studying how President Trump turned on Fox News after the election results came in. Drawing on Twitter as his primary source material, Winberg compares and contrasts the assault on Fox News with other examples of media criticism employed by Trump in previous years. Analyzing the President's criticism of right-wing media and comparing it to assaults on the mainstream media, Winberg demonstrates that the President's attacks did not represent a divide within the right-wing coalition but was part of a long project by the right to delegitimize the media. Demanding loyalty, not fairness or balance, Trump understood the audience of right-wing media better than many at Fox News. With insults, intimidation, and accusations, Trump made his lies about the election a key part of the identity of right-wing media.

In her essay, Henna-Riikka Pennanen further explores the role of Fox News in not only promoting but forming the policy and politics of the Trump administration. With a focus on the politicization of COVID-19 as a part of conservative attacks on China, Pennanen highlights the exchanges between the Trump administration and Fox News in forming a narrative around the term "China virus." She traces the term as a meme, with contested meanings and politics, which cycled through both traditional media and online spaces, and shows how a slur can consist of sub-narratives that connect right-wing media, Internet culture, administration policies, and campaign rhetoric on China as a threat.

Pekka M. Kolehmainen also addresses the significance of COVID-19 in the election, but within the domestic context. Specifically, he examines Donald Trump's own coronavirus infection—looking at the six-day time period from the President's infection to his return to the White House and its aftermath—as a media performance. The performance played out on right-wing media and online, giving the President the opportunity to negotiate multiple meanings of the illness and ultimately appearing to his audience as a hero who had sacrificed his health for the nation. Tracing the politics of strength, health, and success in relation to the campaign but also wider ideological trajectories in U.S. intellectual history, Kolehmainen argues that Trump was able to simultaneously frame himself as a victim and a victor.

Turning to young voters, Mila Seppälä studies TikTok as a platform for fresh expressions of civic engagement, compared to more traditional ways of electoral mobilization and participation. Analyzing creative political participation on TikTok, Seppälä argues that trolling as protest, performing political identity, and sharing and deliberating on civic information are all forms of actualizing citizenship engagement. A particularly novel aspect of this article is Seppälä's approach to the data: going beyond mere hashtags, she utilizes TikTok's sound search function to identify four audio tracks and trace their memetic power. By revealing new facets of collective expression and debate on this emerging popular online platform, Seppälä thus opens a window onto the different political participation styles adopted by Generation Z in the 2020 election.

The election highlighted both the fracturing of the media and the way campaigns and movements could make a difference on the fringes of political media culture. Studying the collaboration between the Biden campaign and musicians, Outi Hakola finds the campaign promoted Biden's message of unity and rejection of national division under the hashtag #TeamJoeSings on YouTube. Social media could also be used to promote political awareness and mobilization, as Reetta Humalajoki illustrates in her reflection on the political role of Native American activists in the election. Beyond the frame of "red states" and "blue states," Rani-Henrik Andersson illustrates the regional and even local diversity critical to understanding election results. Finally, both Benita Heiskanen and Kimmo Ahonen reconsider the relationship between political campaigns, candidates, and the political media in the age of Donald Trump.

The editors would like to acknowledge the kind support of the JMC and thank its network of scholars who made this special issue possible. In particular, thanks go to all the contributors and the reviewers for their work. The editors also want to thank the team at *WiderScreen* for this opportunity. It is our hope that this special issue will show the benefit of studying United States political campaigns and institutions from a transdisciplinary perspective (combining history, political science, American studies, religious studies, and media studies) and acknowledge the multiple implications of elections as media events.

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The Use of History and the Protests of the 2020 U.S. Election Year

Niko Heikkilä
njheik [a] utu.fi
PhD, Post-doctoral researcher
Cultural History
University of Turku

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In the summer of 2020, as the Black Lives Matter protests grew to historic proportions, the movement initiated important and often heated debates about racism and police violence as well as historical narratives. After the presidential election, supporters of President Donald Trump protested the results and organized rallies that culminated in the storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Considering these events, I examine the ways that history was evoked and used in protest and political narratives during the presidential election year. As the political use of history relates to a particular set of ideals, hopes, and fears, the article analyzes specifically moral, ideological, and political dimensions of how history was used in various protest narratives. By understanding protest as a form of news that provides a narrative of what is happening, the debate over history was not merely about historical facts but about historical narratives in relation to present struggles and developments. These narratives served various ideological and functional purposes, including views of history as inspiration, myth, and precedent, that were connected to fundamental disagreements about BLM protests as well as today's culture wars, in which the key difference was between structural critiques and deflecting against them. In the case of Donald Trump and the far right's role in the Capitol insurrection, fascism was a central historical analogy that functioned as a narrative to warn about threats to democracy and as a source of contestation of where political action should be concentrated.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, presidential election, protests, historical narratives, use of history

Introduction

The year 2020 was marked by many dramatic and contentious developments described by the news media and political commentary as "historic." The Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations were among such key events. Sparked by the police killing of George Floyd, protests and civil rights uprisings against police violence and racism were a key issue that unfolded throughout the election year. According to estimates, the protests led by the Movement for Black Lives were the largest in U.S. history (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel

2020; Chalasani 2020). Conversely, after Joe Biden won the presidential election, supporters of President Trump took to the streets in protest against the results. Trump supporters promoted false claims that the election was fraudulent and used the slogan "Stop the Steal" to contest the election results, and the pro-Trump protests finally culminated in the now-infamous storming of the Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Holt et al. 2021).

Actions and their consequences are both shaped by past experiences and future expectations (Koselleck 1985). The actions and aims of the BLM protests and pro-Trump protests, as different as they were, both opened debates about history in connection to hopes and fears about the present and the future. Notably, the news media and political commentators used history and employed historical analogies in protest narratives and in regard to political developments during the election year, and these served different functions. To frame the discussion, some evoked themes like the "Weimarization of America" or a "new era of McCarthyism" (Sibarium 2020; Beinart 2020), while others used historically salient threats—from the specter of (cultural) Marxism and communism to anarchy and violence in the streets unleashed by forces like Antifa and the Black Lives Matter movement (Friedman 2020; McKay 2020). Moreover, the conspiracy theories (Uscinski 2020, 21–41) of QAnon or the ideas of a new civil war promoted by the Boogaloo movement—both seen by officials as threats to domestic security—complicated the political landscape (Johnson 2020). The struggle to find a historical precedent was most evident in the Capitol attack, in which a combination of conspiracism, preparation for political violence, and ideological idiosyncrasies was on full display. In addition to understanding various strongly held political and cultural aims here, it is also necessary to recognize the different functions of and debates over history.

The political use of history relates to a particular set of ideals, hopes, and fears that are interpreted in relation to political ideologies, values, and identities. In a climate of deep political divisions and polarization (Campbell 2018), the use of and the debate over history can also be seen as an expression of contemporary divisions. In this article, I examine the use of history and historical analogies vis-à-vis protest and political narratives during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. The article's analytical framework is twofold. First, the analysis draws from Geoffrey Cubitt's (2007) and Wendy Brown's (2001) ideas about history and the use of history. As Cubitt points out, memory, justice, and historical truth are interconnected concepts and "have again been repeatedly brought to the surface of public discourse," which then also impacts the social functions of historians (Cubitt 2007, 56).

The tension between historical accuracy and justice, however, is most visible in current historical debates in which political actors emphasize utilitarian functions to history. I also draw from Brown's (2001, 3–17) explication of the contemporary disintegration of historical narratives. By identifying different moral, ideological, and political functions, the article analyzes how history was used in the debates over protests. Secondly, I follow Daniel Q. Gillion's conceptualization of protest as a form of news, which is to say that protests provide information about the issues and topics they are protesting. Additionally, protests convey passions and emotions as well as provide a narrative "about what is happening in society" (Gillion 2020, 11–12). These relate to the definition of a movement "as a sustained campaign of claim-making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015, 11). Taken together, contentious politics links protest narratives with debates over history and how history is used to advance arguments about the current moment. I do not mean to extend the focus to historiography per se but rather to highlight the role of and debates over history in the news media and expert commentary by academics, especially historians.

Using examples from the news media, blogs, and other news outlets, I have chosen sources that contain expert commentary from academics and historians or that emphasize a typical political/ideological perspective—be it a conservative, liberal, or leftist narrative—to analyze different claims, functions, and lenses of protest and historical narratives. My focus here is not on the wider societal influence, as

measuring influence is complicated and efforts to quantify influence can fail to account for the different roles of influence. For example, think tanks often aim to influence politicians and policy directly, whereas the news media and academics who discuss their areas of expertise to wider audiences occupy a different public role. Instead, I have attempted to situate the author and commentary within a broader narrative and/or contentious politics advanced by social and political movements. These are divergent, contrasting, and often antagonistic cases, and it is not my intention to treat, for example, BLM protests and the Capitol attack as equivalents. When the question turns to the debates and narratives of protests, and contestations over history, it is important to understand how one side sees their political opponent and vice versa. Due to this divergent nature of cases, the analytic focus of the article highlights different aspects: in the case of BLM protests, supporters or sympathetic voices highlighted the long roots of structural inequality along with emancipatory strategies, whereas conservative critiques claimed that BLM was "erasing history," thereby connecting the movement with the old bogeyman of "cultural Marxism" and the new specter of "cancel culture." Specific cases analyzed here also include the role of monuments and statues in relation to BLM protests and debates over history sparked by the *New York Times* 1619 Project, which sought to reframe U.S. history with a focus on slavery, and the 1776 Commission, which sought to promote patriotic education. In the case of pro-Trump protests and the Capitol insurrection, I examine the different ways in which the term "Weimar America" and analogies of fascism were used in relation to arguments about the present. The article is structured so that I first examine specific uses of history in relation to BLM protests and then move to focus on pro-Trump protests and the aftermath of the Capitol riot.

Black Lives Matter Protests and Debates Over History

On May 25, 2020, the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis by a police officer—who held his knee on Floyd's neck for about 9 minutes until he died—became a catalyst for widespread protests. Like the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014, George Floyd's death started a new phase for protests organized by a movement generally known as Black Lives Matter. The Black Lives Matter Global Network (BLMGN) is one of many local and national groups that fall under the umbrella coalition Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) (Ransby 2018, 1–2; Hennessey and LeBlanc 2020). A defining aspect of the movement is the use of various forms of direct action. These range from street protests to uprisings that not only seek to achieve political reforms but fundamental change (Ransby 2018, 4). To that end, BLM/M4BL is intersectional, has an economic dimension in fighting racial inequality, understands racism in structural terms, and works to change the power structure (Célestine and Martin-Breteau 2020, 299–300).

As waves of protests swept the country from May 2020 onward, the events of the year 1968 became a common point of historical reference by the media. On the surface, there are many similarities between the two periods, from struggles to achieve racial equality to polarization over law and order and street demonstrations. At a deeper level, of course, the protests were much more complicated. Different viewpoints about the BLM actions were very much tied to the meaning of U.S. history. While prominent historians cautioned against finding direct comparisons between the 1960s and today's protests, the theme of racial injustice fits into a long pattern in the country's history, as Heather Ann Thompson noted in an interview with *Vox* (Matthews 2020). In another *Vox* interview (Illing 2020), Michael Kazin also emphasized the long historical roots and the underlying structural reasons for continued inequalities, arguing that any social movement that goes to the root causes of a problem in its demands is in fact "radical." Thus, reform programs like the New Deal in the 1930s and civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. were seen at the time as radical in the eyes of the power structure (Illing 2020). In this view, there was both a continuation of racial inequality and a long history of movements fighting that inequality. Radicalism was contextualized within the moments of mass mobilizations in which movements took to the streets attempting to

overcome structural injustices. For example, the program put forth by M4BL (2020) has sections devoted to ending the war on black people, economic justice, investment/divestment, community control, and political power, which at least in theory point to the ways in which the root causes of present conditions shape visions for the future.

In June 2020, *POLITICO Magazine* tried to contextualize the protest by giving voice to a group of respected historians along with a few ideologues and political analysts. The historian Peniel E. Joseph made the important point that protesters today are a much more diverse group, and this marked a difference from previous waves of mobilizations, including the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the diversity of backgrounds and ethnicities that took part in BLM demonstrations was an important factor not just in terms of the intensity and scale of the protests (Joseph 2020). The historian Clayborne Carson (2020) tried to clarify reactions to protests from a historical perspective by reminding that law-and-order politics has been successfully mobilized against widespread protests for racial equality for decades. From Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan to Bill Clinton, law-and-order rhetoric has been used to advance policies that have strengthened the police and increased mass incarceration. Another function of such rhetoric has been that it does not acknowledge differences between protest and lawlessness (Carson 2020). Historian Nancy Isenberg (2020) has also argued that the language of President Trump to equate protesters with criminals was accompanied by imagery of rioting and street thugs.

From a non-academic and politically conservative perspective, Kay C. James (then the president of the Heritage Foundation) condemned violence as a tool for change while hoping that the tragic death of George Floyd would lead to a better and safer country. James approached the protests through a more moralistic and individualistic/ideological lens. By claiming that conservative principles of individual liberty and freedom are the best tools for uplifting people from poverty to a state of flourishing, James (2020) saw the moment as an opportunity to live up to American ideals. The historians that viewed the nature and function of the BLM protests in a historical context tended to emphasize radicalism in positive terms as going to the root causes of problems, which inevitably leads to reaction on the part of the state. These are firmly tied to the social functions of historians (Cubitt 2007, 56). James instead viewed radicalism in negative terms as being related to violence, finding faults not in the system as such but in individuals. Think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, of course, have ideological functions within the conservative movement to influence policy, and these are contrary to the kinds of structural critiques advanced by the above-mentioned historians and movements like BLM.

As an understanding of root causes involves considering both current political problems and historical reasons for existing inequalities, however, implementation is not so easy in practice. The present is always open-ended, and social movements can point toward possible paths during moments of deep contention (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). Just as structural reasons set the limits of social change, structural critique is necessary for advancing any change, as is demonstrated in arguments by historians and movement activists. The historians have used radicalism as an analytical tool and as a concrete precedent, however inapplicable past problems may be for actual solutions in the present.

Ideological and political differences were even more evident in the critique of statues that are emblematic of white supremacy and colonialism. Monuments and symbols of the Confederacy on public property became a site of contention during the Trump presidency. Statues were also an important target in the ensuing BLM protests. For example, in Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate President Jefferson Davis's statue was toppled by protesters in June 2020. This critique concerns not only questions of the Confederacy and the history of white supremacy but also the origins of settler colonialism and the violent dispossession of Indigenous people (Hixson 2013, 1–22). Statues of Christopher Columbus were vandalized in various places from Boston and Virginia to Miami as BLM protests intertwined with Native American activism in connection to settler colonialism and genocide (*BBC News* 2020).

Roger Hartley's (2021) timely analysis on the problems of Confederate statues observes the link between monuments and distortion of history. Hartley argues that statues are neither silent nor "harmless"; instead, Confederate statues have played a role in the maintenance of white supremacy in different periods and contribute to contemporary structural racism (Hartley 2021, 182–83). The reassessment of Confederate legacy led to some significant changes. In Mississippi, in a bill that was passed in June 2020, the legislature decided to remove the design of the Confederate flag from its state flag and to create a new one (Della Cava 2020). The powerful symbolism of statues obviously raised questions over what kind of values they represented and how people view those values today. As a source of contestation, statues are firmly connected to the current culture wars. Claims for and against controversial statues have also expanded into and escalated the polarized public discussion about so-called "woke culture" and "cancel culture." Here, it is useful to offer two contrasting viewpoints that connect the protests and "cancel culture" to the role of history in U.S. culture wars.

In a commentary for *RealClearPolitics*, David Closson (2020), a research fellow at the Family Research Council, claimed that it is historical illiteracy that fuels "cancel culture." He argues that the vandalization of non-Confederate statues represents a "dystopian plotline." To him, this is historical illiteracy and the latest manifestation of "cancel culture," because it seeks to impose current standards on the past (Closson 2020). In a time of social change, conservative thought, too, can become historicist, insofar as it has political and social use in the present. What is more, as a media narrative, this view of "cancel culture" also functions to deflect attention away from protest claims about structural inequalities.

As often is the case in such debates, moralism plays a role and, as Wendy Brown has argued, it also functions as a form of anti-politics. By this she means the tendencies of moralism and moralizing to "fall from morality" as "an impoverished substitute for, or reaction to, the evisceration of a sustaining moral vision" (Brown 2001, 23). Especially in the domain of cultural politics or identity politics, Brown argues, this kind of moralism as a substitute of moral politics—be it from the left, center, or the right—runs the risk of leading to fixed positions and essentialism and, ultimately, one becoming a reactionary (Brown 2001, 21, 28, 41).

A historical perspective on the statue debate was offered by anthropologist Sarah Kurnick (2020), who noted that the contemporary defacement of statues mirrors a millennia-old tradition. If contemporary protests fit into a longer tradition of fighting to overcome social inequalities in the U.S., the battle over monuments and what they represent in a given time has even deeper roots. As Kurnick points out, the tradition goes back to the third millennium BCE at least, and images of authority have been defaced by marginalized people in an attempt to question authority ever since. She argues that the ways in which history is presented has always been contentious and tied to political issues in the present. So, when Donald Trump argued in June 2020 against "violent mobs," he saw them as arbiters of "what can be celebrated in public spaces," claiming "a deep ignorance of history" in the selection of targets by the protesters (Kurnick 2020). Especially in protest narratives that concern political claim-making, the protesters themselves took a stand on the present situation, emphasizing the long history of racial inequality. Contested statues are symbols of that long tradition, and the emphasis is on both symbolic and real change in the present (Kurnick 2020). The fact that arguments about social change in the present are made by way of tradition indicates the advantages of having concrete precedents. Thus, the search for and use of favorable traditions and precedents for political purposes is appealing even for those dedicated to change. This again relates to deeper issues about history and values in connection to protest passions and narratives of "what is happening in society" (Gillion 2020, 11–12).

The Use of History and Culture War Politics

The weaponization of historical narratives in the culture wars intensified when President Trump sought to advance "patriotic education" by appointing the 1776 Commission in September 2020. The purpose of the Commission was to promote patriotic education by writing a report on the principles of the founding of the United States. It was a reaction to the debate sparked by the *New York Times*' 1619 Project about the legacy of slavery. At the same time, the BLM protests were an implicit target of the 1776 Commission, which relied on a particular set of conservative viewpoints of founding ideals and U.S. history. The Commission was led by Larry Arnn of the conservative Hillsdale College and consisted of an 18-member panel. At the core of its contention were identity politics and the 1619 Project, as well as issues of race and slavery, which, according to Trump, only divide and lead to unpatriotic education, with the result that students "hate their own country" (Gaudiano 2020). To counter these tendencies, the Commission sought to promote the principles of the founding documents of the United States toward the desired outcome of national unity and shared identity. The report, which was published two days before President Trump's term ended, claimed that the historical facts of the country's founding functioned as "cautions against unrealistic hopes and checks against pressing partisan claims or utopian agendas too hard or too far" (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021, 1).

These "partisan claims and utopian agenda" obviously referred to the claims of the 1619 Project and the agenda of Black Lives Matter. The Commission's hostility toward progressive movements was even more evident in that the report linked slavery, fascism, communism, progressivism, racism, and identity politics as historical or current challenges to America's principles (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021, 10–16). As an antidote, the report offered "the glory of our history" as something around which to unite. In the Commission's view, the U.S. is "the most glorious and just country in all of human history" and it is time to renew commitments to the principles articulated in the Declaration and Constitution (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021, 20). Such a view of history is fairly typical of nationalist movements of all kinds, in which history is less a matter of critical study or understanding and more a source of pride, inspiration, and ideology to serve nationalist ends. As Eric Hobsbawm (1997, 25–26) has noted, when historians correctly and factually dismantle certain national myths, they usually evoke the scorn of politicians rather than their gratitude, not to mention the reaction of ideologues dedicated to the politics of nationalism.

The Commission thus used its own form of national identity politics to critique another form of identity politics, reflected in its aversion to relativism and historicism as well as historical narratives of emancipatory struggles. Indeed, the 1619 Project, launched in August 2019 and led by Nikole Hannah-Jones, played an important role in the ways that the legacy of slavery and ongoing racial inequalities are present in media and public discourse. Some of the claims that the project made also received heavy criticism, ranging from conservatives to socialists to several historians. Then again, many agreed with its claims about the role of racism being embedded in the nation's DNA, that slavery was an engine behind capitalism and the creation of wealth, and that concessions were made to appease slaveholders at a time when political institutions were created, which resulted in undemocratic elements (Mintz 2020). Here the debate turned to questions that are as much about liberal attachment to the narratives of progress as they are about historical accuracy. Liberal critics like the historian Sean Wilentz objected to the pessimism of the 1619 Project, namely, if overcoming racism was even possible if it was in the country's DNA. Another concern was the legitimacy of liberal democracy. Often this legitimacy is tied to key narratives and presuppositions like progress (Brown 2001, 13–15), which were challenged by the project. Of course, there is a long line of thinkers who have argued that emancipatory politics should not be confused with the idea of progress. And conversely, deep attachment to narratives of progress has been and remains to be a source of political hope (Brown 2001, 13–15).

Perhaps the most controversial claim was that the protection of slavery was among the central reasons behind the decision to declare independence from Britain. In response, Wilentz began to circulate a letter

objecting to the project and Hannah-Jones's work especially. Four historians signed the letter, while many others, while in agreement on some points made by both Wilentz and the project, decided not to sign the letter or embrace all of Hannah-Jones's arguments. Many critics did, however, support Wilentz's objection to Hannah-Jones's claim about the origins of the American War of Independence in relation to slavery. From the perspective of the present, as relevant as historiographical debates about historical accuracy are, the project brought to the surface the tension between American ideals and lived realities. Different viewpoints were highlighted by answers to such questions as whether it is possible to fulfill the ideals of freedom and how equality should be achieved. For example, there was a vigorous debate about whether African Americans, as Hannah-Jones claimed, have largely been fighting struggles for freedom alone. Wilentz objected to this, taking issue with what he viewed as attempts to undermine objectivity, by noting that there was a risk that ideologues might highjack narratives of U.S. history (Serwer 2019).

Overall, the debate became even more timely in light of the 2020 BLM protests. Peniel Joseph's comment about the diversity of today's protesters suggests change in that a greater number of white people are willing to join black and other emancipatory struggles than in the past (Joseph 2020). Moreover, the fact that there is real and lively historical debate on the matter is a sign of thinking about current political problems in terms of historically oppressed and marginalized groups. The point was poignantly made by the *New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie, whose writing has placed emphasis on the agency of oppressed groups and rebellions in the emancipatory struggles from slavery to civil rights to contemporary protests. The historical pattern found in the argument is that marginalized groups, rebels, and radicals are not only important forces in U.S. history but key actors in actualizing the ideals of democracy and liberty (Bouie 2020a; 2020b). To some, however, this undermines the role of powerful elites in the national story. Indeed, the opposition to arguments made by Bouie and others was not so much based on historical accuracy as on the role of agency—that is, whether collective action or politicians, or the "great men," are the significant historical agents.

Even before the 1776 Commission, conservative reactions against the 1619 Project were fierce, focusing mostly on Nikole Hannah-Jones's introductory essay. Although it is sometimes not easy to separate ideology and objectivity, the reaction seemed to be more about fears that the project focused on the wrong aspects of U.S. history than about what some critics claimed was inaccurate history. In this respect, conservatives sought to highlight the "dangerous" motives behind the project. For example, the project and its authors were accused of preaching cultural Marxism, conspiracy theory, evangelicalism, or political propaganda, among many other things (Wu 2019; Sand 2020; Wheeler 2021; Guelzo 2019).

Such reactions can follow from the disintegration of political and cultural narratives. If the past is less reducible to a singular narrative or single set of meanings, on one hand, the breakdown of historiography gives rise to new political possibilities, and on the other, history becomes less deterministic and the future more uncertain (Brown 2001, 5). Conservatives seemed to fear that protests or what they could achieve would unravel the country. Historically salient enemies provided another way to frame the debate in terms of culture wars. In particular, "cultural Marxism"—which has a long history (Jamin 2018), of course—has been revived time and time again to undermine different groups or views while claiming a status of victimhood for one's own social group or political affiliation. Recently, this has especially been the case with more far-right and white nationalist organizing efforts, like the alt-right movement (Mirrlees 2018). However, there are connections that link the use of the cultural Marxism trope to a broader right-wing strategy. As Jason Wilson (2015) points out, it was the conservative William S. Lind who articulated a strategy through which cultural conservatism became central for Republicans. By emphasizing a culture-centered form of conservative politics and identifying new social enemies, the trope of cultural Marxism provided a powerful narrative and a set of enemies, from Hollywood and academia to journalists and

activists (Wilson 2015). This cultural lens is deeply emotional and connected to broader struggles of control, as well as fears of the influence and power of the other side (Thomson 2010, 24–26; Gamson 1995, 86–87).

This conflict over values most clearly demonstrated the political dimension of history in a way that was tied to the BLM protests and, crucially, questions of national identity. The 1776 Commission's ideas about the American Revolution, the Declaration, and the Constitution suggests that U.S. history has a singular narrative rooted in natural rights and that it is necessary for Americans to believe in an unifying and ennobling view of U.S. history, regardless if it is true or not (President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021). This attempt to portray a singular narrative excludes the voices of those that have been historically oppressed and marginalized—and everything that challenges that narrative is viewed as "dangerous" or "unpatriotic." At the same time, this represents a fragile view of the country, suggesting that even factual histories of oppression undermine people's belief in ideals and values. Here Wendy Brown's argument about the difference between moralism and moral vision is relevant (Brown 2001, 3–17, 23). As such, the report uses history as a justification for rejecting Black Lives Matter and views history as a tool of political socialization by reducing historical education to buttress mythologies. Also, this view of history offers to conservatives a source of authority. By framing some of the ugly aspects of national history as unpatriotic, the Commission thus saw history, in national terms, as a reservoir of inspiration and, in educational terms, as a guide to be good citizens. Thus, the antipathy of conservatives toward unpatriotic tendencies in historical narratives became enmeshed with protest narratives about racial inequality, and the cultural lens functioned to confirm what conservative claims and fears of cultural Marxism and "cancel culture" had already established in their minds.

Protests conveyed passions specifically related to the disintegration of historical narratives (Brown 2001) and national myths. In this way, the debate over history that intensified during protest periods has been deeply connected to contemporary political battles, revealing different ideological views about the past, present, and future and about different relationships to history (Koselleck 1985; Cubitt 2007). For one thing, in the use of history, there was a clear difference between structural and individual lenses to find meaning in the BLM protests. Structural critiques of white supremacy by many historians linked root causes and historical injustices with present distributions of economic and political power. By contrast, conservative media commentary often sought to frame the battles over BLM protest demands and historical debates in cultural terms, functioning as deflection in a similar way as "cancel culture" discourse. In addition, the debate revealed contentions around questions of who the historical agents of progress were and what the meaning of such emancipatory struggles might be. Though most movements—regardless of politics—use history as inspiration by evoking past struggles, the difference is whether history is viewed as purely serving ideological purposes or as critically understood and studied.

The Far Right, Trump, and the "Weimarization of America" Analogy

According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), 360 counter-protests opposing BLM—of which 12% turned violent—were recorded between May 24 and August 22, 2020, in different parts of the country. In particular, the far-right group Proud Boys had a notable presence at various counter-protests against BLM as well as at pro-Trump demonstrations. During the first presidential election debate in September, President Trump was asked to condemn white supremacy and groups like the Proud Boys. Instead, Trump told the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by" (ACLED 2020; SPLC). The groups and ideologies that can generally be described as far right are far from unified. The Proud Boys, who describe themselves as "western chauvinists," generally tend to be supportive of Donald Trump (Vitolo-Haddad 2019). White nationalist and racist groups, on the other hand, largely abandoned their hopes for the President to advance what they see as white America, despite seeing Trump as a vehicle to mainstream the

alt-right in 2016. This has led to the adoption of an accelerationist strategy by some far-right groups. Within the white power movement, accelerationism has a specific meaning—that is, waging an apocalyptic race war (Miller and IP Staff 2020). The strategy is not exactly new, as the label "accelerationism" can be seen as reformulation of the older strategy of leaderless resistance (Belew 2018, 104–6). The aim is to accelerate social tensions and chaos and to wage war against the system to achieve revolutionary ends. Aspects of this can be found in calls for a second civil war (Miller and IP Staff 2020), although such an idea has not just been raised by the rise of advocates on the far right.

An article in *Salon* claims, for example, that the second civil war is in fact already here (Johnston 2021), while HistoryNet (Zakrzewski n.d.) asks: "A Second U.S. Civil War: Inevitable or Impossible?" In a proliferation of questions by the news media about the possibility of another civil war, some historians, too, have similarly been asked: "Are We Headed for Another Civil War?" (BU Today Staff, 2019). And in a similar line of framing, an article published in *Foreign Policy* pondered if the U.S. may be entering its own "years of lead," a reference to a violent period of political terrorism in Italy from the late 1960s to the 1980s (Yablon 2020). This article explores historical precedents for the current situation, in which the potential for increased levels of political violence has been perpetuated especially by the far right. While President Trump's many incendiary statements had implications for political violence, in this analogy the role and actions of extremists on the right occupy the primary focus.

In the context of the 2020 protests, some far-right groups, like those pursuing accelerationism, were anti-government to the core and did not rely on instructions from above to pursue their aim of escalating tensions. Groups like the Proud Boys and pro-Trump militia groups, by contrast, were more ambivalent in their view of the Trump administration and the police. But for the most part, these have been organizationally separate phenomena (Cineas 2020; Miller-Idriss 2020, 4–6). The "years of lead" and Civil War analogies merely identify a symptom of a crisis.

In these situations of high political and social tensions, violence comprised part of a much broader problem. In this case, a prominent media narrative has involved an analogy of "Weimar America"—referring to the Weimar Republic, which existed for a short period from the end of World War I to the collapse of democracy and the rise of Nazi Germany—and its implication that Trump may be, if not a fascist, at least a proto-fascist with fascistic tendencies (Sibarium 2020; Bessner and Greenberg 2016). As an analogy, "Weimar America" evokes a sense of crisis and appeals to the urgency to actively respond to the threat. One of the most explicit and notable warnings of similarities between Trump's America and fascism were made by the historian Timothy Snyder (2018) and the philosopher Jason Stanley (2020). According to Snyder and Stanley, the failure of Americans to resist Trump could be detrimental because his tactics and rhetoric bear close resemblance to fascism. The views of Snyder and Stanley were embraced by many liberals and leftists. While the focus of Snyder and Stanley tends to be more on the cultural and ideological side of Trump, as opposed to his actions, it seeks to highlight threats to democracy and the weakening of institutions (Snyder 2018; Stanley 2020). However, others have criticized this analogy by contrasting Trump's views and actions against classic features of fascism, like the elevation of war or explicit opposition to political institutions and politics, which they argue Trump lacks (Bessner and Greenberg 2016). The political relevance of the fascism debate for the left, as argued by Daniel Bessner and Ben Burgis, is twofold. First, if the threat of fascism is genuine, this would require a revival of the anti-fascist Popular Front strategy of the 1930s, which in turn tends to deemphasize the actual political program of the left. Second, they argue that curtailing civil liberties in response to the threat of political violence would ultimately be weaponized against the left (Bessner and Burgis 2021).

A more complex argument against the fascism analogy was made by Dylan Riley, who analyzed and contrasted the fascist era with the contemporary situation in terms of four dimensions. One key difference, he argues, is the role of civil society and political parties. Italy and Germany of the 1920s and 1930s were

both countries facing a revolutionary threat from the left and had civil societies with high levels of political mobilization. U.S. society today, by contrast, is highly atomized, and civil society has been almost completely hollowed out. For Riley (2018), the comparison of Trumpism with fascism is a bad analogy, functioning more as a morality tale than a useful approach to the current crisis.

What is implicit in the Weimar analogy is that Trump is somehow an alien or anomalous force in U.S. politics. Yet, as Alberto Toscano (2020) points out, there is an older intellectual and political tradition that identifies fascism in the U.S. within a historical continuum of colonial dispossession and slavery. The analysis of "racial fascism" emerged from black radical thinkers of the 1930s, such as George Padmore, and was further developed by the likes of Aimé Césaire. Similar analysis was later carried out by the Black Panther Party, whose relentless critique of policing and the carceral state as symptoms of U.S. fascism is directly linked to contemporary protest narratives of police violence and the problems of incarceration (Toscano 2020).

Since Trump's first presidential campaign in 2016, analogies to European fascism have dominated the debate (Colasacco 2018). During the turmoil of 2020, such claims and comparisons only escalated. Protests against police brutality and racism, coupled with the Trump administration's response and far-right counter-protests, were a big part of why the analogy seemed more prescient in media narratives. Moreover, Trump employed a strategy in which he sowed seeds of distrust about the integrity of the election so that he could claim victory no matter what the result. Although Joe Biden was eventually declared the winner, an increasing number of Trump supporters did not accept the outcome. Accordingly, many pro-Trump protests were organized in battleground states to "Stop the Steal." This slogan became a powerful pro-Trump protest narrative around which Republican voters as well as far-right groups and conspiracy theorists organized. Tensions kept growing, and with a large and angry base supporting him, it was no surprise that Trump kept promoting the narrative that the election was fraudulent and that he was the real winner. This all culminated in the mass rally in Washington on January 6, 2021 (Holt et al. 2021).

The events of January 6 took the nation by surprise, drawing an immediate wave of condemnation, speculation, and reckoning about the meaning of Trumpism and threats to democracy. What actually happened on the Capitol that day has been covered extensively. Immediately, the news media offered differing opinions about whether it was a riot, an insurrection, or an attempted coup. Indeed, the January 6th Select Committee investigation is still ongoing. According to some earlier reports, groups such as the Proud Boys and the Oath Keepers came prepared for violence, having planned at least some kind of action, and led the storming of the building that ultimately overwhelmed the police. This ultimately led to the largest criminal investigation in U.S. history (NPR Staff 2022; Treisman 2021). Different views about the aims of the protesters in Washington, D.C. on January 6 also relate to deeper questions about the current political situation, especially in relation to threats to U.S. democracy (Bessner and Frost 2021).

In the following days, the storming of the Capitol was hotly debated. Different expert historians have commented on the meaning of Trumpism in relation to fascism. For example, writing for the *New Statesman*, historian of the Third Reich Richard J. Evans (2021) argued that Trump is not a fascist, but he also emphasized existing and real dangers to democracy. Evans noted that Trump's nationalism, encouragement of white supremacists, and incitements to violence are related to fascism and that drawing parallels between Trump and fascist leaders is tempting. In addition to Evans, other historians and specialists of fascism, like Roger Griffin and Stanley Payne, have also argued against this comparison, since the conditions and forces driving fascism in the 1920s and 1930s were different than today's problems. Evans has pointed out that the central aim of fascism to conquer territory is not part of Trump's America First foreign policy. And while another feature—encouraging the use of violence against opponents—was systematically employed by fascist regimes to disastrous ends, Trump's use of a rhetoric of violence and encouragements of violence against political opponents has been unsystematic (Evans 2021).

These debates aside, this line of argument returns to the protest narrative used in relation to the Capitol attack on January 6, namely, that Trump's brand of politics in the Republican Party is at a crossroads. While events like the Beer Hall Putsch in Munich in 1923 were only the beginning of the Third Reich, Trump's advanced age does not support a comparable future in the United States. For Evans (2021), it is less important to fight demons of the past, like fascism and Nazism, than to focus on present dangers, which he identifies as disinformation and conspiracy theories, as well as the blurring of fact and falsehood. If one examines the actions of Trump and the ways that he employed political power—and potentially still could—the central point is that the "fascist question" may not be the right one to ask at this moment.

From another perspective, the historian Robert Paxton (2021) wrote an opinion piece for *Newsweek*, noting that the incitement of violence by Trump to overturn the election removed objections to label him a fascist and crossed a red line. Paxton, too, laid out surface-level similarities between fascist leaders and Trump but also underlined important ways in which Trumpism and historical forms of fascism differ. Paxton makes the point that while the support for the demonstrators that breached the Capitol has been diminishing in U.S. society since that event, this does not mean that domestic institutions are safe from further attacks. However, initial views about January 6th can quickly change. Thus, Paxton's (2021) claim is that inciting violence was the final straw and it made Trump qualify as a fascist. Even though the unsuccessful attempt has been widely condemned and institutional safeguards have so far prevailed, there are other contemporary forces at play that may threaten institutions.

Indeed, in a highly polarized political landscape, qualifiers are necessary. The central argument in the historical "Weimar America" analogy is the threat to democracy, but there are different views about what the central threat actually is. While some have focused on the cultural side of language and ideology, others have highlighted Trump's actions in connection to the analogy of him as a fascist. Even as culture war narratives tend to deflect attention from protest claims, the fascist analogy, Evans (2021) argues, deflects attention away from other more prescient threats to democracy. In a similar manner as many historians analyzed Black Lives Matter protests through a structural lens, experts in fascism identify some level of threat to democratic institutions but differ on how severe the threat is and how strong the institutions are.

Finally, the political implications of the fascism analogy can be further linked to different conceptions of history. The MAGA slogan itself indicates a conservative view of a return to the past, to the good old days which never really existed but must be imagined for contemporary political purposes. A mythical view of the past alone does not make Trump or the MAGA movement fascist. Indeed, the variations of liberal and left-wing commentary were often more about the usefulness of the analogy itself in confronting the present crisis. On the most basic level, the more radical left critiques (such as the one advanced by Riley) are grounded in a materialist conception of history in opposition to more idealist views (of the likes of Stanley). In the final analysis, however, the stakes of the debate can be better summarized with how Trump is situated in relation to U.S. history. If one views Trump as a unique threat to the continuum of democracy or an anomalous political phenomenon in U.S. history, this implies a different set of priorities than approaching Trump within the tradition of historical "racial fascism."

Conclusion

Since the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing BLM protests in 2020, various narratives have framed the discussion explored here. The use of history was part of these, signaling the ideological divisions and different lenses through which people viewed BLM. The BLM protests were often compared to the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. There were different narrative claims about the nature of the protests as well

as, more broadly, the history of slavery and racism in the U.S. Many historians focused on structural claims and the striving to overcome inequalities and racism, and they highlighted collective action and the role of marginalized groups, rebels, and radicals as historical agents, whereas more conservative voices used moral and cultural lenses to deemphasize protest demands to support the role of great men and the nationalist narrative of history. In particular, the 1619 project, which predated the BLM protests, became relevant to protest narratives and served to link them to wider battles over history. Conservative critics of BLM often reduced the past to its political and social use in the present, either in the form of patriotic history or to deflect attention away from structural critiques, to bring the battle into the highly emotional arena of the culture wars. In different ways, the search for precedents from the past was relevant to all actors involved as some kind of inspiration, regardless of their applicability in the moment.

At the same time, the attempt to draw parallels between fascism and Trumpism has been a prominent historical analogy about contemporary institutional erosion. One narrative was to highlight a potential threat—namely, that Trumpism is akin to fascism and works to undermine U.S. democracy and its institutions, as put forth by scholars like Timothy Snyder and Jason Stanley. The central claim in such analogies usually assumes that drastic countermeasures are needed before it is too late. However, from another perspective, though different from the culture war deflection, the danger of the fascism analogy is that it draws attention to past enemies and away from existing threats to democracy. What is interesting from this viewpoint is the similar lens of analysis but different conclusions by Evans and Paxton following the Capitol riot regarding whether Trump is a fascist or not. Indeed, qualifiers and distinctions are necessary to understand the political and social realities. On one hand, a comparison between Trump and the forms of fascism of the past provides a powerful narrative to warn about inherent threats to democracy at the moment (even if its accuracy has been contested). On the other hand, the relationship between European fascism of the past and Trumpism was also challenged on different fronts. While some saw it as a bad analogy, others highlighted a tradition of homegrown fascism and linked Trump in continuum of U.S. history, both of which implied different priorities for political action. Indeed, while nearly all saw threats to democracy, differences arose as to what the priority is and what should be done. The relevant point is that the debate over history has not merely been about historical facts but also reveals significantly different ways to think about the present and the future in terms of the past.

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(Dis)Belief in QAnon: Competing Hermeneutics in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Albion M. Butters
albion.butters [a] utu.fi
PhD
The John Morton Center for North American Studies
University of Turku

Among many disruptive events in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, the meta-conspiracy theory known as QAnon surged, intertwining politics and (quasi-)religious belief in ways that have yet to be fully understood. This article explores the power of deep memetic frames—namely, how we ideologically see the world and communicate that worldview—as a means used by certain individuals and amplified by politicians, including President Trump, to mobilize the voting public across party lines. It also reveals how representations of QAnon by the mainstream media played into the movement's success. For QAnon followers, the election became a crossroads moment, a "Great Awakening" whereby one could identify as part of a collective insider movement. Examining the epistemological de/construction of truth in a media context and diverging hermeneutical approaches—faith and suspicion, respectively—the article argues for the importance of religion as a lens to better understand QAnon in a deeply polarized United States.

Introduction

The 2020 U.S. Presidential Election took place during the culmination of a three-year campaign known as QAnon, which was waged by an anonymous person—or, more likely, a set of individuals—posting under the moniker Q. The political significance of QAnon should not be underestimated, both before the election and after, including its potential impact on the insurrectionism at the Capitol on January 6, 2021. From its inception, QAnon presented President Donald Trump as a protector of the United States against a range of enemies, and its followers were urged to patriotically lend him their support. However, insofar as QAnon used religious language and painted its enemies in a polarized worldview of good versus evil, the movement demands analysis not only as a historical phenomenon leading up to 2020 but also as representative of an enduring set of beliefs that promise to have an impact on future U.S. politics. This

article therefore examines the religious dimensions of QAnon alongside the political, understanding them as both entangled and distinct.

First, I present a brief overview of QAnon and the stages of its growth by using a model based on the proselytization and diffusion of a new religious movement (e.g., early Christianity). In QAnon's messaging and framing of the war to be waged, religion was tightly intertwined with political actors and agendas. Wading deeper into the fray, the article joins the existing discussion on conspiracy theories and religion, particularly *conspiracism as religion* (Dyrendal, Robertson, and Asprem 2019, 4–5), by arguing that belief in QAnon's tenets is akin to religious belief. As Adrienne LaFrance (2020) put it, "To look at QAnon is to see not just a conspiracy theory but the birth of a new religion." And yet, to understand QAnon also requires problematizing the term "conspiracy theory" as a trope used to demonize positions held by a certain individual or group, thus obscuring analysis of their actual beliefs; the same even can be said of religion, often regarded as demanding an adherence to dogma at the expense of intellectual argumentation. Here it is helpful to employ hermeneutics, a methodology that critically engages competing interpretations of texts and what is true; traditionally used in biblical scholarship, it has since been extended to historical and philosophical analysis. This method is all the more relevant in light of QAnon's intertwinings with Christianity, for as much as one might describe the movement as a new religion, it fundamentally depended on the tenets and language of an existing one. Furthermore, I argue that QAnon was complicated by an intertwining of political and religious motivations, reflecting entangled but also differing concerns. On one hand, competing interpretations of truth (versus post-truth) during the Trump presidency were instrumentalized for a political purpose. On the other, they signaled a profound epistemological rupture between those who followed QAnon and those who labeled and critiqued these followers as "disconnected from reality". The article closes by framing this juncture and tension in the language of hermeneutics: in relation to QAnon, one finds in play both a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of faith.

In this article, I use discourse analysis to examine religious elements contained in the primary source published by Q. Practically speaking, this means locating posts purportedly made by Q side by side with biblical citations. Given the size of the QAnon corpus, there are limitations to this approach, and so quantitative content analysis is employed as well (for example, by reviewing how many times certain keywords appear). I also review the rhetoric of secondary sources, including media representations of QAnon, as they have a bearing on the discussion of competing hermeneutics. Furthermore, in an attempt at scholarly objectivity, I do not attempt to assign truth status to either side, especially given the wide range of points which Q made and followers later added; these demand analysis individually and in their own right, something that is far beyond the scope of this article. Nor is the goal to prove that religion was a universal in how people approached QAnon, as certainly it was not a factor for many. The aim here is to demonstrate how religion was employed by QAnon and belief played an important role in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election.

The Growth Arc of QAnon: Canonical Creation and Evangelism

The growth and success of QAnon as a movement can be attributed to a number of different factors: the power of the internet to support community-building and the sharing of political memes (Wong 2020), a process of social contagion through which radical ideologies are spread (Youngblood 2020), a peculiar predisposition toward conspiracy theories in the United States (LaFrance 2020), or the participatory nature of QAnon as a nexus of conspiracy theories that others could engage in and write (Zuckerman 2019). I would argue that another theory can be added to this, namely, that the growth of QAnon can be mapped through a model of canonical creation (i.e., assigning authority to a closed corpus of texts with religious significance) and evangelism dependent on key actors at various stages.

From the first message—or "drop" of data—by the person(s) known as Q on 4chan on October 28, 2017, until the last one on 8kun before the election on November 3, 2020, the QAnon corpus comprises approximately 4,950 different posts, not including "lost" ones that were discovered later, over thirty-eight months (for a stylometric analysis of different writing styles, see Aliapoulios et al. 2021, 6–7; OrphAnalytics 2020). Their content ranged widely, changing in relation to current events and failed prophecies (Tian 2021), being predominantly political in nature but also including religious allusions. Followers seized on new Q-drops like revealed gospel, engaging in exegesis to decipher the more cryptic posts and creatively building a body of interpretations. To argue for a canonization of QAnon, however, it is necessary to understand the process by which the movement grew, as it did not happen overnight or by accident.

At a White House dinner held with the heads of the U.S. Armed Forces on October 5, 2017, President Trump drew a circular figure in the air and made an odd comment: "Maybe this is the calm before the storm." When reporters asked him what he meant, he enigmatically replied, "You'll find out" (Carter 2017). Three weeks later, in the /pol ("politically incorrect") discussion thread on 4chan, an anonymous online imageboard created in 2003, a pseudonymous user with the name "Q" (based on the Department of Energy's security clearance granting access to Top Secret Restricted Data) posted twice about "the calm before the storm" (QPosts Online, 11/2/2017). These drops suggested concerns with foreign actors like Russia and China, while other posts purported inside knowledge about the threat to democracy by the "Deep State" (a group of individuals in seats of power or the military, who are believed to be controlling the government) or that Hillary Clinton would soon face extradition for sex trafficking. What the "storm" entailed, and whether it would be foreign or domestic, was not entirely clear. In retrospect, not forgetting Trump's comment, the storm can be read as QAnon itself.

As we will see, QAnon used strong Christian framing in its messages. By extension, the main actors connected to it were cast in a religious light. In my overview of the movement, therefore, I highlight the range of roles in italics. For example, if Q was a "*postmodern prophet*" of the movement to be, Trump was presented as a *savior*, a "messianic figure" who would bring the storm (Burke 2020) and catalyze "The Great Awakening" (Figure 1).

This expression signaled a fusion of political and religious. Followers could interpret awakening on two levels, conspiratorial or soteriological, as waking up to the truth (of the Deep State, for instance) and/or the Truth (of God). It is important to note that for them, these were not mutually exclusive.

Long before it caught President Trump's interest, however, QAnon had quite a humble beginning. Born of an already existent "anon" genre in online bulletin boards, the first posts by Q followed those of a "high-level analyst and strategist" of FBIAnon, who promised criminal details on the Clinton Foundation, which was under investigation in 2016. Q made similarly mysterious drops on other imageboards, abandoning 4chan (after it was supposedly infiltrated) for the more permissive 8chan board (later rebranded as 8kun), known for its acceptance of discussions favoring white supremacism and neo-Nazism. At this point, QAnon had an audience but not a large one. In fact, it is unlikely that the posts would have gone anywhere without the efforts of what I call *evangelists*, a select group who brought the message to a wider audience. These were a successful YouTuber and a pair of 4chan moderators (Zadrozny and Collins 2018), who shared the Q-drops on Reddit, a popular discussion website with millions of users. Here, a community formed around a sub-reddit called r/CBTS_Stream, named after Trump's "Call Before the Storm"; it would soon be followed by others, the largest being r/GreatAwakening. Once again, certain individuals played a disproportionately significant role in interpreting Q's often cryptic posts, driving discussion and evangelizing the message. An analysis of Reddit reveals that "20% of users made over 90% of the comments on QAnon subreddits, suggesting that a few prominent individuals control the conversation" (Aliapoulios et al. 2021, 11). This phase was absolutely critical in the formation of the *canon* and its dissemination to the broader public.

The next major growth spurt came when posts shared on Reddit began propagating on Twitter, other social media platforms, and aggregation sites. Their viral spread was especially supported by the use of hashtags (e.g., #QAnon, #GreatAwakening), which allowed easy identification and framing (Xu 2020, 1081). By replicating a specific corpus of posts, the aggregation sites also accorded canonical status to the set of drops purported to have been made by Q (Aliapoulios et al. 2021, 6). By the time Reddit shut down QAnon-related threads in September 2018, they had already caught fire across the Internet and as a topic in mainstream media. For instance, just before Reddit's announcement, the *New York Times Magazine* published a piece, "A Trail of 'Bread Crumbs,' Leading Conspiracy Theorists Into the Wilderness" (Schwartz 2018), that effectively left a trail for *the masses* to follow as well. At the same time, one-sided and "snarky" coverage by the media only served to solidify belief among QAnon followers that there was a disinformation campaign and agenda to ignore or invalidate what they perceived as the truth (on the tendency of the media to mock QAnon, see Phillips 2020a).

After gaining a wider audience, Q was able to better mobilize their posts toward influencing votes. It must be noted that the general tone of Q-drops had been political before. For example, key figures like Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain were vilified: Clinton was described as part of a child sex trafficking ring, while Obama and McCain purportedly had secret ties to terrorist groups. At the same time, Trump was built up as a hero who was heroically trying to save the children, or whom, they believed, was targeted by Obama's wiretapping and "spygate" operation in the 2016 election (Tian 2021). QAnon's political agenda became especially overt in the midterm elections, when Q used multiple drops to stress a "red October" (code for a GOP landslide in the midterm elections) and then make claims of election fraud. Both of these foreshadowed events that would be seen in the 2020 Presidential Election. As Q began to increasingly play an influencer role and the canon served as a playbook, two more types of evangelists emerged: at the institutional level, there were *patriarchs* within the administration, such as the President and those in his camp, whose retweets and messaging to large audiences on social media bordered on explicit approval of QAnon; at the grassroots level, there were those who acted almost like *missionaries*,

taking the gospel of Q to the streets and political rallies, carrying signs and wearing clothes with provocative slogans.

As noted above, the use of Christian terminology is intended to highlight the roles of the different actors and how the growth of QAnon can be understood as a form of religious proselytism—from revelation to codification to wider dispersion. In a similar way, one can even read the approval of QAnon at the highest levels of government as an important turning point in the movement, akin to the Emperor Constantine's validation of Christianity in the fourth century, when it was longer considered a marginal cult. Perhaps most significantly, however, the followers of Q understood themselves in terms of this model. As one posted on Telegram, a messaging app that became popular after social media channels like Facebook and Twitter removed the accounts of QAnon evangelists, "If Jesus turned the world upside down with 12 people, imagine what we could do? How many are we now?" (Greenspan 2021).

The Entanglement of Christianity and Politics in QAnon

Christianity formed an important aspect of the content offered by QAnon to its followers. Quantitative cluster analysis shows that a large number of posts use religious and/or spiritual terms, with "heavenly" being one of the ten most important words in the corpus (Aliapoulios et al. 2021, 8). A search for "God" (understood here in the context of Christianity) reveals that it is mentioned no less than 223 times in the Q-drops. Beyond sheer numbers, however, the types of references made to religion are also significant. Q frequently cited passages of Christian scripture calling on God for strength, and such posts leveraged spirituality in various ways. For example, using shared language not only strengthened the canonical nature of Q's corpus and established common cause with a Christian audience but also bade followers to marry their faith with their belief in the movement, and to actively engage in praxis by praying for the realization of its goals (QPosts 11/1/2017); in this way, QAnon was able to mobilize people beyond the voting booth, leveraging their spiritual investment and ideological worldview for a wider public dissemination of its message. Needless to say, I do not intend to equate QAnon with Christianity here or disparage it—just as the fact that radical forms of many religions exist is not taken as criticism of those religions themselves— but merely point out the power of strategically targeting and attracting people on the basis of their faith.

Furthermore, the scriptural references chosen by Q (QPosts 2/17/2019) reinforced a deeply polarized worldview: "But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil" (2 Thessalonians 3:3 Revised Standard Version); "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1); "And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matthew 6:13). The "us and them" trope was reiterated and amplified in chat rooms online and in person, in books (e.g., Simon Smith's *QAnon and 1000 Years of Peace: Destroying the New World Order and Taking the Kingdom of Christ by Force!*), self-made documentaries, and classrooms even (Kafka 2019). As an example, a video made by a QAnon supporter, which had millions of views before being taken down by YouTube, narrated over archived footage of President Trump: "The world is currently experiencing a dramatic covert war of biblical proportions, literally the fight for earth, between the forces of good and evil" (Joe M. 2018). Presentations like this served to deepen in QAnon supporters and groups a strong sense of righteousness—and a need to be on the right side.

The place of politics and specific religions in this battle was not always black and white, however. On one hand, Q called followers to go beyond partisan and faith-based divides: "This is not about religions or party affiliation. EVIL is everywhere. There are no drawn lines. No boundaries. Good vs Evil" (Q, 3/10/2018). Such non-exclusionary rhetoric created an opening for unlikely bedfellows, as those on the left who were anti-establishment or held alternative worldviews came to support QAnon in common cause against child

traffickers or globalists. Theories about COVID vaccines matched some of the narratives held by anti-vaxxers; for instance, the viral success of the "Plandemic" video on YouTube was partly due to QAnon networks active on social media (Gallagher 2020). The spiritual language of QAnon also resonated with proponents of New Age faiths (Meltzer 2021), supporting the idea of "conspirituality" introduced by Charlotte Ward and David Voas (2011) to describe the fusion of negative-focused conspiracy theories and positive-oriented spirituality in a "politico-spiritual philosophy." Entanglements of belief by individuals on opposite extremes of the ideological spectrum—from the "Pastel QAnon" of Instagram influencers (Argentino 2021) to the "raw QAnon" of 8-chan and the "partisan penumbra" of the far-right (Rosenblum and Muirhead 2019, 148)—allowed the movement to resist reductionist analysis and labels.

Yet, the dogma of QAnon did ultimately have a political orientation. As Rose See (2019, 97) observes, Q vilified resistance to the Trump presidency. In a deeper reading of QAnon discourse in which religious cosmology is intertwined with its political agenda, "good becomes conflated with conservatism and evil with liberalism, so that speaking about evil actors becomes a de facto way to discuss liberal politics and Democrats in particular. Establishing this conflation serves to delegitimize and demonize competing claims within the US political system" (See 2019, 97). If this had not been the case, it is extremely unlikely that President Trump would have supported QAnon to the extent he did.

As QAnon and its followers grew, Trump stood at the center of the movement—but supposedly unaware of it. This purported ignorance continued even until the final days of the presidential election. For instance, when asked by the NBC News host Savannah Guthrie at a Town Hall in Miami on October 15, 2020 if he would disavow QAnon and "just say it's crazy and not true"—and if he would dispel the "theory that Democrats have a satanic pedophile ring and you are the savior of that"—the President answered, "I don't know about QAnon. … I know nothing about it" (O'Kane 2020). During his presidency, however, Trump used Twitter to amplify accounts promoting QAnon-related conspiracy theories at least 315 times; the same was also done by those close to him, including Rudy Giuliani, Roger Stone, Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn, and campaign staff manager Brad Parscale, not to mention the President's own family (Kaplan 2019–2021). And they did more than support other accounts—they directly promoted QAnon and leveraged it for political momentum (Figure 2). It could even be entertained that the entire QAnon rollout was a plan engineered by those close to the President, in order to exploit existing ideological divides in the electorate and strengthen his base.

Figure 2. "Who's ready?" @erictrump, Instagram, June 20, 2020.

Collective identity-building was fundamental to QAnon's messaging, and it formed the basis of the movement's main slogan: "Where we go one, we go all" (abbreviated in the tweet above as #WWG1WGA). Membership within this in-group—primarily Trump supporters—was visibly displayed on T-shirts and other gear at rallies and election events, making it increasingly possible for the mainstream media to comment on QAnon as a political phenomenon, which in turn acted as advertising for further growth.

Churches also served as a channel for building the "we go all" QAnon community. Christian conservatives, especially white evangelicals, were already aligned with the apocalyptic messaging. Ed Stetzer, an evangelical pastor and the executive director of the Billy Graham Center of Wheaton College in Illinois, put it simply: "QAnon is a train that runs on the tracks that religion has already put in place" (Rogers 2021). Compared to religiously unaffiliated individuals, those who belonged to some kind of faith were nearly twice as likely to believe in the tenets of QAnon (PRRI 2021). In some cases, such as the Omega Kingdom Ministry in Indiana, Q-drops and The Great Awakening were preached alongside biblical sources (Argentino 2020a). Due to the groundswell that QAnon enjoyed in both political and spiritual contexts, as well as their intersection, belief in QAnon was no longer fringe. At a certain point, radicalization becomes normalization,

and this may especially be the case when different demographics overlap. In a survey by the conservative American Enterprise Institute in January 2021 on the relationship of religion and conspiracy theory (Cox 2021; Jenkins 2021a), more than a quarter (27%) of white evangelicals maintained that the ideas held by QAnon are mostly or completely accurate, and 29% of Republicans believed the same. These results were corroborated a few months later in a poll conducted by PRRI in March 2021: 25% of white evangelical Protestants and 23% of Republican agreed that "government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation"; respectively, 26% and 28% believed that "there is a storm coming that will sweep away the elites in power" (PRRI 2021). This level of conviction in such numbers, underlining the significance of religious aspects of QAnon in the historical context of the election, clearly indicates the correlation between faith and political affiliation.

Interpreting QAnon through the Study of Religion: Competing Hermeneutics

As much as politics and religion were combined in the messaging of Q and the ideologies of those who support it, a better understanding of QAnon may be gained through the lens of the academic discipline known as the study of religion. Politics and religion (in this case Christianity) speak different "languages" and follow different logics. For example, whereas the former is part of the mundane sphere, the latter tends to correspond to a transcendent worldview. These can be located along two axes, horizontal and vertical, of how far out one's views could be considered. As seen above, Q spoke both languages and raised concerns regarding both domains. Thus, instead of only following the classic model of understanding conspiracy theories as the secular manifestation of a religious impulse (Popper 1945), it is important to also recognize belief in QAnon as religious per se, and sometimes even at a remove from worldly or political concerns.

It may be helpful to provide some examples of how QAnon plays on the two different levels of secular/political and religious. On one hand, the belief that politicians are involved in the sex trafficking of children, for instance, specifically targeted Hillary Clinton along purely partisan lines. On the other, certain versions of this narrative included a larger anti-government or anti-imperial trope with cosmological elements, as found in David Icke's (1999; see also Lewis and Khan 2005) extreme theory that the Bush family or British royals are blood-drinking reptilian aliens. Similarly, the image of child cannibals echoes the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory used by the Protocols of the Elders of Zion about a secret cabal of Jews working toward world domination (Doward 2020). Another example may be found in the concept of The Great Awakening, which can be interpreted in terms of the masses waking up to the fact that they have been enslaved in a nefarious but worldly power structure (engineered by globalists or the Deep State, for instance), or seen as a redemptive moment when a person wakes up to their own spiritual corruption (LaFrance 2020). Worth noting here is that The Great Awakening as a trope has had a similar dual interpretation at different points in U.S. history. Prior to the American Revolution, it reflected both a religious revival movement and the revolutionary spirit: "historians have seen in it nothing less than the first unifying event of the colonial experience, the origins of the American evangelical tradition, and a major source of revolutionary antiauthoritarian and republican rhetoric" (Butler 1990, 164–65). Making frequent references to "patriots" and targeting a Christian audience, QAnon accordingly located itself within a disruptive religiopolitical tradition and created a modern mimesis of it.

The two-axis model also provides a simple means of differentiating between those who followed QAnon. Instead of speaking of an "either/or" of secular and religious, it may be more accurate to consider people's

worldviews as operating on a sliding scale. For many Trump supporters who were exposed to QAnon, the political was almost surely more important than any religious aspect. For those whose political and religious ideologies were linked, and for whom Q's messaging may have synced with existing ideals of patriotism and eschatological expectations, it would be harder to separate these or determine which was stronger. And finally, for some true believers, the religious worldview appeared to be predominant.

As a well-publicized example of the latter type, one can point to Jacob Anthony Chansley (aka Angeli or Yellowstone Wolf), who came to be known as the "QAnon shaman." The creator of the Star Seed Academy—the Enlightenment and Ascension Mystery School, he described himself on Facebook (profile since removed) as "a metaphysical warrior, a compassionate healer and a servant of the Divine Creator God" (Evans 2021). Posing next to a cosplayer of Batman at the Capitol, a superhero dedicated to maintaining justice in the world, Chansley was more of a cosmic player, wearing a costume of his own making and tattoos of Norse religious symbols (e.g., Odin's Valknut, Thor's hammer Mjölnir) (Figure 3).

Figure 3. The two sides of the QAnon shaman's sign. Photos: TheUnseen011101; @DavidPuente.

As a hero of his own mythology, which included spiritual elements from pop culture (e.g., *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*), Chansley epitomized comparisons made between QAnon and "hyper-real religion" (Argentino 2020b), defined by Adam Possamai (2012, 20) as "a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life." I would argue that in the case of QAnon, the connection was more than metaphorical. It provided for many of its followers a new type of lived religion, and it certainly pushed conventional understandings of Christianity. In the vertical-axis religious worldview of the QAnon shaman, the rotunda of the Capitol was more than a political place; it was a power spot. "Let's all say a prayer in this

sacred space," he invited his comrades; first he invoked the "divine, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent creator God," and then he thanked the "Heavenly Father" for "filling this chamber with patriots that love you and that love Christ" (Jenkins 2021b). Those gathered around removed their hats, bowed their heads with eyes closed, and silently joined in (The New Yorker 2021).

Despite Jake Chansley's unusual costume, he was clearly accepted by the QAnon community (or at least until some labeled him an agent of antifa); he was not a loner but embedded in a social network that more or less believed the same—depending on its place on the two axes discussed above—and voted the same. For this reason, when discussing belief in QAnon it is important to pull out from the individual to the larger cultural context, in which alternative worldviews converged and were supported, and then propagated, in an echo chamber of like-minded contacts (Jenkins 2021a). On social media especially, deep memetic frames had a strong impact on perceptions of what was real; due to algorithms prioritizing what friends and what posts one would see, an information bubble was created. This led not only to an increasingly blindered idea of reality but also a sense of things connecting together, forming overwhelming evidence to support one's own views. Calling this the "media-wraparound effect," Whitney Phillips (2020a; 2020b) explains: "Once that happens, disbelief in QAnon becomes the irrational thing—because everything they're seeing (and are inclined to trust) confirms that the theory is legit. Believers think they've stumbled upon some vast and hidden truth, and it makes sense that they would. From their perspective, confirmation is everywhere." At this point, due to conflicting versions of what is real, dialogue can become increasingly difficult. Here, scholarly analysis benefits from the hermeneutical method.

In the study of religion and philosophy, hermeneutics has been used as a theoretical tool to understand how texts should be interpreted and understood, especially in relation to the question of truth. For some, like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1819), this required considering the perspective or agenda of the author; later, the process came to be informed by a need to also reflect on the objectivity of the interpreter, forming an ever-widening hermeneutical circle. As much as one might analyze Q-drops, therefore, the scholar should self-reflexively consider their own sources and biases. In the case of this article, that would mean acknowledging that its sources include mainstream media, and that sometimes the journalists quoted here are critical of what they are writing or admonishing their peers to practice that same view (Thompson 2016; Phillips 2020a; 2020b). Similarly, it means problematizing the use of terminology like "conspiracy theory" even; insofar as this term would likely not be employed by those who hold certain beliefs or are charged with doing so, it arguably reveals bias. I have chosen to use it for practical reasons, because it is a common rubric that offers a way of contrasting one set of beliefs from another, but once the nature of the contrast is visible, it may be dispensed with.

Paul Ricoeur (1981; see also Josselson 2004) helps us in this regard through his differentiation of a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion: the former amplifies the assumed meaning of a certain text and the latter problematizes it. Traditionally such debates have concerned theology and large ontological questions, but in recent years there has also emerged a more pragmatist approach toward hermeneutics, which reframes the question of truth not in terms of reality but the practical ramifications of interpreting. This departs from a transcendentalist interpretation of religion—or hermeneutics of faith sui generis, predicated on an understanding of a prior experience of something called religion—to employ a non-transcendentalist interpretation, which is concerned with causes and conditions (Stausberg 2009, 12). In other words, even within the study of religion, one can see a trend from the vertical to the horizontal axis discussed above. Another way to approach this difference is to consider the two hermeneutical approaches—faith and suspicion—as concerning ultimate truth or relative truth, respectively. Either way, the two conflicting hermeneutical strategies can provide insight into the way QAnon is understood—or not.

From the perspective of the typical academic or journalist, an examination of QAnon tends to begin with hermeneutics of suspicion, including a problematization of the truth status of the content (i.e., Q-drops).

When the *Guardian* asked professor of political science Joseph Uscinski why fighting QAnon's narrative is a "moral imperative," he answered: "It's a potentially dangerous belief; it's very disconnected from reality; I don't really think we want more people getting into it" (Wong 2020). The media and expert thus invoked a superior rationale and claim to truth, invalidating "belief" and those who would hold it (i.e., a hermeneutics of faith) as "disconnected from reality." Such critiques of QAnon can even extend to ad hominem charges of mental illness: an NBC article was titled "Why do seemingly sane people believe bizarre conspiracy theories?" (van Prooijen 2018), the *Guardian*'s "Today in Focus" podcast (2020) called QAnon adherents "unhinged," and a researcher on *The Conversation* discussed the "psychology of conspiracy," citing what appeared to be an apparently disproportionately large number of mental health problems among QAnon followers arrested after the Capitol attack on January 6, 2021 (Moskalenko 2021). Recently setting a high-profile example, U.S. District Judge Royce Lamberth ordered the QAnon shaman Jake Chansley to be placed in a mental health facility for a psychological examination (Hosenball and Lynch 2021). My point here is not to question the sanity of QAnon followers or lack thereof, but rather to illustrate the nature and extent of suspicion in academic and media discourse.

There are at least two ways in which QAnon followers disputed such argumentation. The first was through their own hermeneutics of suspicion. Since relative truth is relative after all, what is perceived as "real" or "fake" can vary widely, depending on one's lens and to whom one is listening. Thus, the cause of confusion is not merely individual but due to a greater epistemic error—people misjudge what they believe because they have misjudged their source of information—and the question of who is misjudging is a matter of debate. As Keith Harris (2018, 243) explains, "from the perspective of each agent, it is not immediately clear that the non-conspiracy theorist has more grounds to dismiss conspiracist sources than the conspiracy theorist has to dismiss non-conspiracist sources." In practice, this entailed an epistemological war, with mainstream media and Trump battling over representations of reality, and the minds of those who (still) subscribe to them. When Trump used the term "fake news," mentioning it 2,343 times during his presidency (Factba.se), it constituted an epistemic attack; the journalist Jonathan Rauch (2018) complained of this as "emanating from the very highest reaches of power, on our collective ability to distinguish truth from falsehood." By flipping the idea of truth, Trump revealed how the media itself was vulnerable to a hermeneutics of suspicion. Some precedent for this existed already, of course. As discussed by Mark Thompson (2008, 2016), CEO and President of the New York Times Company, declining trust in the media can be connected to journalists' attitudes and active distrust of politicians, or of religion. But in this case in particular, use of the hermeneutics of suspicion resulted in fallout on both sides and the status of truth as collateral damage. As each side claimed their own truth to be the actual one, it opened a space for inversions of logic. In the case of QAnon, disbelief in the media led to anything that the media said is not real being taken as real; consequently, critiques of QAnon by the mainstream media likely resulted in some people adhering to it even more.

In the era of "post-truth," to use the Oxford Dictionaries 2016 Word of the Year defined as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief," the nature of discourse has changed. While one can point to a decline in rhetoric (i.e., oratory skill, wit) and increase in demagoguery and ad hominem claims to truth, the loss of logic mentioned above signals a kind of epistemological morass, where radically different ideas of relative truth demand a move outside of conventional reason or justification. In this regard, QAnon fits with what Nancy Rosenblum and Russell Muirhead (2019, 3) identify as a shift from "classic conspiracism," which provides a narrative and theory for the set of beliefs, to "new conspiracism," which lacks the burden of proof or theory even. Gaining its power from sheer repetition (retweeting, sharing, etc.) and echo chambers, there is a move from scientific validation to social validation. According to David Brooks (2020), those who rebel against the "epistemic regime" need "stories that will both explain their distrust back to them and also enclose them within a safe community of believers." When enough people agree about a

certain idea, consensus reality itself—the epistemology that everyone shares—is challenged. Thus, as Rosenblum and Muirhead (2019, 9) explain, "The most striking feature of the new conspiracism is … its assault on reality. The new conspiracism strikes at what we think of as truth and the grounds of truth. It strikes at what it means to know something." Interestingly, this situation sounds similar to what is commonly described by those who have experienced a spiritual revelation or awakening.

This brings us to the other reason why QAnon supporters might dismiss objections raised by those employing a hermeneutics of suspicion. Simply put, they did not privilege that mode of interpreting what is real, but instead employed a hermeneutics of faith, which allowed them to claim access to an ultimate level of truth. A great deal has been written on this (see Ricoeur 1981) but the point is simple enough: followers of QAnon, like religious adherents around the world and throughout history, justified their position in relation to a higher, divine authority. In this specific context, I would argue that argumentation based on ultimate truth held especially great appeal and power in the epistemological morass resulting from the dislocations of relative truth during Trump's presidency. In this sense, the hermeneutics of faith served as both the basis and justification for belief in QAnon.

Conclusion

This article has explored the religious aspects of QAnon in an attempt to explain its force in the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, charting its rapid growth from a conspiracy theory on a marginal online imageboard to an ideological movement that captured the attention of mainstream media and famous political figures, including the President. While the movement invoked prayer and a Christian frame to galvanize faith in Donald Trump and create a powerful electoral bloc, this language of faith simultaneously provided a means for followers of QAnon to avoid cognitive dissonance and invert the hermeneutic of suspicion that critiqued them. It also allowed them to inhabit their own modern mythology as agents of real change. In this way, QAnon took the traditional electoral rhetoric of change to another level. Four years before, with the slogan "Make America Great Again," Trump had fused exceptionalism with a message that the country was in decline (Butters 2017). But after his first term, the swamp was supposed to have been drained—and a new narrative was needed. QAnon provided this in two ways. On one hand, conspiracy theory tropes justified how the United States was *still* in decline. On the other, a rhetoric of what I would call extra-exceptionalism, which resonated with the deep memetic frames of the MAGA worldview, accorded soteriological significance to the presidential election, offering "true patriots" the promise of a better future that not only included the nation but heavenly rewards as well.

Of course, such a future was not to be. After Trump lost the election, posts from Q dropped off sharply. Two days after the insurrection on January 6, 2021, Twitter suspended Trump's account, severely limiting his ability to directly message his followers. On the very same day, no less than 70,000 other accounts associated with QAnon were purged (Tollefson 2021). At a glance, it might have even appeared that the movement, failing to achieve its objective of Trump's final victory and being largely deplatformed, was done. And yet this is far from the case. In the leadup to the midterm elections of 2022, the former president is using his Truth Social platform to explicitly promote QAnon more than ever before (Herman 2022), and its famous "The Storm is Coming" motto—which can be taken as either a warning or a promise—prominently appears on the lapel pin he wears. Given the clearly perennial nature of the movement and its potential significance for the future political landscape of the U.S., it goes without saying that further research on QAnon is direly needed. There are many angles from which the subject might be approached, but the conclusion of this article is that the religious dimension cannot be ignored.

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"Maybe You Are Fake News": Donald Trump, Fox News, and Right-wing Criticism of Right-wing Media

Oscar Winberg
owinberg [a] abo.fi
PhD, post-doctoral researcher
History Department
Åbo Akademi University

Following the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, Donald Trump became critical of the right-wing cable network Fox News. Rather than an example of bitter infighting on the right, however, his attacks are part of a tradition of criticism of right-wing media. Focusing on President Trump's communications on the social media platform Twitter, I compare his post-election criticism with his previous criticism of right-wing media and the news media in general. Trump demanded loyalty from Fox News and singled out critical voices for insults, intimidation, and accusations of bias while extolling complimentary voices and promoting competitors. Thus, I argue that the study of Trump's criticism of Fox News furthers our understanding of right-wing criticism of the news media in general.

Introduction

Late on election night of November 3, 2020, something unexpected happened on Fox News. The state of Arizona turned blue. "Why is Arizona blue?" asked a surprised Bill Hemmer on air. As the first network to call the state for Joe Biden, Fox News faced immediate condemnation from the White House (Peters 2020). Donald Trump was furious. In a report from Washington, the network's Chief White House correspondent John Roberts described the feelings within the campaign as "livid" (Klein 2020).

Campaign spokespeople and allies of the President condemned the decision in public (Karni and Haberman 2020). Behind the scenes in the White House, the President ordered aides and allies to fight the call on Fox News. Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law, called on the powers that be at Fox News, including the conservative media mogul Rupert Murdoch, in a desperate attempt to overturn the decision (Martin and Burns 2022, 214–15).

Both Chris Stirewalt and Arnon Mishkin, responsible for the decision desk at the network, were asked to defend the call on the air. News anchor Bret Baier acknowledged the pressure, "we're getting a lot of incoming here" (Ellison 2020). In private, Baier was reported to have been fuming (Baker and Glasser 2022). "I'm sorry, we're not wrong in this particular case," Mishkin told the anchors on air when pressed, prompting an embarrassed Bret Baier to note, "you don't have to apologize" (Ellison 2020). For the President, however, the outlet described by historians as "closer to state television than anything the United States has ever known" had failed him (Hemmer 2019). What Trump wanted from Fox News was not a right-wing perspective in the news environment, it was loyalty.

Fox News is a potent force in United States politics. Political journalists increasingly scrutinize the close and interdependent relationship between Fox News and the political right (Brock et al. 2012; Sherman 2017; Mayer 2019; Stelter 2020; Gertz 2021). While cable news generally command only a modest audience, as on any given night more than 99% of the population is *not* watching Fox News (Socolow 2019), the viewers include political elites and party activists. "The key to their influence," Ezra Klein (2020, 162) observes, "is that they have the right audiences." Indeed, Fox News enjoys an unrivaled dominance among the political right (Klein 2020, 235).

Acknowledging the considerable political influence of the cable news network, Matthew Yglesias (2018, 683) recently called for "more detailed, more comprehensive, and more rigorous scholarly analysis of the 800-pound [sic] gorilla of the partisan media world." Still, even as Yglesias (2018, 683) describes Fox News as "well-known but poorly understood," there is considerable research in a number of disciplines on the behemoth of right-wing media.[1]

The problem, Anthony Nadler and A. J. Bauer (2020b, 232–33) suggest, is a lack of continuity and interdisciplinarity in the research.

Social scientists have long recognized the peculiar institution of Fox News in modern political life. In a pioneering study, Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella (2010) explored the ways in which right-wing media provides cover for conservatives and creates counter-narratives while decrying "liberal bias" in the media. In the last decade, political science research on right-wing media has continued to analyze the influence of the network and the ways the stars of Fox News shape right-wing politics (Cassino 2016; Young 2019.) By reinforcing policy preferences among audiences, the cable network is contributing to the ideological transformation of the Republican Party (Hoewe et al. 2020; Hoewe, Brownell, and Wiemer 2020; Skocpol and Williamson 2012; Jamieson and Cappella 2010). Indeed, today Fox News constitutes a key power broker within it, intertwined with both party activists and elites, being a crucial partner in electoral campaigns (Grossman and Hopkins 2018).

Furthermore, Widmer, Galletta, and Ash (2020) have shown that Fox News polarizes the media environment, driving newspapers to move toward the right-wing perspective of the cable network. Communications scholars have also studied how the cable network shapes United States politics (White 2018). By promoting a right-wing style of politics which emphasizes a populist discourse, the cable network enforces the messaging and branding of the Republican Party and party factions (Peck 2019).

Key to the position of Fox News, paradoxically, is a deep distrust of the media. In fact, as Klein (2020, 237) notes, the former motto of the cable network, "Fair and Balanced," is in itself "an insinuation that the rest of the media is unfair and biased." Over the last five decades, the Republican Party has embraced attacks on the news media and the free press as part of the party identity (Ladd 2011). Concomitant with right-wing criticism of the media, wealthy conservatives funded the development of a considerable right-wing media ecosystem as a part of the development of the modern conservative movement (Hemmer 2016).

Conservative media, historians have illustrated, laid the foundation for the conservative ascendancy in modern politics (Hemmer 2016; Hendershot 2016; Rosenwald 2019; Brownell 2017). The launch of Fox News in 1996 was the culmination of decades of media activism by Republican operatives and conservative ideologues (Hoewe, Brownell, and Wiemer 2020, 369–72). Today, Nicole Hemmer argues (2016, xiii), the "habit of conservative media consumption [is] part of what it now means be a conservative in America." Understanding this political and historical context is critical to appreciating the role of Fox News within the right-wing coalition today.

The purpose of this article is to explore Trump's post-election criticism of Fox News to better understand the phenomenon of right-wing criticism of the news media. Trump's assault on Fox News, I argue, was part of the broader right-wing war on the media rather than an aberration or a sign of bitter infighting on the right. Thus, the right-wing criticism of right-wing media provides insight into right-wing criticism of the media writ large. How should Donald Trump's criticism of right-wing media be understood, how does it compare to his attacks on non-right-wing media, and what can his charges tell us about the relationship between right-wing media and right-wing politics? To explore these research questions, I analyze patterns and themes in Donald Trump's communications on the social media platform Twitter, comparing his post-election criticism with earlier criticism of both right-wing media and the news media in general.

Twitter as Source Material

Described as the "first Twitter president," Trump preferred communicating through the popular social media platform both on the campaign trail and in the White House (Cook 2019). Furthermore, political reporters and pundits amplified his communications on and beyond the platform. "Twitter was always Trump's favorite child," media critic Jack Shafer (2021) observed, "and reporters picked up on that, forever citing his Twitter feed." Trump's tweets garnered considerable attention and, according to political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson (2020, 5–6), served as a distraction in political life. "[Trump] uses Twitter as a means of exerting power," media scholars have recognized, "over the media, the executive branch, the legislature, or opponents (Benkler et al. 2018, 19)." Often described as Trump's "favorite" medium, the political significance of the forum is clear (Stevens 2017; Conger and Isaac 2020; Conger and Alba 2020; Wakabayashi 2021).

In the aftermath of the deadly insurrection of January 6, 2021, following Trump's support of the insurrectionists on Twitter, the social media platform announced the permanent suspension of his account "due to the risk of further incitement of violence" (Twitter 2021). With this, all activity (including tweets, retweets, and likes) of the @realdonaldtrump account was deleted and is no longer available on Twitter. The information is not lost, however. The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), in collaboration with Twitter, maintains archives of communications from official accounts by members of both the Obama and Trump administration, but the suspension of Trump's account makes this difficult; NARA is still working on creating an official online archive (Forgey 2021). In the meantime, researchers must rely on other databases. Launched in September 2016, the Trump Twitter Archive, a site recording every tweet from the @realdonaldtrump account into a searchable database, constitutes a valuable resource in this regard (Trump Twitter Archive). Thus, I rely on it for this article.

Between announcing his candidacy for the presidency on June 16, 2015, and the suspension of his account on January 8, 2021, Donald Trump sent over 34,000 tweets from his @realdonaldtrump account, making an average of approximately 17 tweets daily. To manage such an overwhelming amount of source material requires that strict limits be set on the scope of the study. To understand the President's post-election

criticism of Fox News requires juxtaposing it with years of attacks on right-wing media and the news media in general.

For this comparative analysis, I selected tweets in which Trump expresses or shares opinions critical of either Fox News (or any employees or representatives of Fox News) or the media and journalism in general (or any individual journalists or representatives of media outlets) in three separate timeframes: January 2016, February 2019, and November 3, 2020–January 8, 2021. In January 2016, candidate Trump engaged in an open and bitter feud with Fox News over campaign coverage, as the cable network was set to host a presidential primary debate. During the same period, he also condemned the right-wing publication *National Review* for its criticism of his lack of conservative bona fides. In February 2019, Trump launched blistering attacks on the media over unfavorable investigative reporting, especially on the connections between his campaign and Russian interests. Following the presidential election in November 2020, Trump spent weeks condemning the media and Fox News.

The selection is not intended to be representative of Trump's term in office, as the analysis is qualitative, not quantitative. For comparative purposes, the selection offers different forms of media criticism communicated by Donald Trump. Even the material in the limited timeframes, however, is considerable: the first period consists of 473 tweets, the second 243 tweets, and the third a total of 1,552 tweets. While my overall analysis focuses on media criticism in the material, in the first period I am exclusively interested in criticism of right-wing media, in the second criticism of other media, and in the third all media criticism. For the purpose of this article, criticism is defined as any negative remark.

January 2016: Insults, Bias, and Ratings

Before Donald Trump received a single vote in the presidential primaries of the Republican Party, he lambasted prominent party members and powerful institutions. The most powerful right-wing institution that the candidate targeted with his vitriol was Fox News. Together with talk radio, Fox News was the kingmaker on the right. It was on Fox News that Donald Trump remade himself, under the direction of Roger Ailes, as a political figure during the Obama years (Mayer 2019). As James Poniewozik (2019, 169) observed, "It was the perfect symbiosis." But while Ailes created the candidate, Rupert Murdoch viewed him as an embarrassment.

Before the first presidential primary debate in August 2015, Murdoch ordered Ailes to have the debate moderators—Bret Baier, Megyn Kelly, and Chris Wallace—put pressure on the unexpected frontrunner (Sherman 2017, 405–6). "How could you do this?" an angry Trump blasted Ailes in private following the debate. In public, he unleashed a stream of malicious and misogynistic ad hominem attacks on Kelly (Sherman 2017, 406). Ezra Klein (2015) concluded, "Now Trump and Fox News are at war." But Ailes, who recognized the power of his own creation, did not want to escalate the conflict, and Trump, who recognized the cable network as the key to the Republican base, focused his attacks primarily on the star anchor (Golshan 2016).

By January 2016, Trump—the favorite in opinion polls with the Iowa caucus just around the corner—again escalated his feud with Fox News and other right-wing media. Set to host another presidential primary debate, the cable network intended for Kelly to again serve as a moderator, to Trump's chagrin. With Trump as the recognized frontrunner, he was increasingly facing criticism from conservatives who were convinced that he did not represent them and would doom the party. The cover of *National Review* in January read "Against Trump," with the issue featuring a no-holds-barred attack on the candidate. "Donald Trump is a menace to American conservatism," the editorial board declared (*National Review* 2016). Among the contributors was the right-wing firebrand and conspiracist Glenn Beck. In print and on

television, Beck denounced Trump: "If Donald Trump wins, it's going to be a snowball to hell" (Flegenheimer 2016). These three—Fox News, the *National Review*, and Glenn Beck—emerged as the primary targets in Donald Trump's Twitter criticism of right-wing media.

"I refuse to call Megyn Kelly a bimbo, because that would not be politically correct," Trump (2016a) taunted the anchor, "Instead I will only call her a lightweight reporter!" The ad hominem insult illustrates how the candidate reveled in misogynist insinuation and deliberate provocation. Of course, Trump also bartered insults for attention (Winberg 2017). The candidate hurled insults at outspoken critic Glenn Beck, calling him "very dumb and failing" and "irrelevant" (Trump 2016l; 2016m). Quantitative studies of Trump's tweets confirm that during the campaign he often targeted individual journalists with insults and intimidation (Sugars 2019). Trump's vitriol was dangerous. In her book on the campaign, NBC correspondent Katy Tur (2018, 274) claims, "his comments put us in danger." When Trump attacked Megyn Kelly, she lost the support of the leadership at Fox News and was harassed by viewers, even receiving death threats (Sherman 2017, 406). Research shows that Trump's attacks on the media garnered considerable attention and engagement (Meeks 2019). Thus, the insults actively served as a tool of intimidation.

Furthermore, Trump equated unfavorable coverage with bias. Several times, Trump either accused right-wing media personalities of bias or retweeted accusations of it (Trump 2016b; 2016c; 2016d). Never, however, was bias defined or examples provided. When Trump accused Kelly of having a "conflict of interest and bias" and suggested she should not be allowed to serve as debate moderator, he seemed to assume the alleged bias was self-evident (Trump 2016e). Trump alluded to months of *him* publicly bullying Kelly, to suggest *she* could not possibly be fair (Golshan 2016). With the slogan "Fair and Balanced," the brand of Fox News was built around the suggestion that other media is unfair and biased. Yet, as Nicole Hemmer (2016, 270) has shown, the suggestion was also an implicit argument that Fox News "should be trusted because it was right, and because it was right-wing." Thus, when directed at right-wing media by right-wing candidates, the accusation of bias should be understood as an accusation of not being right-wing enough. For while Trump was fast to decry bias when faced with criticism, he praised the right-wing media stars who disregarded objectivity to extoll him. "Rush Limbaugh is great," Trump announced, saying he "tells it as he sees it" (Trump 2016f). Similarly, he retweeted a supporter hailing Sean Hannity of Fox News for being "for Trump" (Trump 2016g). While he was in an open war of words with Fox News, he simultaneously relied on friendly faces at the cable network to promote himself and his campaign; these included Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Jeanine Pirro (Mayer 2019).

Beyond ad hominem insults and charges of bias, the most pronounced pattern in Trump's criticism of right-wing media in January 2016 was a focus on ratings, sales, and revenue as measurements of success. Success, by extension, came to suggest journalistic standards. When launching a series of assaults against the *National Review*, Trump focused on what he claimed was low circulation: "National Review is a failing publication" (Trump 2016h). In another tweet, the candidate asserted, "Very few people read the National Review" (Trump 2016i). He also took to calling the magazine "failing" or "dying" (Trump 2016j; 2016k). When going after Glenn Beck to dismiss his criticism, Trump also pointed to ratings: "Very few listeners – sad" (Trump 2016m).

The same pattern was evident in Trump's attacks on Fox News: "Without me they'd have no ratings" (Trump 2016n). With a background in television entertainment, Trump was obsessed about this metric (Poniewozik 2017). When Trump called the upcoming debate "a total disaster," he relied on ratings and revenue—not journalistic or news values—to make his case: "low ratings with advertisers and advertising rates dropping like a rock" (Trump 2016o). Following reports of low ratings after the debate, the candidate gloated and bragged of his power to attract attention, claiming his presence on the debate stage would have resulted in "12 million more [viewers] [and] would have broken the all time record" (Trump 2016p). The focus on profits suggested a keen understanding of right-wing media. Certainly, earlier generations of

right-wing media activists, including William A. Rusher, Clarence Manion, and William F. Buckley, prioritized ideological victories over profits and depended on conservative philanthropy (Hemmer 2016). Yet, for talk radio hosts, online outlets, and Fox News, as Brian Rosenwald (2019, 256) has argued, "Any ideological or political agenda was secondary." Profit was everything (Stelter 2020, 19–22, 284).

Recognizing his ability to attract audiences, Trump understood that he could threaten right-wing media with implicit threats to their bottom line. Besides, he did not need to defeat Fox News but merely show "that he could delegitimize Fox to his followers" (Poniewozik 2019, 222). For years, Fox News had told its audience to distrust or dismiss the media, a message that served to lift the cable network to prominence but also, according to media critic James Poniewozik (2019, 221), "left it vulnerable to someone like Trump." Trump emerged victorious from his first battle with right-wing media. With his success, Rosenwald (2019, 9) remarked, "eventually Fox News recognized their scion in him." Shifting the power dynamics between Trump and Fox News, the triumph would shape the relationship and set the stage for the confrontation between them following the 2020 election.

February 2019: Enemy of the People

As Jane Mayer (2019) has observed, "Fox's embrace of Trumpism took some time." But with Trump now in the White House, the cable network adjusted. Voices critical of Trump were taken off the air, while the screen time of his favorite faces increased (Mayer 2019). Brian Stelter (2020, 284) notes, "The GOP had become Trump's party, so Fox had become Trump's network." For the President, the network served as both defense and offense: defending him from criticism and negative coverage while at the same time attacking his opponents and the news media. By February 2019, the President and the right-wing cable network were working hand in hand to undermine and assault the news media (Stelter 2020, 2). Indeed, Trump seized on Fox News' disdain of the news media and made it the "cornerstone" of his presidency (Stelter 2020, 95). Two themes dominated Trump's criticism of news media on Twitter: accusations that they did not want to give him due credit or avoided reporting on his successes and that they constituted an opponent or enemy. Both were later adopted to target Fox News itself.

When bragging about high approval ratings among Republicans, the President added that the numbers should be understood as "[p]retty amazing" since "my press is REALLY BAD" (Trump 2019a) or "the most unfair (BAD) press in the history of presidential politics" (Trump 2019b). In an angry rant about the investigations of his 2016 presidential campaign and Russian interests, Trump directed a broadside against the media: "Someday the Fake News Media will turn honest [and] report that Donald J. Trump was actually a GREAT Candidate" (Trump 2019c). Praise of the President was equated with honesty.

Having won, Trump had turned to the term "fake news," meant to describe made-up stories spreading on social media, which he used as "a bludgeon, a diversion, and a punchline" (Stelter 2020, 94). Trump redefined it into any news which he did not want his supporters to believe. Following his election, the slur of "fake news" intended to delegitimize the free press came to dominate Trump's media criticism (Sugars 2019). Condemning the media for not properly crediting the Republican Party, such as for having more "ENERGY" than the left, Trump argued: "The Fake News just doesn't want to report the facts" (Trump 2019d). For Trump, positive reports were not only good but honest and factual, while negative reports were neither.

When angered by reporting on his work schedule, Trump responded that "it should have been reported as a positive, not negative (Trump 2019e)." This tweet captures the meaning of Trump's constant charge of "fake news," namely, as news which he did not approve of. But among many Trump supporters, the term also came to mean "anything that mainstream media says" (Tong et al. 2020, 12). Distrust in the news

media was for years consistent with appreciating right-wing media (Ladd 2011, 101–3). Thus, "fake news" captured existing widespread sentiment among the right and added an insinuation of malice. With Trump suggesting that the news media intentionally denied him credit, he portrayed them as not just biased or untrustworthy but as an opponent or enemy.

In mid-February, the President of the United States tweeted: "THE RIGGED AND CORRUPT MEDIA IS THE ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE!" (Trump 2019f). This was not the first time Donald Trump used such vicious language in his attacks on the free press. In fact, he initially used the term "enemy of the people" to describe the news media early on in his presidency, singling out several media outlets: the national paper of record, the *New York Times*; the television networks ABC, CBS, and NBC; and the cable news network CNN (Kalb 2018, 1).

Evoking authoritarian regimes and the efforts of dictators to destroy press freedom, the language signaled—in the words of Marvin Kalb, the *éminence grise* of broadcasting journalism—that "a flashing red light" had been crossed (2018, 2). Yet, the President embraced it and the hosts at Fox News defended him (Stelter 2020, 107). By the second half of 2018 and early 2019, Trump was using the highly inflammatory term regularly.

For example, when the *New York Times* published an investigative article on attempts by the President to undermine and influence investigations into his campaign and his administration, the President directly targeted the paper. "The New York Times reporting is false," Trump announced, and continued with a full-frontal assault, "They are a true ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE" (Trump 2019g). In response to these charges, the paper's publisher A. O. Sulzberger denounced the rhetoric coming from the White House: "There are mounting signs that this incendiary rhetoric is encouraging threats and violence against journalists at home and abroad" (Grynbaum and Sullivan 2019). Two days later, however, the President reiterated: "Fake News is so bad for our Country" (Trump 2019h). Appreciating the President's vicious vilification of the news media and the way Trump, with the support of right-wing media, delegitimized the news media is key to understanding his attacks on Fox News in November 2020.

November 2020: Conspiracies and Right-wing Challengers to Fox News

"I don't think I'm fake news," Chris Wallace of Fox News protested in a July 2020 interview with Donald Trump. "Maybe you are," the President rebutted (Fox News, 2020). During his 2016 campaign and throughout his presidency, Trump alternately loathed and lauded the right-wing cable news outlet. Days before the election, he singled out Wallace for further criticism. "His show," Trump (2020a) tweeted, "is a total 'hit job' on your favorite President, me." Following his defeat in the 2020 election, however, the President directed especially blistering criticism toward Fox News.

Beyond the insults and his obsession with ratings, three patterns in Trump's post-election criticism of the media in general and Fox News in particular stand out: conspiracist accusations of illegal or unethical behavior by the news media, encouragements to abandon Fox News for other right-wing media, and concomitant extolling of supportive voices on Fox News.

When it became clear that Joe Biden had won the presidential election, Donald Trump did not concede the election or congratulate his successor. Instead, he declared war on the results themselves, recklessly charging fraud and promoting baseless conspiracies. The news media, according to Trump, were to blame. In fact, only days before the election, the President charged that his Democratic Party challenger was "bought and paid for by Big Tech, Big Media, Big Donors, and powerful special interests" (Trump 2020b).

Having spent years accusing the news media of being the enemy, it was natural for Trump to claim that the press was now favoring a Biden win.

Yet, Trump moved beyond the familiar right-wing charges of bias to suggest that the news media "really is tampering with an Election" (Trump 2020c). According to the President, any inaccuracy in polls commissioned by outlets like Fox News, the *Washington Post*, and NBC was an intentional "attempt to suppress" his vote (Trump 2020c). Without any evidence or legal argument, he claimed that it amounted to "a possibly illegal suppression" (Trump 2020d).

He accused the news media of refusing to cover purported developments in his favor. Charging both Fox News and the rest of the news media with deliberately ignoring or misrepresenting demonstrations in support of his baseless voting fraud claims, Trump (2020e) announced: "we now have SUPPRESSION BY THE PRESS." Using the salient language of "suppression" of voters, the charges echoed generations of claims that a liberal leaning among reporters resulted in a disregard of right-wing perspectives, but they also echoed contemporary accusations of discrimination or silencing of right-wing voices on social media and beyond (Stack 2018). For instance, when repeating his earlier message, the President extended his targets, tweeting: "Big Tech and the Fake News Media have partnered to Suppress" (Trump 2020f). And hoping by means of insults to further mainstream his charges, Trump (2020g) added a new slur: "The Silent Media is the Enemy of the People." Exploiting the currency of anti-media messages among his base, he recognized that delegitimizing the news media was key to delegitimizing the election results: "The Media is just as corrupt as the Election itself" (Trump 2020h).

Fox News, often excluded from right-wing attacks on the news media, could not both avoid drawing the President's ire and report the election results. Or not, at least, with Joe Biden emerging victorious. Over the years, Trump had challenged Fox News whenever he considered them out of bounds, and the cable news network had, by and large, conformed to his whims. As Matt Gertz (2021) concluded, "Fox News spent the last four years remaking itself as President Donald Trump's personal propaganda tool." However, while Sean Hannity, Tucker Carlson, Laura Ingraham, and Jeanine Pirro were eager to promote the conspiracy theories of the President, the news desk had called the election for his Democratic challenger—and Trump felt betrayed.

"Perhaps the biggest difference between 2016 and 2020 is @FoxNews," the President concluded (Trump 2020i). His implication was clear: if only Fox News had worked harder, the White House would have been his. Fox News was supposed to be his champion (Stelter 2020, 265). Flummoxed and outraged over the way the cable news network refused to follow him in his assault on democracy, Trump went for the jugular—the financial bottom line.

On a Wednesday in mid-November, Trump made no less than 14 retweets criticizing Fox News. Encouraging his supporters to abandon Fox, the President used his position to promote challengers. When criticizing Fox News, Trump included suggestions to "try" or "check out" right-wing competitors like the One America News Network (OAN) and Newsmax (Trump 2020j; 2020k). Neither represented a serious challenge to the dominance of Fox News. According to Brian Stelter (2020, 314), OAN was "tiny and posed no immediate threat to Fox" before the election. Trump sought to change the calculus, however.

Reveling in the declining ratings of Fox News, Trump claimed that they had "completely collapsed" following the election (Trump 2020l). The President understood the decline as a result of the cable news network turning its back on him: "They forgot what made them successful, what got them there. They forgot the Golden Goose" (Trump 2020l). For Trump, the lack of support from Fox News also tampered the quality of the shows. "@FoxNews daytime is virtually unwatchable," Trump (2020m) concluded. Going even further, Trump (2020n) suggested that Fox News was becoming "almost as bad as watching Fake News @CNN." While denouncing Fox News and encouraging his followers to abandon the cable news network,

Trump repeatedly promoted its supportive voices, such as Sean Hannity, Jeanine Pirro, Jesse Watters, Greg Gutfeld, and Pete Hegseth. Extolling supporters both at and outside Fox News while denouncing the cable news network itself, Trump again signaled what he demanded from the news media: loyalty.

Conclusions

Fox News is often understood as consisting of both news and opinion. The distinction seems less and less relevant today (Boehlert 2021; Gertz 2021; Sullivan 2021). First of all, viewers are not good at distinguishing between news and opinion (Mitchell et al. 2018). Second, the division at Fox News is not even, with the network being built around the ratings of opinion stars such as Sean Hannity and Tucker Carlson (Stelter 2020). Third, the independent voices on the news side, anchors such as Chris Wallace and Shepard Smith, have left the network over the last years, citing an "unsustainable" environment for news, thereby giving even more room to opinion hosts (Grynbaum 2022; Benveniste 2021; Sullivan 2021). "Fox News isn't a newsgathering organization," media critic Eric Boehlert (2021) concluded weeks after Trump left the White House.

The Trump years transformed constructive right-wing media criticism into what Brian Stelter (2020, 120) called "destructive attacks." Yet, these attacks tell a lot about right-wing criticism of the news media overall. The role of Fox News in United States politics is unique. Indeed, researchers have found "there is no symmetry in the architecture and dynamics of communication within the right-wing media ecosystem and outside of it (Benkler et al. 2018, 14). Perhaps it is no surprise, as Stelter (2020, 23) observes, that even "the average political journalist" does not understand the relationship between Fox News and right-wing leaders like Trump.

Trump's assaults on Fox News further understandings of the relationship between the right and the news media. Throughout his political career, Trump has had a habit of making implicit right-wing messages explicit. Trump's attacks on Fox News were not so much a sign of a divide within the right-wing coalition as part of a decades-long right-wing project to delegitimize the news media. This was not a crusade against Fox News; it was a challenge to any criticism by any news media. In the case of Fox News, it worked (Hemmer 2022, 65).

Back in 2015, when Trump launched misogynistic insults toward Megyn Kelly, celebrated voices in political media such as Ezra Klein and Nate Silver concluded that a war against Fox News was not a war Trump would win (Klein 2015; Silver 2015). When condemning Fox News while praising the stars supportive of him, however, Trump made it clear that he was never at war with the network. In the end, Trump needed not destroy Fox News but merely transform it.

Declining ratings, the result of the sustained assault by Trump, challenges from Newsmax and OAN, and viewers' disappointment with the election of Joe Biden were enough to shake the executives at Fox News (Ellison and Barr 2021; Hemmer 2022, 65). Even after a deadly insurrection, Fox News would double down on its support of Donald Trump. Executives at the network purged the news editors behind the November coverage, including political editor Chris Stirewalt and Washington managing editor and vice president Bill Sammon (Ellison and Barr 2021). The network was "taking steps to increase Fox's reliance on incendiary right-wing propaganda" (Gertz 2021). While Trump's assault on right-wing media failed to win him a second term at the ballot box or overturn the election results in an insurrection, he eventually did win over Fox News and, by extension, the Republican Party. In the process, Trump made clear that right-wing media criticism is not about the media itself but politics and power.

References

Social Media

Trump 2016a. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 27, 2016, 6:44:04 AM EST

Trump 2016b. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 26, 2016, 6:14:43 AM EST

Trump 2016c. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 25, 2016, 11:56:32 PM EST

Trump 2016d. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 29, 2016, 9:00:03 PM EST

Trump 2016e. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 23, 2016, 11:52:17 AM EST

Trump 2016f. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 22, 2016, 6:49:42 PM EST

Trump 2016g. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 5, 2016, 10:50:46 PM EST

Trump 2016h. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 21, 2016, 10:56:44 PM EST

Trump 2016i. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 21, 2016, 10:56:57 PM EST

Trump 2016j. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 21, 2016, 10:57:22 PM EST

Trump 2016k. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 22, 2016, 9:24:15 AM EST

Trump 2016l. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 15, 2016, 9:02:12 PM EST

Trump 2016m. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 22, 2016, 8:33:17 PM EST

Trump 2016n. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 26, 2016, 5:43:27 PM EST

Trump 2016o. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 28, 2016, 8:20:01 AM EST

Trump 2016p. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, January 29, 2016, 3:40:16 PM EST

Trump 2019a. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 17, 2019, 7:41:31 AM EST

Trump 2019b. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 24, 2019, 10:02:16 AM EST

Trump 2019c. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 8, 2019, 8:59:10 AM EST

Trump 2019d. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 23, 2019, 12:52:46 PM EST

Trump 2019e. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 10, 2019, 1:27:03 PM EST

Trump 2019f. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 11, 2019, 7:41:49 AM EST

Trump 2019g. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 20, 2019, 8:49:13 AM EST

Trump 2019h. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, February 22, 2019, 9:55:25 AM EST

Trump 2020a. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 1, 2020, 2:20:37 PM EST

Trump 2020b. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 2, 2020, 2:12:47 PM EST

Trump 2020c. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 9, 2020, 7:38:59 PM EST

Trump 2020d. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 11, 2020, 8:35:55 AM EST

Trump 2020e. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 14, 2020, 4:24:15 PM EST

Trump 2020f. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 27, 2020, 10:45:35 AM EST

Trump 2020g. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 14, 2020, 11:51:46 PM EST

Trump 2020h. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 21, 2020, 6:13:41 PM EST

Trump 2020i. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, December 16, 2020, 10:06:47 AM EST

Trump 2020j. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 15, 2020, 7:25:14 AM EST

Trump 2020k. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, December 6, 2020, 1:49:13 PM EST

Trump 2020l. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 12, 2020, 11:10:18 AM EST

Trump 2020m. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, November 28, 2020, 2:48:23 PM EST

Trump 2020n. Donald J. Trump, Twitter, December 30, 2020, 4:27:38 PM EST

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Notes

[1] A note on terminology: I favor the term "right-wing media" over the more common "conservative media" in recognition of the contested nature of the term "conservative" in the Trump years. Still, my understanding of right-wing media is similar to the definition provided by Nadler and Bauer (2020a, 6): "forms of media production, circulation, consumption, or identification by institutions and actors who are associated with the extended infrastructure of or discourse produced by the modern conservative movement in the United States." The definition is wide enough to include both traditional media outlets, such as the *Wall Street Journal* or *National Review*, and alternative outlets (for example, Rush Limbaugh's talk radio show or the controversial online outlet *Breitbart*).

The "China Virus" Meme and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Henna-Riikka Pennanen
henna-riikka.pennanen [a] utu.fi
PhD
The John Morton Center for North American Studies
University of Turku

In this essay, I argue that in the run-up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, "China virus" became a meme that connected traditional media spaces, online spaces, and policy spaces. The template for the meme was created by repeating terminology that fixed a link between SARS-CoV-2 (and its attendant disease COVID-19) and China. I trace the co-production and circulation of the meme within the modern-day version of a conservative echo chamber, comprising the President, his administration, Fox News hosts, Republican politicians, informal Trump advisers, and Trump supporters. As the meme reverberated through the echo chamber, it was assigned the function of an identity marker and the connotation of an "irresponsible China," which ultimately built toward the national security narrative of China as a threat. The meme was also employed in two election strategies: the domestic policy of blaming China and the foreign policy of tough-on-China. Outside the echo chamber, however, the China virus meme was seen to function as a means of pandemic othering, and it connoted the return of the "yellow peril."

The "China Virus" Meme and the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Through 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic dominated people's lives and commandeered the mediascape. The pandemic and the presidential election composed two "intense, yearlong storylines" in the news in the United States (Mitchell et al. 2021, 21). In this essay, I focus on the controversy that intersected both of these storylines: the naming of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus as the "China virus." I argue that the "China virus" *terminology* became a *meme* that was co-produced and circulated—partly, but not exclusively—in an *echo chamber* comprising the Trump administration, Fox News hosts, Republican politicians, informal Trump advisers, and Trump supporters.

Limor Shifman (2014, 7–8, italics in the original) defines memes as "(a) *a group of digital items sharing common characteristics* of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created *with awareness of each other*; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed *via the Internet by many users*." Accordingly, the "China virus" terminology provided the shared form, or the template of the meme, which was then discursively populated by shifting meanings, identities, and functions. Here, "China virus" terminology refers to all variations of the term denoting the Chinese origins of the coronavirus and its attendant disease. Whether the terms in use were, for example, the "Wuhan virus" or the "Chinese Plaque," I

consider these as variations of one and the same "China virus" meme template. While Shifman analyzes memes as socially constructed discourses traveling the internet, the "China virus" meme traversed and connected online spaces as well as traditional media spaces and policy spaces. As I will show in this essay, the meme was circulated, repeated, mimicked, and modified in the run-up to the election. It became the cornerstone of Trump administration's COVID-19 response, was adopted as an identity marker, functioned as part of Trump's presidential election strategy, and formed a building block of the emerging national security narrative of China as a threat. Effectively, the meme coalesced domestic and foreign policy.

The essay is based on an analysis of selected online, media, and policy sources from 2020.[i] I have identified and selected tweets from Donald Trump's now defunct Twitter feed, episodes from prominent Fox News programs,[ii] and speeches made by Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in which the "China virus" terminology, COVID-19, and China were addressed.

Making of the Meme

By the end of December 2019, news about a new infectious disease in the city of Wuhan, China, began to make the rounds worldwide. In January 2020, the disease was confirmed as being caused by a novel coronavirus, and experts alerted the world about the potential outbreak of a pandemic. Trump's trade advisor, Peter Navarro, sounded an alarm in his January 29 memo to the National Security Council, noting that the coronavirus could reach the United States and cost countless of lives and dollars (Osterholm and Olshaker 2020, 16). Two days later, the World Health Organization (WHO 2020a) declared "a public health emergency of international concern over the global outbreak of novel coronavirus," and on March 11, the WHO (2020c) characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic. By that time, Navarro's predictions had already materialized, and 24 U.S. states had declared a state of emergency over COVID-19 (Razek 2020).

Over the spring, the "China virus" terminology was notably embraced on Fox News. Media Matters for America—a politically left-leaning media watchdog organization—noted that from January to March, "Fox News personalities and their guests have used derogatory language to describe the disease 144 times" (Savillo 2020). Tucker Carlson, Sean Hannity, and Laura Ingraham, in particular, were prolific users of different variations of the terms "Wuhan virus" and "Chinese virus". However, before the WHO (2020b) issued COVID-19 as the official name for the disease on February 11, the term "Wuhan Coronavirus" also appeared on CNN, for example (Provalis Research 2020).

The terminology was also adopted by President Trump, as was evident on his communication platform of choice—Twitter. A search for the term "virus" in Trump's Twitter feed reveals that in the early months of 2020, he tended to refer to "Coronavirus" and "CoronaVirus." The President muddled the conceptual distinction between the virus and the attendant disease and referred to both as "covid,"[iii] especially in conjunction with mentions to "Covid Relief Bill" or "Covid drugs." Occasionally, he clarified that by "COVID-19" he meant the "China Virus" (e.g., on July 7). Then, during and after March, President Trump gravitated more and more toward the terms "Chinese Virus" and "China Virus" in his tweets.[iv] In May, the President adopted another variation: "the Plague,"[v] and used it repeatedly thereafter.

The similarity between the vocabularies of President Trump and Fox News hosts was hardly a coincidence. In fact, Matthew Gertz (2018) from Media Matters claims that during Trump's presidency, there existed a "Trump–Fox Feedback Loop" that covered a wide variety of topics. Gertz posits that this loop was formed in stages: first, Trump live-tweeted Fox News programs; second, his tweets upended the news cycle for the rest of the day; and third, the tweets were then reported on Fox News. Along similar lines, Brian Stelter characterized the relationship as symbiotic, in which "Trump props up the network and the network props up Trump" (Stelter 2020, 23).

While the idea of the Trump–Fox loop is informative for understanding how the "China virus" meme was co-produced, how it traveled, and what discursive contents were attached to it, in this essay I will show that at times the loop broke down and that the meme was anything but exclusive to it. Representatives of the Trump administration, the Republican Party, and the conservative media and movement all participated in the production and circulation of the meme. And yet, so did news outlets and political actors with no connections to the loop; by criticizing the meme, they participated in assigning meanings and functions to it. Perhaps more instructive would be to view the Trump–Fox loop as part of an echo chamber—a modern-day extension or modification of the conservative echo chamber that was created by the conservative media in the 1990s and 2000s (Jamieson and Cappella 2010). Like its earlier conservative predecessor, the echo chamber of 2020 represented "homogenous clustering" (Breuer and Johnston 2019, 435) or a space in which individuals are exposed to only like-minded people and information that is ideologically consonant and confirms their pre-existing opinions (Kitchens et al. 2020, 1622).

In the early spring, the President and some Fox News hosts contended that the new coronavirus was not a threat, and there was no need to foment panic or hysteria (Chiu 2020a; Shephard 2020). Among the main news outlets, Fox News stood out in terms of the tendency of its hosts to characterize the threat of the pandemic as overstated (Provalis Research 2020). Yet, some actors within the echo chamber contested this line of thought. Tucker Carlson (2020a), for example, emphasized the seriousness of the COVID-19 threat very early on in his opening monologues. He criticized both sides of the political aisle for not taking proper action to counter the threat, but especially those who claimed that the virus was not a serious problem. Carlson conjectured that maybe these people did not know any better, or maybe it was because of the presidential and congressional elections that were coming up. Whatever the reason, he concluded, they were wrong: "The Chinese coronavirus is a major event. It will affect your life. And by the way, it's definitely not just the flu" (Carlson 2020a). Similarly, Maria Bartiromo and Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR)—a political Trump ally and frequent Fox News guest—raised the alarm over the virus (Fordham 2020).

The echo chamber sent mixed messages on the gravity of the issue and on how to respond to the pandemic. This was reflected in the reactions of the Trump and Fox News audiences. Some reacted by wearing a protective mask, or by practicing social distancing, while others eschewed all COVID measures. In fact, one study showed that Tucker Carlson's audience took protective measures against the virus "much earlier than Hannity viewers" (Sullivan 2020b). However, as March progressed, Trump changed his tone. On March 18, Trump tweeted that he had "always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously" and had done "a very good job from the beginning." This turnaround has been largely attributed to the influence of Tucker Carlson (Shephard 2020; Sullivan 2020a). Other Fox News hosts fell in line around the same time. Sean Hannity claimed that the news network had been telling their viewers "from day one" that the "virus is serious" (Gabbatt 2020).

In trying to make sense of COVID-19 and debating the nation's response to it, the template of the meme was slowly forged through repetition of "China virus" terminology. And by March, the meme was in full circulation.

The (Identity) Politics of Naming

Once the template of the meme had been established, it quickly stirred controversy. Headlines in, for example, the *New York Times* (Rogers et al. 2020), NBC (Yam 2020a), *Vox* (Scott 2020a), the *Washington Post* (Chiu 2020b), and CNN (Filipovic 2020) criticized the President's use of the "China virus" terminology, while Media Matters (Savillo 2020) took aim at Fox News. The meme was condemned for its linkages to xenophobia, racism, and anti-Asian bigotry. According to reports compiled and published by the Stop AAPI

(Asian American Pacific Islander) Hate Reporting Center, people of Chinese background—and people of Asian background in general—faced verbal harassment, shunning, physical assaults, and potential civil rights violations in connection with COVID-19 (Stop AAPI Hate 2020a). Anti-Asian American discrimination was very real and nationwide in the United States during the pandemic.

President Trump paused at the criticism. In a press briefing on March 24, he pledged his support for U.S. citizens with Asian heritage (MSNBC 2020). Trump chose not to use the term "Chinese virus" in the briefing. He explained his decision later that day in an interview with Bill Hemmer on Fox News: "You know, everyone knows it came from China, but I decided we shouldn't make any more of a big deal out of it" (Fox News 2020c). The pause, however, was short-lived. On March 25, he congratulated his administration in a tweet for getting "great reviews on our handling of Covid 19, sometimes referred to as the China Virus."

Meanwhile, in his opening monologues, Tucker Carlson (2020b) insisted on using the "China virus" terminology and denounced other alternatives as dangerous euphemisms at a time when "accuracy and clear language in the way you talk about the threat" was essential. He claimed that the risks of the virus had gone unheeded because the situation had been politicized with the controversy on naming:

> One of the reasons that Americans may have missed the significance of this virus is because unfortunately, it came enmeshed with politics. On television, talking heads have wasted hours upon valuable hours yammering not about the virus and its potential victims, but how it is racist to tie the coronavirus to China, where it came from. (Carlson 2020b)

Similarly, Sean Hannity accused the "media mob" of politicizing the issue at a time when a unified response was most called for (Fox News 2020b). According to a text analysis comparing transcripts of different television news broadcasts, blaming the media and Democrats for politicizing the COVID-19 was a distinctly Fox News theme (Provalis Research 2020).

Fox News hosts and President Trump had two main lines of defense against the criticism they faced. The first line was encapsulated by Maria Bartiromo, who in her March interview with Senator Cotton claimed that the virus originated in China, and hence the term "Chinese virus" was perfectly applicable. Senator Cotton agreed. (Blitzer 2020a). For both Fox News hosts and President Trump, this line was fortified by the point that there are a host of viruses and diseases named after their place of origin (Fox News 2020b; 2020c). Persisting in using the term "Chinese virus" on grounds that it came from China ignored the best practices for naming human infectious diseases issued by the WHO years earlier. The 2015 WHO guidelines urged the creation and employment of "scientifically sound and socially acceptable" names that would not incur "negative effects on nations, economies and people." The guidelines were to apply to new diseases only. Thus, although older, established names, such as "swine flu" and "Middle East Respiratory Syndrome," clearly stigmatized particular economic sectors and communities, the WHO had no intention of changing or censuring those names. (WHO 2015.)

In light of earlier naming practices, Hannity declared that it was an "insane talking point," propagated by the "social justice warriors in the media mob," to claim that "using the word China or Wuhan virus to describe the Wuhan virus is racist" (Fox News 2020b). Hannity's comment touched upon the second line of defense: to dismiss the criticism as identity politics. Carlson (2020b), for example, pleaded that such a moment of crisis was not the "time to indulge in the lowest and dumbest kind of identity politics". Conservative or right-wing critique of identity politics is nothing new (Scott 2020b). Yet, while Fox News hosts and President Trump accused the media and the left of identity politics, they at the same time forged the "China virus" meme into a marker for political identity. The President himself urged his supporters at a rally to refrain from using the term "coronavirus," because "corona" sounds like a beautiful place in Italy.

Instead, he argued his supporters should opt for the term "China virus," which "the radical left" refused to use (CNBC TV18 2020). In other words, the "China virus" meme was used as a deliberate taunt to liberals and progressives. The "China virus" meme functioned as a symbol for standing with President Trump, essentially not that different from wearing a red Make America Great Again hat.

The "China virus" meme firmly established what the Trump camp was not (i.e., radical, left-wing Democrats), suggesting that they were the exact opposite (i.e., conservative, right-wing Republicans). This speaks to Corey Robin's (2011) argument that conservatism is forged in reaction and negation. Using the meme prompted a backlash, to which the 2020 echo chamber reacted by accusing the critics of making the naming of the virus about identity politics. At the same time, they embraced their own form of identity politics, and employed the meme to drive home the distinction between themselves and the critics.

Blaming China

The Trump administration defended the "China virus" terminology by claiming that it was not targeted at U.S. citizens with Asian heritage, but rather it was "an indictment of China for letting the virus get here" (Yam 2020b). Thus, the administration employed the "China virus" meme to blame China for the outbreak of the pandemic. This, I would claim, was an intentional election tactic, purported to counter domestic criticism over the administration's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before President Trump fully embraced the "China virus" terminology, he utilized the words "Coronavirus" and "CoronaVirus," most notably in tweets in which he emphasized the good relations and cooperation between the United States and China. For example, on March 23, Trump tweeted about having a conversation with Xi Jinping, the President of the People's Republic of China, discussing "in great detail the CoronaVirus," and added that the U.S. was working closely with China on the issue. Soon, however, the President's tweets, speeches, and interviews flipped, and criticism of the Democrats and the media playing identity politics was joined with criticism of China. "Blame China" was a strategy put forward in a memo sent by the National Republican Senatorial Committee to the Republican campaigns. The memo, dated April 17, urged Republican candidates to evade questions on the President's handling of the pandemic, except for the "China Travel Ban" he issued on January 31. Instead, the memo advised them to direct their attention to China, arguing that "Coronavirus was a Chinese hit-and-run followed by a cover-up that cost thousands of lives". If questions of racism arose, those were to be rejected by assuring that "No one is blaming Chinese Americans" (Isenstadt 2020).

In March, Trump was still hesitant, granting in a press conference that "I don't know if you'd say China is to blame" (Chiu 2020a). And on April 19, he mused in a press briefing that the spread of the virus may have been a mistake on the part of the Chinese, but adding, "if they were knowingly responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences" (Rourke 2020). However, by April 28, he was faithfully following the script set out in the memo and laid the blame for the coronavirus outbreak squarely on China (Davidson and Rourke 2020). Again, in a Rose Garden speech in May, he stated that "China's cover-up of the Wuhan virus allowed the disease to spread all over the world, instigating a global pandemic" (White House 2020a). He reiterated the theme on Fox News (Olson 2020) and took his "blame China" message to the world stage as well. In September, he addressed the United Nations General Assembly and faulted the Chinese government and the WHO for the worldwide spread of the virus—which he again termed the "China virus" (White House 2020b).

Fox News hosts had turned to blame-shifting well before the campaign memo. On March 18, the same day that newspaper headlines were deploring the use of the "China virus" term, Tucker Carlson claimed that the pandemic had happened only "because China hid the truth" from the rest of the world (Fox News

2020a). Laura Ingraham stated that the Chinese had "blood on their hands" (Garcia 2020). Sean Hannity (Fox News 2020b) sent "a very serious message for China's hostile dictatorship," blaming their "months-long cover-up" for "death and destruction and carnage all over the world". He also praised the President's travel ban, defining it as a decision that bought time and saved "countless thousands of Americans from being exposed" to the virus, just as the Republican campaign memo later advised.

At first, utilizing the "China virus" meme to blame China may have been a simple tactic of blame-shifting to counter any criticism of Trump administration's COVID-19 response in the run-up to the election. But it tapped into a wider negative sentiment regarding China that was shared by some Trump administration officials, the president's political allies, and Fox News hosts—and increasingly also the public, as shortly after the pandemic outbreak, the share of especially Republicans who considered China an "enemy" rose dramatically (Bruce 2020).

The "China Threat" Narrative

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had issued an alarm over China in his speech at the Hudson Institute in 2019, describing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as "truly hostile to the United States and our values" and China as a national security risk (Pompeo 2019). Then, in March 2020, he repeated that the CCP posed a "substantial threat to our health and way of life," which now "the Wuhan virus outbreak clearly has demonstrated" (Pompeo 2020c). Pompeo also appeared on Fox News, talking through the Trump Administration's response to the pandemic and slamming China for suppressing information and spreading disinformation (e.g., Blitzer 2020b; Fox News 2020b). Pompeo was an avid propagator of the "China virus" meme, using the term "Wuhan Virus" in his speeches and tweets (see, e.g., Pompeo 2020b).

Maria Bartiromo, Tucker Carlson, Senator Cotton, and Peter Navarro were also long-time critics of China and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in particular. Bartiromo, for example, featured in a YouTube clip presented by the Committee on the Present Danger: China—an interest group established in 2019, with former Trump advisor Steve Bannon as one of its founding members. In the clip, she interviewed Attorney General William Barr and characterized the CCP as rich, powerful, dangerous, and an enemy of the United States (Committee on the Present Danger China 2020). Carlson has criticized China for years (Shephard 2020), and Senator Cotton concluded in 2019 that China was building a "new evil empire" (Gehrke 2019). Navarro has built much of his literary career on composing wake-up calls to people ignoring the threat posed by China, such as *The Coming China Wars: Where They Will Be Fought and How They Can Be Won* (2006) and *Death by China: Confronting the Dragon—A Global Call to Action* (2011). All four actors sounded an early alarm over COVID-19, perhaps precisely because it was associated with China. And then they made this connection explicit. In an interview with Maria Bartiromo, Senator Cotton argued that the unleashing of COVID-19 was a "deliberate and conscious choice by the Chinese communist leadership, because they didn't want to see their relative power and standing in the world decline" (Cotton 2020). Carlson dubbed China a "dangerous Cold War adversary" (Carlson 2020c) and repeatedly claimed that COVID-19 is "part of a larger geopolitical struggle for control of the world" that China is determined to win (Carlson 2020d; 2020e). He warned that the Chinese perceive the pandemic as a "beginning of a new Chinese century" (Halon 2020).

Adam Breuer and Alastair Iain Johnston (2019) have introduced the idea that memes are also smaller components of narratives. Breuer and Johnston explain that in the social and online media era, the story arc of a narrative "is composed of short discrete items (text and/or images) that users of the meme connect to make a coherent story (or sub-narrative). Mutually consistent combinations of these sub-narratives help create a master narrative." In other words, memes are discursive building blocks of sub-narratives—"the

elements that ensure narratives propagate and spread"—and, in turn, sub-narratives are the building blocks of a master narrative. All three do not necessarily emerge simultaneously. Thus, we can have a meme not yet connected to a sub-narrative, or a sub-narrative, only later connected to an emerging master narrative. (Breuer and Johnston 2019, 431–33.) Narratives are vital for society and politics. As Jelena Subotić (2016, 612) notes, through narratives people make sense of the world and their own role in the world. Narratives are manipulated, "highly selective and purposefully constructed," and they grant "ideological and emotional value to what we hear and how we choose to act on that knowledge" (Subotić 2016, 612–13).

Following Breuer and Johnston (2019), I argue that the "China virus" meme was a component of a (master) national security narrative of China as a threat (see, e.g., Pan 2015; Turner 2013; Yuan and Fu 2020). The meme added the connotation of China as an irresponsible international actor that was culpable of failing to handle the virus in its initial phase, suppressing vital information, lying and spreading disinformation, threatening to sever critical supply lines, and manipulating the international media. Such claims were frequently made by Carlson, and the silver lining of the pandemic, he claimed, was that now the whole U.S. saw clearly that China was "an imminent threat" (Carlson 2020b; 2020c; 2020d). "Irresponsible China" was joined with other sub-narratives building up to the "China threat." These were most notably propagated by Mike Pompeo. Pompeo suggested that China was striving for hegemony; conducting an aggressive military build-up; challenging the rules, laws, and norms of the international order; and "cheating" in the economic and trade realm (Pompeo 2020a; 2020c; 2020d). In addition to these geopolitical storylines, Pompeo claimed that the Chinese Communist Party in power was ideologically alien to the U.S.: a totalitarian, repressive, and human-rights-abusing regime (Pompeo 2020c; 2020d). Some of these sub-narratives were reiterated also, for example, by Tucker Carlson (2020d; 2020e; Halon 2020).

During the early phase of the pandemic, President Trump appears to have wavered over employing the "China virus" meme to promote the "China threat" narrative, just as he wavered over blaming China for the virus. At the time, his focus was on the Phase One Trade Deal and cooperation with China over COVID-19. Eventually, however, he jumped on the bandwagon. In an interview with Maria Bartiromo in August, Trump explained: "It's before plague and after plague. Right now, I view China differently than I did before plague" (Conklin 2020). The significance of national security narratives is that they provide grounds for legitimization of certain policy options and grounds for mobilization and action (Yuan and Fu 2020, 421, 426). Indeed, by the time of the August interview with Bartiromo, Trump's foreign policy actions had aligned with some of the "China threat" sub-narratives: the President had signed executive orders banning U.S. companies from doing business with TikTok and WeChat and ending preferential economic treatment for Hong Kong, and he was issuing sanctions relating to China's treatment of Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Conklin 2020; White House 2020a).

The idea of an "irresponsible China" in conjunction with COVID-19 was shared well beyond the echo chamber. Observers of international politics commonly criticized China for being slow to report the COVID-19 outbreak, for lacking transparency, and for refusing to cooperate with foreign scientists (see, e.g., Patrick 2020, 4, 49). However, the Trump–Fox loop linked that discussion directly to the presidential election. Hannity, for example, interviewed President Trump's informal China advisor, Michael Pillsbury of the Hudson Institute, who made the claim that China was fueling criticism of Trump's handling of the coronavirus because they wanted Joe Biden to become the next president (Fox News 2020b). The same talking points were later mouthed by President Trump. In late April, Trump claimed in an interview that "China will do anything they can to have me lose this race," including using the coronavirus situation to meddle in his reelection bid (Holland 2020).

Thus, through the "China virus" meme, domestic and foreign politics became conjoined. This was reflected in an ensuing contest between Trump and Biden over who was "tough" and who was "weak" on China

when it came to a host of issues, ranging from holding China accountable for the pandemic to policies for countering the perceived "China threat" (Kessler 2020; NPR 2020). For Trump and Republicans, the "China virus" meme functioned as a sign of their "toughness". It should be noted, however, that "tough on China" was hardly a new election tactic. For the past two decades, both Republican and Democratic congressional candidates have blasted China and attacked their opponents for being "soft" on China (Wichowsky and Chen Weiss 2021), and the same goes for presidential candidates on the campaign trail (Chang 2015, 244–47).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that in 2020 the "China virus" became a meme that seamlessly connected traditional media spaces, online spaces, and policy spaces. The template for it was produced by repeating terminology that fixed a link between SARS-CoV-2 (and its attendant disease COVID-19) and China.

Reverberating through the 2020 edition of a conservative echo chamber, the meme was assigned multiple meanings: most notably it connoted the irresponsibility of China in global politics and ultimately it functioned as a building block for a national security narrative of China as a threat. The meme was also assigned multiple other functions. The meme was employed in two intertwined election strategies: blaming China for originating the virus—in order to counter criticism of the Trump administration's COVID-19 response—and advocating for a tough-on-China foreign policy. Even in its template form, devoid of any additional discursive elements besides the claim that the pandemic had Chinese origins, the meme also functioned as an identity marker, distinguishing President Trump and his supporters from the "radical, left-wing social justice warriors." To be sure, the national security narrative of the "China threat" was also about identity. And just like the identity of Republicans, this identity was a negation of *the other* it portrayed.

In encountering the global pandemic, the Trump-Fox loop was initially in disarray. While it soon aligned, weaponizing the "China virus" meme to win the presidential election as well as the great power competition against China, outside the loop and the echo chamber the meme was met with sharp criticism. Critics argued that the racialized and stigmatizing language of the "China virus" played a distinctive role in discrimination, noting that "the history of Asian Americans in the U.S. is dotted with evidence showing that such rhetoric has laid the groundwork for violence and shameful policies" (Yam 2020b). Effectively, the "China virus" meme functioned as a means of pandemic othering, or designating a specific—often marginalized—group as a source to blame and avoid during a pandemic (Dionne and Turkmen 2020).

The Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center (2020b) also connected the "China virus" meme with the "return of the 'Yellow Peril.'" In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. and Europe, the "yellow peril" was imagined as not one but a series of threats emanating from the "yellow races": a military and naval threat of Japan (or Japan and China combined); a global commercial and industrial threat of the "westernized East"; and a domestic U.S. threat of Chinese immigrants "underliving" U.S. laborers and tainting the "civilized" society (Pennanen 2020, 70–71). One specific variation of the "China virus" meme firmly entangled the present with past instances of pandemic othering and racial fears of the "yellow peril." Once the President started tweeting about the "China Plague" (e.g., October 12, 2020; November 16, 2020), the immediate association was with the outbreak of the bubonic plague in Chinatown in San Francisco in 1900–1904. Labeled as the "Chinese plague," the outbreak was a culmination of the Sinophobia and anti-Chinese discrimination prevalent in California at the time, and it fixed a connection between Chinese heritage and disease (Urbansky 2019, 77, 80).

As the "China virus" meme moved beyond the echo chamber, it was assigned wholly different functions and meanings from those assigned within. In the end, the Trump–Fox loop could construct, propagate, and manipulate a meme, but the inherent dynamism of the meme form ensured that they could not control and dominate it.

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Notes

1 All the references to Donald Trump's tweets in this essay are from the online archive of his Twitter account: https://factba.se/trump/topic/twitter.

2 The programs include *Hannity*, *Sunday Morning Futures with Maria Bartiromo*, *The Ingraham Angle*, and *Tucker Carlson Tonight*. When the citation to the program episodes is made to an online article, not to a stand-alone video clip, the reference is made first to the video clip embedded in the article and only secondly to the text, which is usually a summary or a transcript of the episode.

3 A search for the term "covid" in President Trump's original tweets in 2020 reveals that it was used on the following dates:

Term: covid
Mar: 14 (multiple), 23, 31
Apr: 4, 13, 21, 22 (multiple)
May: 16, 24, 25, 27 (multiple)
Jun: 9, 15, 22
Jul: 6, 7
Aug: 3, 23
Oct: 1, 2, 5, 6 (multiple), 9, 12, 19, 22, 23, 26, 27 (multiple), 28, 30
Nov: 1, 14, 19, 21 (multiple)
Dec: 27

4 **A search for the term "virus" in President Trump's original tweets in 2020 shows that he used the terms "virus," "coronavirus," "Chinese virus," and "China virus." Here are the dates on which he used the terms:**

Term: virus, coronavirus	Term: Chinese virus, China virus
Jan: 27 Feb: 7, 25 Mar: 19, 23 (multiple), 27 (multiple), 29, 30 Apr: 6, 17 May: 3, 10, 20	Mar: 16, 17, 18 (multiple), 21, 22, 25 Jul: 5, 6 (multiple), 7, 8, 20, 21, 26, 28, 30 Aug: 2, 3 (multiple), 7 (multiple) Sep: 3 (multiple), 7, 8 (multiple), 18, 30 Oct: 7, 13, 26 Nov: 16 Dec: 6, 9, 18, 19, 24, 26, 29

[5](#) **A search for "plague" in President Trump's original tweets in 2020 yields the following dates when he used the term:**

Term: plague
May: 2, 3, 5, 13, 16, 17, 20 Aug: 11, Sep: 16 Oct: 3, 5, 7, 12 (multiple), 21 Nov: 16

The President, the Hero: Politics of Strength, Health, and Success surrounding Donald Trump's COVID-19 Infection

Pekka M. Kolehmainen
pmkole [a] utu.fi
PhD, post-doctoral researcher
The John Morton Center for North American Studies
University of Turku

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This article examines Donald Trump's COVID infection as a media event where the President and his supporters in right-leaning media participated in a mediated performance, seeking to present their own interpretation as the dominant narrative. I trace how the President and his supporters seized on the opportunity to narrativize Trump's COVID-19 infection for the purpose of political messaging in the 2020 election. Specifically, I contextualize the ideological narratives produced by Trump and his allies within the larger context of U.S. conservatism and its relationship to the politics of strength, health, and success. I argue that the media performance by the President and his supporters looked to elevate Trump as a hero figure, with his infection representing a sacrifice that he had undertaken for the sake of the nation.

Introduction

With a veneer of heroism, President Donald J. Trump returned to the White House on October 5, 2020, after a brief hospitalization following his contracting of COVID-19. To celebrate his return, the President shared a video on his (now-defunct) Twitter account, which depicted the occasion with dramatic flair. Accompanied by an epic orchestral score, a helicopter soars through the air past the Washington Monument and lands on the White House lawn. There is a hint of a slow-motion effect as its wheels touch the ground, to emphasize the import of the moment. Donald Trump emerges and the music soars even higher as the President ascends to the balcony of the White House and salutes the departing helicopter (The Telegraph 2020a). The video evokes the sentiment of a hero returning from conflict, projecting an air of both strength and sacrifice. He is portrayed as returning alone, despite the fact that his wife and a number of staff members were also diagnosed with COVID-19 at the same time.

This article examines Donald Trump's COVID-19 infection as a media event where the President and his supporters in right-leaning media sources engaged in a mediated performance, seeking to implement their own interpretation of the event as the dominant narrative. While I observe some larger trends in the reporting and commentating of Trump's infection, the main analytical focus is on the President and his supporters in order to question how they seized the narrativization of the event and rebuked the messaging of his political opponents. This kind of narrativization seeks to turn political events into acts in a melodrama, bestowing them with emotionally charged meanings often drawn from the language of popular culture (Anker 2014, 2–4). In these narratives, presidents and political leaders are given the mantle of the hero, symbolizing salvation and triumph to the nation (Alexander 2010, 63–87; Anker 2014, 187). For Trump's infection, I am particularly interested in how the event was connected to politics of strength, which has been instrumental to Trump's self-portrayal across his political career (Martin 2021; Kellner 2016, 22). I will further delineate how performing politics of strength around COVID-19 draws from larger cultural formulations of health and disease and the contingent meanings that are embedded in seeing someone as either healthy or sick (Ahlbeck and Oinas 2012; Ahlbeck et al. 2021).

Trump's COVID-19 infection and its narrativization across media is a telling example of certain ideological media dynamics that surrounded the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The Trump administration's failure in dealing with the pandemic had become one of the notable sore points of his presidency. At the time of Trump's infection, the pandemic death toll in the U.S. surpassed 210,000, with nearly 7.5 million infected (Neuman 2020). In this article, I focus on how the President and his supporters seized the opportunity to frame his COVID-19 infection for the purposes of political messaging. For this, I explore Trump-friendly media sources from different facets of what Andrew Chadwick (2013) has called the "Hybrid Media System," comprising "traditional" media as well as grassroots online media, which oftentimes feed into one another. From the more traditional right-leaning media, I explore reactions on Fox News and in the *Wall Street Journal*. In the more alternative media sphere, I have examined the right-wing site *Daily Wire* and its founder Ben Shapiro's YouTube channel, former Trump-strategist Steve Bannon's podcast *War Room: Pandemic*, and the outputs of the prominent right-wing political cartoonist Ben Garrison. These chosen sources represent different styles and levels of media influence leveraged by right-wing sources on the topic. I have traced the specific day-by-day timeframe of Trump's infection, from the news first breaking in the early hours of Friday, October 2, to Trump's return on Monday, October 5, and the immediate aftermath on October 8 when Trump declared (without any medical evidence) that he was no longer contagious (O'Donnell 2020). This timeframe is intended to cover the immediate reactions in the media, first by Trump's supporters over the period of his hospitalization and then by the President himself upon his return.

To further analyze how meaning was constructed through the performance of politics of strength around Trump's infection, I examine the ideological connotations of the used narratives in relation to the larger context of U.S. conservatism. I acknowledge that Trump's classification as a "conservative" is a topic that has generated heated debate in both domains of everyday politics and their scholarly study (Barber and Pope 2019). While drawing deeply on some historical elements of U.S. conservatism—the politics of resentment and the antagonisms of the culture wars—the President has decidedly differed from prevalent orthodoxies in other ways (Szefel 2018; Fawcett 2020). Similarly, one can question whether Trump himself holds any genuine political ideology.

However, some scholars have highlighted the extent to which Trump has in fact conformed to and followed certain longer lineages in U.S. conservatism. For instance, political theorist Corey Robin (2018, 4) has conceived of conservatism as being primarily about reaction: the "mediation on—and the theoretical rendition of—the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back." This approach sees conservatism as tied more to its general ideational attitude toward change—that is, both

resisting further societal change and implementing a counterrevolutionary program that would return society to an imagined prior state—than the specific policy proposals it might become historically enmeshed with. In a similar fashion, Lawrence Glickman (2019, 4) has written about the importance of "elite victimization," where members of a political elite depict themselves as the suffering underdogs of modern culture. Along the same lines, Michael Kimmel (2017, 21–25) has described the reactionary animosity that buoyed Trump's political ascendancy as "aggrieved entitlement," namely, the belief of the "downwardly mobile middle class" that they are owed more than they are getting from the contemporary society (see also Kelly 2020). Thus, whether Trump is a knowing ideological actor or not can be regarded as largely irrelevant when it comes to studying the ways in which his *actions* have channeled these basic tenets of U.S. conservatism.

Exploring the event as a form of mediated performance allows me to analyze the discrete ways in which various parties look to constitute and generate meaning through communicative actions taken in diffuse parts of the media system (Bachmann-Medic 2016, 73–74). The approach of performativity places special emphasis on the way in which cultural and political meaning is actively created by types of staging and the utterances that are made (Bachmann-Medic 2016, 75–76; Bell 2007). Thus, politics likewise becomes a matter of competing performances, which seek to instill as normative and commonsensical certain ways of understanding events (Alexander 2010). The approach draws on the linguistic theories of J. L. Austin, who has emphasized how speech can be regarded as a form of action, thus leading to the close relation between political speech and political action (Pocock 2009, 33–50; Bell 2007, 12–16). The link between everyday political action and the wider phenomenon of ideology can be forged by classifying the basic modes of performance being utilized. For instance, Michael Freeden (2009, 142) has emphasized that the functioning of ideology occurs by taking over the dimensions of expression that can be politically used around specific subjects. Ideology succeeds by embedding its own worldview within an existing facet of how certain phenomena are conceived in society.

Media serves as both the site and a participant in the performances being enacted. In the study of performativity, the stages and platforms have recurringly been seen as gaining agential quality in their own right (Leeker 2017). In the case of Donald Trump, media became a particularly contested terrain. His presidency was notorious for its open antagonism toward news media and Trump's expressed preference of alternative media platforms—the most notable being Twitter until his ban on January 8, 2021—as a means to directly reach his target constituencies while bypassing the more established media enterprises (Ott and Dickinson 2019). U.S. conservatives were historically keen to seize on alternative media developments, as it allowed them to create their own networks beyond the gatekeepers they considered to be ideologically motivated. These range from more traditional media sources, like Fox News and the *Wall Street Journal* to right-wing talk radio (Jamieson and Cappella 2010), to the entire blossoming "Alternative Influence Network" (Lewis 2018), online in the form of YouTube channels and podcasts. For this study, I have chosen a few notable representatives of both the more traditional right-wing media and the AIN who prominently commented on Trump's COVID-19 infection.

My approach here is largely chronological. I begin by examining the immediate reactions to the news of Trump's infection among his supporters. In this first step, Trump, being hospitalized, remains largely silent, the performance being instead enacted by his supporters in his absence. I explore these reactions and then use them as a platform to analyze more thoroughly the way in which Trump and his supporters employed the larger politics of health and strength. From there, I introduce Trump himself as he returned to the White House and used language—both spoken and cinematic—of heroism and sacrifice to frame COVID-19 as a personal matter rather than a collective issue facing the United States.

When the News First Broke

The news of Trump's COVID-19 infection broke in the early morning of October 2, 2020. Immediately, various figures across the right-wing media sphere were already looking to set the stage and the basic narrative tropes for the coming script. One example could be found on the conservative talk show Varney & Company, hosted by Stuart Varney, for the cable news channel Fox Business Network under the larger Fox News umbrella. On the show, Fox News contributor and political strategist Steve Hilton—himself the host of the program The Next Revolution on Fox News—suggested that due to the President's "resilience," the risk should be minimal, and that he could become "a metaphor for the recovery of the country" (Varney & Company 2020). This displayed the early workings of a narrative trope that would emerge and recur throughout the weekend: that Trump's infection was not just a question of individual health but symbolic of the struggles faced by the nation more broadly. The merging of the health of the President with the health of the nation was made concrete by the fact that he now faced the same illness that had brought the country to its knees. It also invoked an old form of heroic symbolism. Michael Rogin (1987, 4–5) reflects on this in relation to President Ronald Reagan's recovery from an attempted assassination, relating it to the medieval theology of the "King's Two Bodies," where the body of the king and the "body politic" become merged (see also Kantorowicz [1957] 2016).

Having forged the symbolic connection between the well-being of the President and the nation, Hilton proceeded to identify the future antagonists. He suggested that the responses he had seen on other media sources and social media had been "revolting" and "ghoulish." The reaction that Hilton cited by name was that of journalist Carl Bernstein, who had argued the same morning on CNN that Trump's infection came as a result of his own recklessness and negligence (Varney & Company 2020; Regan et al. 2020).

Thus, Trump's supporters seized on a prevalent ethical dilemma plaguing those commenting on the issue in the more liberal-leaning media: to what extent could the event be seen as Trump facing the consequences of his own actions—or inaction? The *Los Angeles Times* summed up the debate with a headline: "When Reagan Was Shot, Country Rallied Around, But He Hadn't Spent Months Downplaying Assassins" (Wilber 2020). *New York Times*' opinion columnist Frank Bruni (2020) admonished his own pettiness of having thought first about karma upon hearing the news, and *POLITICO*'s John F. Harris (2020) suggested that Trump's COVID-19 infection seemed like a type of cosmic joke. For the *New York Daily News*, Leonard Greene sought to delineate between the personal tragedy of the disease and the infection's political significance:

> Anyone who has ever wished this dreadful disease on President Trump is wrong. Period. Grow up. But now that the president, and his wife, have tested positive, now is the proper moment to observe how much in life is about timing—or what some might call karma, or just the cyclical nature of going around and coming around. (Greene 2020)

These kinds of sentiments marked the early response across much of the more liberal-leaning news media, as some grappled with the complex emotions of learning that Donald Trump—whom they considered responsible for the awful COVID-19 response of the United States—had contracted the disease. Trump's supporters used these media stories to demonstrate the moral failings of his opponents and the media at large. Along these lines, the editorial board of the right-wing leaning *Wall Street Journal* (2020) argued against the "karma explanation," claiming: "The shame is that America's media have peddled the fiction that every new Covid case represents a failure of policy. Their line now is that Mr. Trump's infection is karma because he didn't take the disease seriously enough." To respond to the news in any way other than sympathy was presented by the right-wing media as a moral failure. Meanwhile, COVID-19 was detached

from the realm of politics. It was suggested that it was "fiction" to relate infections to failures in policy, formulating coronavirus as a natural event that merely occurred.

There had been a distinct dissonance between Trump's prior public declarations regarding the coronavirus and his private sentiments. This dissonance was what his critics noted in their responses to his infection and what also fueled the media performances enacted by his supporters and himself. For instance, Bernstein's statement, which many of Trump's supporters found to be morally inappropriate, was based on the contrast between the President's general anti-mask politics and his personal demand that people around him wear masks (Regan et al. 2020). This likewise links to a general surface-level disconnect between Trump's policy approach toward the pandemic and his status as a known germaphobe, who reportedly dreads the possibility of getting sick. In March 2020, when the coronavirus was first making inroads in the United States, CNN even projected that Trump's germaphobe tendencies might *help* his White House in preparing for the pandemic (Liptak, Collins, and Diamond 2020). With the disconnect between Trump's personal stance toward disease and his publicly facing persona projected through the media, and with his supporters valorizing his "resilience" in the media, his infection became linked to the general politics of health as they had been deployed by Trump in the past.

Trump and the Politics of Health

Performing health was an important part of how Trump had set himself apart from his political adversaries. Already in the 2016 election, Trump had attacked Hillary Clinton via claims that she was ill and seeking to hide it (Kellner 2016, 82–83). Trump returned to the strategy in the 2020 election: less than a week before his infection, he had mocked Biden during a debate for his habit of wearing a mask: "I don't wear a mask like him. Every time you see him he's got a mask. He could be speaking 200 feet from it, and he shows up with the biggest mask I've ever seen" (Macaya et al. 2020). While Trump affirmed that he had nothing against masks when needed, his response called attention to Biden's strict adherence to wearing one. Both the conjured situation (Biden speaking to someone so far away that there was no chance of infection taking place) and the magnitude of Biden's reaction (the size of his mask as the "biggest") were used to depict the candidate's fear of the virus as comical and overblown. Trump's political performance drew on the narratives of both strength—him not needing a mask due to his health and vigor—and individualism—his deciding the need for a mask on case-to-case basis, as opposed to Biden's more collectivist adherence to group logic.

This was a sentiment that the right-wing commentator Ben Shapiro shared and elaborated on in his YouTube video responding to the news of Trump's infection. Shapiro argued that people on the right had a practical approach to safety measures regarding COVID-19, while people on the left were prone to a form of magical thinking:

> . . . where you're immune to the disease if you're protesting for racial justice, where if you run around and virtue signal about wearing a masking a hundred feet from other people, this somehow makes you immune to the disease, . . . there is this sort of talismanic worship of particular modes of discussing this disease. (Shapiro 2020)

Shapiro depicted a gap between people having policy discussions about the best practices for tackling the COVID-19 situation and the President's left-wing critics, whom he saw as engaged in a form of superstition where the disease was so thoroughly politicized that correct political causes were enough to deter its spread (Shapiro 2020).

Shapiro linked the COVID-19 debate to the concept of "virtue signaling," which in the right-wing media sphere has arisen as a common phrase used to dismiss the political convictions of their ideological opponents. The concept sees the exclamation of political or social ideals as a collectivist form of peer pressure and intragroup communication, where individual's politics do not stem from genuine convictions but rather from a desire to be seen as righteous by one's peers (McClay 2018). Without using the phrase directly, this was essentially the bulk of Trump's criticism toward Biden's use of a face mask: that it was not motivated by genuine concerns or needs of the occasion, but rather masks were used as a communicative tool to demonstrate Biden's adherence to a specific ideological position, symbolized in the usage of masks. It drew on a much larger phenomenon of the COVID-19 era, where masks—or, more specifically, often the refusal to wear one—became virulent political actions of ideological symbolism in themselves. As noted by Jack Bratich (2021, 258), the anti-mask sentiments (seemingly) paradoxically combined individualist notions of freedom with collective antagonisms: the right to not wear a mask was grounded in individualist rhetoric but often expressed within an *us vs. them* framework that was deeply collective.

The specific symbolisms of COVID-19 merged with the larger history of Donald Trump's politics of health. Already during the early parts of his first campaign, Trump released a letter from his physician which called his "physical strength and stamina [. . .] extraordinary" and declared him "the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency" (Brait 2015). Years later, the author—Dr. Harold Bornstein—admitted to CNN that Trump himself dictated the letter to him (Marquardt and Crook 2018). In the sphere of right-wing media, the imagery of Donald Trump as a virile, resilient, and healthy were being reproduced by commentators in response to the news of his infection. For instance, Fox News ran an interview of White House coronavirus adviser Scott Atlas. who called him a "super vigorous man" and said he had "never seen anyone with more energy and more vigor, at any age, but particularly at his age" (Singman 2020).

Depictions of Trump as a virile and imposing figure of great physical strength have also been recurring features of media produced by his supporters. The most prominent example of this can be found in the works of pro-Trump cartoonist Ben Garrison, whose comics often circulated on both pro- and anti-Trump media platforms in the wake of significant events (Barnes 2017). As a recurring stylistic feature of his comics, Garrison depicts Trump as a statuesque figure of impressive physique contrasted to his frail and decrepit opponents—whether they are Democrats or insufficiently pro-Trump Republicans (see, for example, Butters 2017). In 2019, Garrison depicted the conflict between Trump and Mitt Romney, who had publicly criticized the President, by drawing the two as boxers. The frail-looking Romney is shown launching a flurry of blows against the muscular and broad-shouldered strongman Trump, who appears completely unaffected by the assault, not even needing to make any effort to defend himself (Garrison 2019). Garrison returned to the boxing theme in his reaction to the news of Trump's COVID-19 infection in 2020, when the match between a muscular and athletic Trump and a badly bruised, trembling Biden is interrupted by an image of the coronavirus dressed as a referee. Within Biden's boxing glove one can see the outline of a horseshoe, showing that Biden had attempted to cheat but still became easily outpowered by Donald Trump. In the textual accompaniment to the comic on Garrison's webpage, the artist claims that Trump will "beat Covid like he did Biden" (Garrison 2020). Yet Garrison also voiced doubt about the news, claiming that the timing was suspicious. Hence, Garrison's comic depicts the coronavirus as a potentially malicious agent, with its malice pointed directly at Trump in the image, intending to save Biden from a sure defeat at Trump's hands.

Similar messaging was employed by the President's former advisor Steve Bannon's podcast, *War Room: Pandemic*, in the aftermath of Trump's infection. The hosts downplayed the severity of the situation and focused on the so-called "mass hysteria" induced by the media surrounding the announcement: "This is all just the complete hair-on-fire. . . This is the reason we have the problem with the Democratic base and why they have to steal this election after November 3rd. 'Cause of the mass hysteria they go through every

day. This is how they traumatize their base" (*War Room: Pandemic* 2020). Bannon argued that the media's response to Trump's infection was reflective of a larger pattern of traumatization being inflicted on the U.S. population by media, both traditional and social. Going forward, Bannon described the moment as just the newest stage in an ever-evolving conflict between the "agents of chaos" and Donald Trump, whom Bannon claimed symbolized "stability, grit, determination, and resolve" (*War Room: Pandemic* 2020). One of Bannon's co-hosts went even further, suggesting that the President's opponents had been eagerly waiting for him to get ill to use it in their campaign. Meanwhile, another host projected that through his vigor and stamina, Trump could help people across the U.S. overcome the fears of coronavirus implanted into them by the media, the Chinese government, and the Democratic Party (*War Room: Pandemic* 2020).[1] In these narratives, Trump was transformed into a paragon of both vigor and stability.

Persistent across the discussions I have examined so far is the creation of antagonisms and conflict. Not only is Trump depicted as a paragon of health, but this is given a relational quality, either in terms of the unhealthiness of his political opponents or the expectations of his critics. By projecting Trump's quick and easy recovery, his supporters envisioned a political victory as much as a medical one. At the center of this narrative is the conjured image of a "Leftist," built by combining liberal-leaning media responses by figures like Bernstein with right-wing projections of who they imagine their opponents as being—Bannon's "agents of chaos." This conjured villain of the narrative is enjoying the news of Trump's infection, but will be defeated by Trump overcoming the virus. These themes resonate with Corey Robin's observations that conservatism has historically often been enamored with the "soul of violence," even when protesting the fact:

> The sublime is most readily found in two political forms: hierarchy and violence. But for reasons that shall become clear, the conservative . . . often favors the latter over the former. Rule may be sublime, but violence is more sublime. Most sublime of all is when the two are fused, when violence is performed for the sake of creating, defending, or recovering a regime of domination and rule. (Robin 2018, 61)

The quote illuminates the general media politics around the 2020 election, but specifically regarding Trump's infection. Trump's campaign had originally been regarded by his supporters as a counterinsurgency against a corrupted establishment that had replaced the timeless and honorable old regime. In 2020, this fight was still ongoing. For his supporters, Trump was the means of transferring power back to those who felt they had been unseated from their rightful positions of power (Kimmel 2017). Casey Ryan Kelly (2020, 3–4) suggests that Trump's political rhetoric can best be analyzed through the concept of *ressentiment*: "bitter indignation that one has been treated unfairly [. . .] in which a subject is consumed by emotions and affects such as 'revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite.'" It is a rhetorical strategy which gains pleasure from defeating one's enemies. Kelly links this political style to Robert E. Terrill's (2017, 499–500) argument that Trump represents the nullification of the ethos of "reciprocity and mutual sacrifice" that are instrumental to the fostering of civic citizenship. That is, Trump's political rhetoric elevates self-interest to a virtue and denies the value of looking after others. Dissimilar people are given no other roles except that of an enemy.

Trump Emerges

So far, I have largely focused on the immediate reactions to Trump's infection by the pro-Trump media, from Fox News to YouTube to podcasts. Trump himself was largely vacant in the early moments, receiving

medical treatment and finally being hospitalized over the weekend at the Walter Reed Military Medical Center in Maryland (Baker and Haberman 2020). Over the weekend, the medical reports showed conflicting news about the President's health, until on Sunday evening he suddenly emerged from the hospital in a motorcade to greet his supporters, who had gathered outside (Alper and Sullivan 2020). According to interviewed officials, Trump wanted a display of strength (Dawsey, Leonnig, and Knowles 2020). While even Fox News had previously expressed a hope that Trump would use the moment by "toning down his routine" and showing "seriousness and empathy" (Stirewalt 2020), Trump opted for the path of spectacle and performance. After the fact, Fox News anchor Sandra Smith's interview with Trump surrogate Mercedes Schlapp showed some of the discord regarding Trump's media performance even in right-wing media environments. While Smith admonished Trump's "irresponsible" messaging regarding the infection, Schlapp depicted Trump as a first-hand survivor and a fighter, as opposed to Joe Biden, whom she claimed was advocating "surrender" (Wilstein 2020).

Performing health and strength in the presidential office is not a phenomenon related only to Trump, of course. The most notable instance of this was the case of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who consistently performed health to the public in order to mask a disability caused by polio. As observed by Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe (2003, 9), this act of concealment had "nothing to do with polio per se but with how the public attributed meaning to that affliction". It was assumed—likely correctly for the time—that the public would not accept a disabled president. Still, the office has hardly been held by paragons of health, with John F. Kennedy, for instance, being heavily medicated for much of his presidency (Blumenthal and Morone 2010, 15). Moreover, in the aftermath of Reagan's attempted assassination, the nation was shown a pre-taped appearance (Rogin 1987, 4). Beyond these specific ailments, presidential political rhetoric particularly around elections has often involved the performance of heroism:

> Heroes rise above ordinary political life, and the narratives we spin about them allow us to understand how they are able to do so. Stories about heroes create meaning by looking back to the past from the present and by projecting the plot's next act into the future, all at the same time. In their earlier lives, heroes were tested and suffered, usually on behalf of something greater than themselves. In the present, however, their suffering and their causes will be redeemed. (Alexander 2010, 64)

Trump's emergence from his COVID-19 infection and the political performance surrounding it suggest at least an attempt to live out this manner of a heroic tale. The motorcade ride in many ways set the tone for Trump's return, culminating—as referenced in my opening—with the Twitter video showing Trump's triumphant homecoming in highly cinematic tones. The video in particular can be read as a highly produced, performative attempt to instill popular cultural meaning in the event. According to a CNN report, Trump was seen reshooting his entrance to the White House, without a mask, seemingly to ensure that multiple takes of the moment would be available in the editing of the video (Burnett 2020). In this sense, Trump—especially due to his roots in show business—can be seen as a producer figure who choreographed his return to express a certain sense of cinematic heroism. This drew on representations of the U.S. presidency that began to proliferate during the 1990s, where the President became an action star who tackled issues head on (Lawrence 2003, 223–30). This kind of portrayal, fundamentally about *being seen* as the hero, is a performance aimed toward creating a specific kind of image in the minds of potential onlookers, and follows Trump's larger trend of using popular cultural meaning-making in crafting his political narratives (see Kanzler and Scharlaj 2017).

Everything from the soundtrack to the chosen angles for the video served to distance the event from the very real tragedy taking place across the nation. Thus, COVID-19 was turned into a moment of personal

triumph for Trump. Furthermore, the President's own messaging was built on the groundwork done by his supporters in the media during his hospitalization. For instance, Fox News' Greg Gutfeld had previously already argued that Trump's infection was a patriotic act, which resulted from having "put himself on the line" in the "battlefield." As Gutfeld argued, "He didn't hide from the virus. The reason he didn't hide from the virus is he didn't want America to hide from the virus" (Baker 2020). Gutfeld's take is among the more explicit examples of the metaphor of wartime used to explain Trump's infection, depicted as the result of a heroic sacrifice, laying oneself on the line and going to the battlefront. A few days after his return, Trump tweeted a video where he claimed that his COVID-19 may have been a "blessing from God" (The Telegraph 2020b). He credited his recovery to an experimental antibody therapy from Regeneron Pharmaceuticals Inc., which he called a "cure." In the video, he highlighted how he himself had suggested that he would undergo the treatment, again employing the narrative device of laying himself on the line.

Before his return to the White House, Trump had tweeted his advice to the nation: "Don't be afraid of Covid. Don't let it dominate your life" (Wulfsohn 2020). On Fox News, the tweet was praised on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* by Alex Berenson, author of the COVID-skeptic *Unreported Truths about COVID-19 and Lockdowns* (2020). Berenson decried: "For too long we have let this virus—and the media's hysteria around it—to dominate us" (Wulfsohn 2020). Both Trump and Berenson used the same phrasing of "domination" to describe the impact of COVID-19 on the U.S. population. In the politics of masculinity used by Trump, it has been a point of importance for him to portray himself as the "alpha male" who dominates his opposition through aggression and bullying (Ott and Dickinson 2019, 45). In this gendered performance, to dominate is to succeed as a man, while to be dominated is to fail (Kimmel 2017, 170–79). Using this language of "domination" around COVID-19 brought it into the narrative framework of "man-versus-nature," where the masculine hero exerts his will over his circumstances and surroundings.

Berenson further appealed to national pride: "This country—we put people on the moon! We're the first manned flight in 1903. What has happened to us that this rather dismal virus has scared everyone to death?" (Wulfsohn 2020). This essentially transformed disease and health into issues of will. The pandemic could be handled by altering the way one viewed it. This seemingly simple suggestion contains deep ideological resonances. One of the core issues driving ideological conflict in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been the question of individual will versus circumstances: to what extent do prosperity, success, and health derive from the choices an individual has made instead of their societal circumstances (Katz 2001, 341–59; de Coning and Ebin 2022). The most explicit combination of these is the evangelical doctrine of "prosperity gospel," which sees economic success and good health as the results of moral virtue—an ideal that helped align U.S. evangelicals behind Trump and his general ethos of business success (Fea 2018). In a similar way, the presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s had already instilled in the heart of U.S. conservatism a sense of unfettered personal liberty, unburdened by obligations (Rodgers 2011, 15–40). Framing COVID-19 in terms of will and personal choice turned it from a collective tragedy requiring communal sacrifice and interpersonal obligations into a matter of personal empowerment, which the recovery of Donald Trump reflected and inspired.

Conclusion

In the cycle of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump's COVID-19 infection presented him and his supporters with both an opportunity and a threat. On the one hand, it was a chance for his campaign to garner sympathy, to demonstrate his health and strength, and to highlight the moral faults of those who expressed conflicted feelings about the situation. On the other, the very fact that Trump contracted COVID-19 could be seen as a failure on his part. This was something that the President seemed unwilling to accept. If there is one thing that has epitomized Trump in the public sphere, it has been his formulation of his

entire identity around success. In this worldview, failure brings shame. Thus, the President's infection had to be presented not as a failure but as either a symptom of or a path toward success.

The mediated performances enacted by Trump and his supporters around his own coronavirus episode reflect this basic need for success. Drawing on deep ideological reservoirs of how strength, health, and success had been formulated around U.S. conservatism, these performances located Trump as a hero who had sacrificed his health for the nation. After a short hospitalization in a choreographed performance, he returned as a hero, all signs of weakness and lingering disease having been swept aside. This basic narrativization emphasized larger tendencies in both Trump's reelection campaign and in right-wing political messaging at large: Trump facing the disease and overcoming it were symbolic both of the nation surviving the pandemic and Trump's political victory over his ideological enemies. The hero narrative constructed would not have been complete without the right-wing media system constructing the image of a villain to be defeated, which was not as much the coronavirus as the imagined "Leftist" rejoicing at the news of Trump's infection.

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Notes

[1] *War Room: Pandemic* repeatedly referred to the coronavirus as the "CCP virus" and thus routinely engages in the kind of anti-China rhetoric described by Henna-Riikka Pennanen in this issue.

Creative Political Participation on TikTok during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

Mila Seppälä
mila.t.seppala [a] utu.fi
John Morton Center for North American Studies / Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History and Political Science
University of Turku

In this article, I study creative forms of youth political participation on the social media platform TikTok during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election. I examine the collective expression found in videos employing four distinct sounds in a memetic manner, taking advantage of the particularities of the platform interface in a novel way. Within the framework of the actualizing citizenship model (Bennett 2007; 2008; Bennett et al. 2010; 2011) that emphasizes the importance of self-expression in civic engagement, I consider three different forms that creative political participation takes on the platform: 1) performing political identity, 2) creating community by debating, and 3) trolling as protest. Creative self-expression serves as a way for young people to construct and affirm their identity and their social networks, which in itself is an important political activity for the actualizing citizen. However, these forms do not necessarily contradict more traditional ways of civic engagement, as being socialized in a political space with like-minded peers increases social learning and political awareness, which encourages civic engagement in offline spaces as well (Jenkins et al. 2016; Kim and Ellison 2021).

Introduction

In 2020, the social media platform TikTok—known for its 15-second lip-syncing videos—was the most popular non-gaming application in the world, particularly among people under twenty (Iqbal 2021). TikTok was also at the center of many scandals and viral moments during the 2020 U.S. presidential election, from the infamous empty seats shown at the Trump rally in Tulsa after a boycott was organized on the platform (Lorenz et al. 2020) to political disputes over China's influence (Swanson et al. 2020). Although unsuccessful, the Trump administration even attempted to ban the application in the United States, reportedly due to heightened security concerns (Allyn 2020). In this article, I explore collective forms of political participation that developed on the platform, particularly among teens and young adults. I

consider what new information TikTok can offer about the creative political engagement of Generation Z, the generation that was born after the year 1996 according to the definition by Pew Research Center (Dimock 2019). Much remains unknown about the political participation of Generation Z, a generation still coming of voting age. As one of the most popular forms of social media among this generation, TikTok is an important resource for understanding that participation.

For decades, one of the main concerns for scholars studying youth political participation has been how to explain the apparent lack of interest by young people toward traditional party politics and actions such as voting. Some argue that a breakdown of communities and an enhanced sense of individualization have led to young people disengaging from politics altogether (Putnam 2000; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999). Others argue that individualization and a fragmentation of social hierarchies have led to the creation of a risk society, where young people fail to see structural problems as collective and have instead internalized a sense of individualized responsibility about the future, leading them to not see the value in traditional politics or even in democracy itself (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In this risk society, Bennett (2007; 2008) and Bennett et al. (2010; 2011) argue that beliefs about what constitutes good citizenship have also shifted over the generations, causing a change in civic models, from traditional, dutiful citizenship to an actualizing citizenship. In essence, citizens used to participate within established institutions on the basis of the information they had received from various sources of public authority (Bennett et al. 2011, 839).

After the turn of the century, people began to rely more on crowd-sourced information to participate in "personally expressive cause-oriented politics" that happened in informal networks, where civic engagement became more tied to identity (Bennett et al. 2011, 839). Building upon this, particularly scholars of social media rejected the notion that youth political participation is in decline, arguing rather that political engagement by young people looks categorically different (Banaji et al. 2013; Collin 2015; della Porta 2019; Earl et al. 2017; Jenkins et al. 2016; Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018; Vromen et al. 2016). They argued that online political participation is a particularly important part of civic engagement, where creative forms of self-expression "can be seen by the self-actualizing citizen as more meaningful than voting" (Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat 2018, 79). For the actualized citizen, personal social networks and a desire to belong to a community are drivers of political participation rather than a sense of duty toward public service, while the way they choose to participate—and, importantly, what they themselves find meaningful—reflects that.

Through a novel approach, I examine a sample of 150 video clips that I have collected using the sound search function of TikTok as the tracking tool. I focus on four distinct sounds that have been employed and disseminated in a manner that resembles political memes. Considering the framework of actualized citizenship together with the findings of Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2018) on creative personal expression, I determine that creative political participation can manifest itself in at least three different ways on the platform. First, I consider how *performing political identity* is central to the way young people express themselves politically on the platform. Second, I analyze how TikTok users are *creating community by debating.* The platform affordances allow for vibrant debates between users, and these debates can become a way for users to construct networks with peers through the sharing of information informed by values. In my last example, *trolling as protest*, I consider how internet culture such as trolling, often portrayed as negative and deviant, can become a productive way for the actualized citizen to disrupt and resist political ideologies and cultures they find discordant with their values.

Methodology and the Responsibilities of Researching TikTok

The forms that youth political participation can take specifically on TikTok have not been widely researched due to the fairly recent global popularity of the platform. In their research of Musical.ly (the previous version of TikTok before it was bought by the Chinese technological company ByteDance), Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik discovered that young people, regardless of their ideological beliefs, used the platform to combine popular music with dancing to convey a political message tailored to like-minded audiences (2019, 2003). TikTok differs from other social media platforms in that its central feed is not built around the people users follow but an algorithm that determines what types of content viewers want to see and engage with (Kumar 2022). Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik argue that this has made TikTok far more appealing to young people wishing to express themselves politically, as context collapse is less likely on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, where it is much more difficult to control one's audiences (2019, 1990). Likewise, in a study of politically active youth on TikTok, Serrano et al. (2020, 8) claim that the audiovisual "playing" of one's politics results in a far more interactive experience than on any other platform. As such, I argue that while it is decidedly not made for such purposes, unique features of the TikTok interface make it particularly suited to the forms of civic engagement common among the youngest generation.

Thus, at its best, TikTok is a vast, still mostly uncharted repository offering a gateway for researchers to explore the everyday lives of young people, down to uncannily minute details packaged in short clips of image and audio. Millions of young people around the world have invited viewers into their most intimate spaces, whether it be their bedrooms, their family dinner tables, or even the voting booth. In these glimpses lie the possibilities of TikTok but, importantly, therein lie its dangers as well. When it comes to opening one's life to complete strangers, it could be asked how informed these decisions actually are. There are a number of ethical concerns that need to be taken into consideration when stepping into these spaces as a researcher. For one, the users of TikTok overwhelmingly tend to be young. The age limit specified by TikTok itself is 13, and research shows that the largest user demographic in TikTok is comprised of teens (Tankovska 2021). While TikTok does not prohibit using the content produced by its users for research purposes, and only explicitly denies scraping the data on the application for commercial purposes (Terms of Service 2019), it is important to note that ethical considerations surrounding research extend far beyond what is allowed by the platform itself.

Indeed, due to the myriad of ethical issues relating to the use of data for purposes that the subject may not realize they have consented to, Williams et al. emphasize that scholars need to carefully consider "user expectations, safety, and privacy rights" before embarking on any social media research (2017, 27). In addition, researchers based in the European Union need to be aware of the more rigorous ethical standards and legal standards set by the EU in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) directive (EU 2016/679). As clarified by Kotsios et al. (2019, 6), "any research-based processing of social network data that not only directly identifies but also possibly may identify (by the same researchers or third parties) individuals will be regulated under the GDPR." According to the GDPR, collecting sensitive personal data, such as political opinions, requires appropriate safeguards to be implemented, such as anonymization and pseudonymization, so that it cannot be identified by anyone. This includes ensuring that in the process of replicating the results, researchers separate the identifiable data from the content analyzed in a way that cannot be easily discovered by a simple web search (Kotsios et al. 2019, 21). Therefore, in order to protect the right to privacy of the users of TikTok, I will not include any information that could be used to identify the creators. This is a method also used by other researchers of TikTok to protect the privacy of young creators (Khattab 2020; Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019).

For my study, I use the sound search function of TikTok instead of the hashtag search tool to track a cluster of videos on a particular topic to be further analyzed, as has been done with previous quantitative, big data studies of TikTok (Literat and Kligler-Vilenchik 2019; Serrano et al. 2020). I employ this method in an effort to collect forms of creative expression that have been propagated in the platform in a memetic way, that is,

videos that are structurally similar imitations of each other (see, e.g., Shifman 2014, 41). There are a number of benefits to collecting the videos according to their background sound. First, the audiovisual experience is what makes TikTok so different from other social media platforms, and it is the primary way for content creators to engage with others and to build community together with their peers on the platform. The sound used can be a popular song, an original piece of music, or a speech from a public figure such as Donald Trump. Sound acts as the frame of reference upon which to build content, which can then be recreated by other users in a meme-like fashion. TikTok facilitates this memetic way of producing content—users who wish to upload videos to the platform are presented with a wide variety of trending songs and viral "challenges" to take part in when they are adding sound to the content they are creating. Indeed, part of what makes TikTok so popular is how easy it is to create new content on the platform. Users do not necessarily need to know or do much to start creating their own content, as the application automatically offers trending topics, sounds, filters, and effects upon which to build the video.
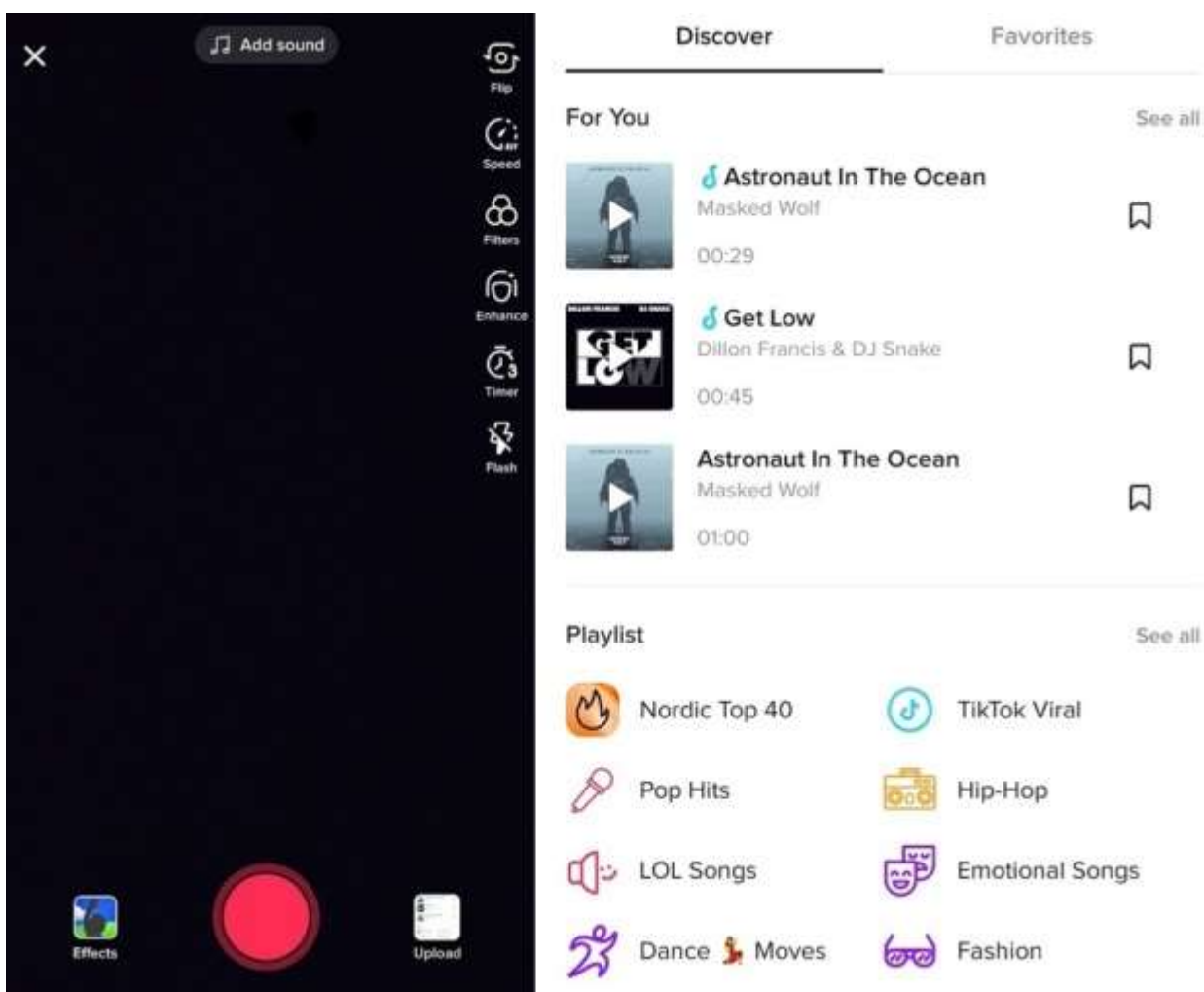

Figure 1. Screenshots of the TikTok interface. On the left, an image of the features that can be added when creating a video. On the right, an image of the options provided when pressing "add sound."

In addition to providing a new avenue for researchers to locate collective expressions on TikTok, the sound search function also provides information about the specific number of videos that have used the same sound clip as well as information about the number of views a particular video has. However, there are difficulties with collecting videos through the sound search function as well. There will inevitably be clusters

of videos where a piece of sound has been used in ways that are completely unrelated to each other. It also excludes all the videos that use a specific sound that has not been appropriated by other users in a memetic way—videos that contain personal experiences too specific to replicate, both serious and funny, videos that have not gone viral, and videos that use sounds used by everyone for all purposes. As I used the search sound function to determine virality and collect material that I could then study in-depth with a qualitative approach, these difficulties do not impact the integrity of my results, even as it is important to be transparent about them.

To form the data of this study, I identified four popular memetic sounds used by creators in TikTok during the 2020 presidential election. I used the hashtag tool to locate the popular sounds by exploring the first 100 search results of each hashtag #election2020, #biden2020, #trump2020, #voteblue, and #votered. From a sample of 500 videos found through the hashtag, I chose sounds on the basis of how widespread their memetic use had become. I considered the sound to operate in a memetic fashion if 30 of the first 300 most popular videos found through the search sound function (different from the search hashtag function) were structured in the same manner. In this way, I identified four viral political sounds and divided them into three categories according to the function they played, with two sounds considered in the "performing political identity" category to represent both "liberal" and "conservative" TikTok. Liberal and conservative are used as hashtags by the users themselves to provide signals to the algorithm so that the videos appear in the "for you" pages (the central feed of TikTok) of likeminded people, that is, in the community space it was intended for (see TikTok Newsroom 2020 for more on how the algorithm works). Here, 30 examples of each four memetic sounds were chosen, and as one of the sounds had been used in two different memetic ways, 30 examples of both were included. This resulted in a data set of 150 videos.

My data represents a randomized sample of TikTok videos. This is by no means an exhaustive collection of the memetic sounds used for political purpose that circulated during the election. All of the searches were conducted during February 2021, and the results and analysis reflect that timeframe. Furthermore, collecting a representative sample without scraping the app with an automated web crawler is exceedingly difficult when any given search can produce well over 100,000 videos and the search function does not offer any other way to modify the search than keywords. Also unclear is the rationale for the order in which the videos show up in the results. The results of a search are presented in a feed that can seemingly be scrolled down indefinitely—from most popular to less popular, according to the number of views—but the further one scrolls, even that categorization stops being strictly true.

The purpose of this study is not to account for all the different variations of political participation in TikTok but to introduce the different forms of civic engagement that these viral videos can serve. Through collective performances where sound and image are synced to provide political commentary, users can creatively express themselves, construct communities around those expressions, debate each other, and encourage peers to take political action. As an example of creative self-expression and the first of the four memetic sounds examined, I consider the ways in which users perform their political identity on TikTok.

Performance of Political Identity as Creative Self-Expression

The fact that TikTok facilitates performing to audiences of likeminded people drawn to the content by the algorithm makes the platform ideal for the model of actualizing citizenship and, as such, represents an active space for creative political participation that centers around identity. Political identity or partisan identity (i.e., the way individuals identify with parties as social groups) can be comparable to other social identities, such as religious ones, which are formed already at a young age through the cross-pressure of internal motivations and external social environments (Green et al. 2002, 23). Partisan groups can provide

to individuals a sense of belonging—indeed, as partisan polarization has intensified, partisan identities have become more and more entrenched. Lilliana Mason (2018, 20) describes partisan identities in the U.S. as mega-identities, where a "single vote can now indicate a person's partisan preference as well as his or her religion, race, ethnicity, gender, neighborhood, and favorite grocery store." Parties tend to matter less to young people, as has been shown in studies before Generation Z, and this continues to be found with them (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; della Porta 2019; The Circle 2018a). However, the ideological divides that differentiate Democrats from Republicans and liberals from conservatives still clearly frame how young people see their political selves as well (Fisher 2020). For the youth in the United States, constructing a political identity does not require membership or even a sense of belonging to a political party. They do not identify with parties per se but with parties as social groups (Green et al. 2002, 26). In my study, I consider how young people identify as "liberals" and as "conservatives" and how they construct a political identity in networks that seem to best represent their political values.

Creative self-expression of any kind most commonly manifests itself on TikTok as intricate choreographies danced to the beat of popular songs. For political self-expression, the choreographies include ways to indicate the approval or disapproval of different values and policy positions in a way that is often intrinsically tied to the identity of the user. For example, examining how the song *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)* has been used in a memetic way in TikTok videos shows how political identity can be performed by relying on both image and sound. *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)* is a hip hop-inspired country song released in 2011 by the singer Luke Bryan, who is known for subverting expectations of the country music genre. Likewise, TikTok users from rural parts of the United States riffed on the song to subvert some of the expectations other users of TikTok might have about them. As Bryan sings the first line "You know you've got everybody lookin," these TikTok creators use the opportunity to catch the attention of viewers by pointing to the caption they have added to their video. These captions include affirmations of taking part in the collective expression "I heard the left were taking over this sound" or assumptions about their audiences "prob gonna lose followers but lets make some things clear." This is then followed with assertions of their conservative upbringing or rural background and/or symbolic representations of someone from the countryside, wearing boots or a cowboy hat or performing the dance in a field next to a tractor. As the song kicks off, the TikToker moves to incorporate dance moves, some following an elaborate choreography, along with the captions of left-leaning positions they believe in, such as "black lives matter," "love is love," "defund the police," and "her body her choice." This idea is further appropriated in videos where people dress in clothes stereotypically associated with "country people" and dance to the beat of the song in order to blend in when going to vote for a Democratic candidate. The point of the joke the users make is in contradicting the concept of a partisan mega-identity—the idea that you can infer someone's political beliefs by the way they look or where they live.

These videos garnered a significant amount of responses that subverted the original message as well. In the responses, "I heard the left were taking over this sound" turned into "since all the liberals wanna claim our sound, ill claim it back," followed by captions of conservative values such as "all lives matter," "abortion is murder," "back the blue," and "come and take my guns." Some play with the reverse assumptions people have about what liberals look like, with people of color and young women adding captions like "i might lose followers but idc" followed by the abovementioned conservative values. In turn, these videos were then responded to by people who conformed in their social identity to the assumptions people have about their political identity, for example, adding a subversion in the beginning "Since Liberals are taking this sound over I thought we could take it back" and then adding "JK" with the captions of left-leaning values. The multiple different permutations represent the virality of the memetic video, as do the metrics: over 24,000 videos on TikTok feature *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)*, and while not all of them use the song for the same purpose, the most popular videos that do have well over 600,000 views.

As seen above, performance of political identity on TikTok is often tied to people's appearances. Another example of this is offered by the videos uploaded to the tune of *Real Women Vote for Trump* (2019) performed by the Deplorable Choir (whose name appropriates the term that former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton used about Trump supporters). In the original song, three women sing about Trump supporters accepting everyone into their community: "We don't care if you're white, Don't care if you're black, We don't care if you're gay," with the chorus asserting "Real women vote for Trump, we don't need no liberal chump." The original song has been used in 3,636 TikTok videos but the variations on it edited by TikTok creators far exceed those numbers. With 23,400 videos, a popular modification, for example, includes a distorted computer voice declaring "I have a penis" after the chorus "Real women vote for Trump." The format of the meme is simple enough: the ironic statement at the end provides all the content while bored-looking teenagers stare at the camera as the song plays on. The gender of the creator is irrelevant, as the statement is only used to denote their non-support for Trump.

Of the 18 different modifications of the song with original sound, the most popular trend plays with stereotypical assumptions about what "conservatives" and "liberals" look like. In an effort to mock the idea of the "real" women who vote for Trump, the videos consist of young people giving themselves a makeover to represent a caricature of the women singing the original song. This includes an overt yellow shade of concealer, dark and sharply drawn eyebrows, bright eyeshadow, and the red MAGA (based on the Trump campaign's catchphrase Make America Great Again) hat; captions start with "Turning myself into a Trump supporter" and follow with a detailed description of the process, as is common in the make-up tutorial format. These videos have in turn garnered duets where content creators do a makeover into a "Biden girl" or "a libtard" by creating a caricature of a "goth" with white concealer, black eye make-up, and black dots and crosses drawn across their cheekbones. Responses to the "Biden girl" and "Trump girl" looks also include tutorials where the styles are recreated in a more authentic way, turning the caricatures into real people. With the view counts of the most popular videos rising well above 100,000, these TikTok creators show how a popular, non-political lifestyle format can be successfully appropriated for political commentary. The performance of political identity is tied to audiovisual experiences that rely on subverting and contradicting stereotypical assumptions about what certain ideological beliefs look like, but also adopting and capitalizing on those same assumptions, whether they be about themselves or the "opposing side." This demonstrates the power the image of a partisan mega-identity holds, regardless of whether it holds true or not to these young TikTok users. Contesting and conforming to the ideological expectations related to one's social identity are key to the performance of political identity.

Crowdsourcing Information and Creating Community

One of the most unique technological features of TikTok is the ability for creators to respond to the content of other users through the duet function. When a TikTok video garners enough attention to "go viral," part of the memetic process is not only the way in which others adopt the same format for their own content to spread imitations and transformed content, but how the content mutates due to the duets it attracts and the duets those duets then get. At times, the popularity of the duets is far greater than that of the original video. In political TikTok videos, duets are often used to answer the political claims made by other users of the platform. Serrano et al. (2020, 8) describe such political TikTok duets as "being the closest feature on social media to an actual online public debate." An example of this online public debate can be found by following the tracks provided by an original piece of sound called *In the Mood*, which was created by a TikTok user. While a significant number of the 536,000 videos employing the sound are non-political in nature, 30 of the 300 most popular ones—with view counts ranging from 46,000 to over 600,000—utilize a very specific format, where captions of political claims are added to the beat of the song. Approximately

half of the *In the Mood* videos are duets, answering claims in the original video. For example, "owning guns is a constitutional right" becomes "more gun laws = less deaths. It's proven. Your 'rights' aren't prioritized over people's lives," "healthcare isnt a 'human right'" becomes "article 25 of the declaration of human rights says healthcare IS a human right," and "'Anchor babies' should be illegal" becomes "Marco Rubio, Bruce Lee, WALT DISNEY Were all 'anchor babies.'"
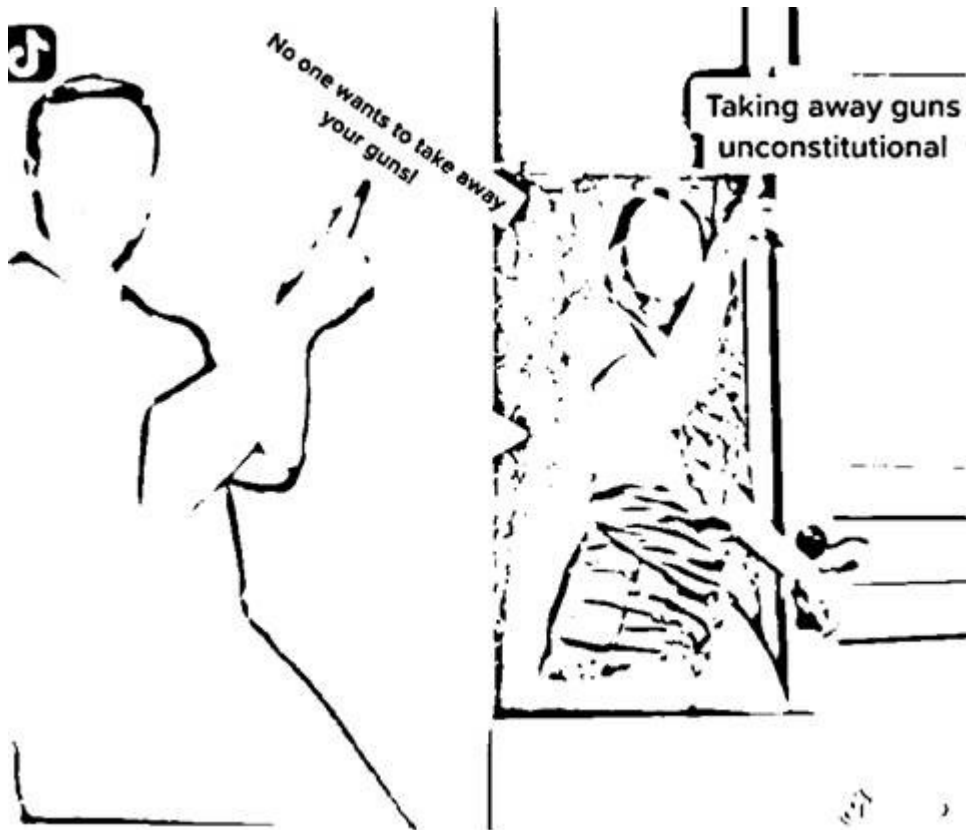

Figure 2. Modified screenshot of a political duet where claims are made by changing captions.

Duets such as these perform the function of an online public debate and show how civic information is animated by a catchy beat and choreography. Yet, as the algorithm curates feeds of users according to their preferences, the viewers of these duets still mostly consist of people who are already watching such content and, presumably, subscribing to the beliefs presented by the duet maker. In this sense, even though the content creator has had to venture across the lines from one social group to another, the "debates" end up being rather one-sided. The original piece of content only acts as the structure on top of which duet makers can affirm their own political beliefs and perform their political identity for likeminded audiences. Regardless of the goals of the actual duet maker, the function the duet serves is more of a community-building effort.

Duets with civic debates also offer information and knowledge to those engaging with the content. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center, 52% of under 30-year-old U.S. citizens regularly consume news on TikTok (Walker and Matsa 2021). It is in networks like these—where users create content and other users engage with that content by creating something of their own—that information is shared. The duet functions as a creative way for users to crowdsource information. The information often implicitly carries value statements itself and thus can be considered trustworthy by the community members. Moreover, it is not only information, as statements about guns, abortions, and healthcare clustered

together provide to the users that engage with the videos important sources of civic knowledge and ideas about how to see the world around them. Personal networks, of which online networks account for a great share, are the primary sources of fostering civic culture among the actualized citizenship (Jenkins and Shresthova 2016, 25).

When information is pooled together in discrete communities, such as the ones created by the duet function, the facts that people use to talk about the world also become divided along ideological lines. The TikTok algorithm plays a powerful part in creating spaces for identity and interest-based communities in different corners of the platform, such as "conservative TikTok," "liberal TikTok," "gay TikTok," or "straight TikTok." This facilitates more open engagement by young people, as the threat of context collapse is much smaller. However, this also means that accidentally crossing the line from one space to another, which can happen due to the quirks of the algorithm, can be a terrifying experience, with users often being subjected to a significant onslaught of hate messages if their content ends up in the feeds of viewers it was not intended for. Furthermore, while the identities of young people can be fluid and constantly in a state of being constructed, consciously moving from one space to another can be just as difficult and cause a dramatic breakdown of networks. The TikTok algorithm, for better or worse, creates "bubbles" that are not often broken by users.

Trolling as Productive Civic Action

A Trump rally in Tulsa on June 20, 2020 brought TikTok into the general news cycle in a way that forced adults previously unaware or dismissive of the platform to take its political organizing power more seriously. During the first Trump rally held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, before the primaries of the presidential election, fans of Korean pop (K-Pop) joined TikTok users to register for tickets for the event they had no intention of attending. This was done in order to overinflate the expectations of the Trump campaign and to skew the data that campaigns can collect from such events (Lorenz et al. 2020). The trick seemed to have worked, as the turnout at the Tulsa rally was (according to the Tulsa Fire Department) only around 6200 attendants instead of the million the Trump campaign had expected (News On 6 2020). Even though the Trump campaign publically disputed claims that TikTok users had been the reason for any disparity between the expected and actual attendant numbers (News On 6 2020), internally the campaign considered the rally to have been "an embarrassing flop" (Martin and Burns 2022, 95).

The idea for the Tulsa rally ticket reservation protest reportedly came from a campaign staffer who used to work for the former Democratic presidential hopeful and current Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg (Lorenz et al. 2020). The former staffer was enraged over the implications of Trump having an in-person, maskless rally on Juneteenth, the holiday celebrating the emancipation of enslaved African Americans. While the rally was postponed a day due to the backlash the original choice caused (Baker and Haberman 2020), the idea of reserving tickets kept spreading on TikTok and among K-pop fans on Twitter. Many of the TikTok users participating in the protest removed their own videos before the rally happened in order to prevent knowledge of it from spreading to the wider public and the Trump campaign itself (Lorenz et al. 2020). Yet, by following just one original sound by a TikTok user who had not removed their content, one can still find 297 videos lip-syncing to a voice-over of the ticket reservation process and "duets" to that voice-over. The original voice-over used by the TikTok users is aptly named "DONT DO THIS ALL IT DOES IS HELP TRUMP SORRY."

The voice-over in these Tulsa rally videos is a simple declaration of reserving the tickets from the Trump campaign website, with emphasis put on the fact that they cost nothing. The joke of the video is in keeping up the appearance that one really wishes to participate but cannot due to an absurd reason: "I have to walk

my gecko that day." This process is performed in front of a green screen, showing the purchase on the website. Some of the duets simply present the same feelings in front of the same green screen but add versions of their own absurd reasons, such as "I have to take my fish to the dentist" or "whoops i have a date with a tree that day!!" Some users then made further duets of these videos, leading to amalgamations of as many as seven videos playing alongside each other in duet form (see Figure 3). Others added more detailed descriptions of the process of reserving the tickets, such as how to find the website and how to fill out the form with fake phone numbers and zip codes. For most, taking part in this collective memetic expression was very much a politically conscious decision. For some, however, it was only the joke that they wanted to be a part of, as is made clear in descriptions such as "also only jokes ok not politics" in videos of people reserving tickets.
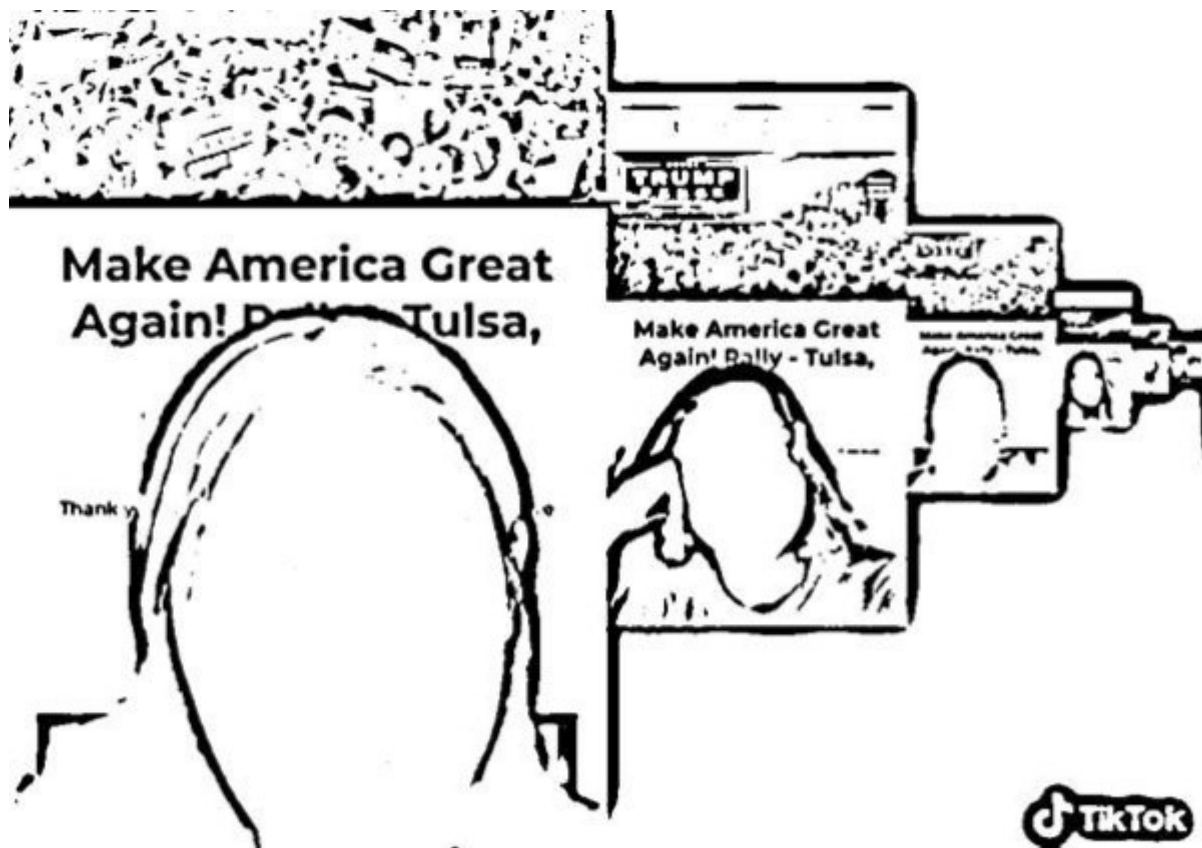

Figure 3. A modified screenshot that shows how duets consisting of as many as seven people can appear on TikTok.

Within the actualizing citizenship model, the case of the Trump Tulsa rally represents a form of civic action that is not merely a curious one-off but a natural progression of the civic styles preferred by the youngest generation. Vromen et al. (2016, 517) argue that within the changing model of citizenship, young people's social media engagement is project-oriented, ad hoc, and immediate. The Tulsa case was a project for young people that they could easily take part in, pooling their efforts together with other large communities known to take part in online-based activism such as K-pop fandom (Romano 2020). Importantly, they could also immediately see the results of taking such action. While the role social media plays in facilitating traditional political engagement (or not) is largely debated (see, e.g., Kligler-Vilenchik

and Literat 2018; Morozov 2011; Vromen et al. 2016), it is clear that social media does make possible such politically oriented direct-action campaigns. As evidenced by the wide array of media stories on the event, which credited the TikTok teens and K-pop fans for the empty seats seen at the rally, this type of trolling (whether done for explicitly political purposes or as a joke) can have consequences that reach far beyond social media.

The Trump Tulsa rally case also shows how online behavior that is typically viewed as negative (i.e. trolling) can become productive when employed by self-actualized citizens in the service of a specific civic-minded goal. Most media scholars describe trolling as disruptive, abhorrent, hostile, and a transgressive practice aimed, at best, at entertaining and strengthening the ties of a close-knit community and, at worst, done for no other purpose than for the enjoyment of one person at the expense of the dignity of another (Bishop 2014; Graham 2019; Hannan 2018; Phillips 2015). Hannan (2018, 214) argues that trolling has not only gone mainstream but that "we are trolling ourselves to death." Graham (2019, 2030) points to the difficulty of defining what exactly is considered trolling but still posits that "definitions of trolling tend to agree that trolling is hostile." Certainly to the Trump campaign, the ticket-reserving videos can be seen as hostile. Some who participated in the effort explicitly made clear that they were participating for no other reason than for their own amusement. However, for many the project was a deliberate attempt to disrupt a political campaign they considered to be against their own values, and as such it is reminiscent of any traditional offline advocacy effort, such as street protests, picketing, or sit-ins. As a tactic for the actualized citizen, the Tulsa Rally protest demonstrates that trolling can be a productive way to participate in politics.

Conclusion

For the actualizing citizen, creative self-expression is one of the primary means of political participation. The examples provided by the four memetic sounds— *Country Girl (Shake It For Me)*, *Real Women Vote for Trump*, *In the Mood* and DONT DO THIS ALL IT DOES IS HELP TRUMP SORRY—showcase the different forms and functions that creative political participation can take. Whether conforming to or subverting the expectations of political identity that social identity creates in a hyper-polarized society, creating community by engaging in political debate through the duet function, or taking part in an effort to essentially troll political campaigns, the way young people participate in politics through TikTok can be a meaningful activity for the actualized citizen. If in a highly individualized society social structures are obstructed, constructing a sense of belonging in a community is vital for young people to see and believe in the collective solutions that democratic processes purport to offer. Learning to know one's political self together with likeminded peers is part of the process of understanding the value of such actions as voting (Gentry 2018). Furthermore, creative political participation and self-actualization are not inherently discordant with taking part in traditional electoral politics, as is evidenced by the rise in youth participation in the last two U.S. national elections (The Circle 2018b; 2020).

TikTok offers a vast window onto the political participation styles adopted by Generation Z. Much of the existing research on TikTok has been quantitative in nature and dealing with big data, and scraping the application for data through hashtags has been the norm of the methods used. The novel approach of this study is to go beyond searches with the hashtag tool alone, to focus on specifically memetic sounds found through the "discover sound" function. Further research that combines both quantitative and qualitative methods in a systematic manner could undoubtedly yield more information about the creative political expression and civic engagement on the platform. Also out of scope for this study was to consider how TikTok as a uniquely sound-specific space is changing the way music and politics is intertwined in the politics of Generation Z. Young people are turning cultural products that are not explicitly political into

political and political statements that are not musical into choreographed performances. For the creative political participant, not only is the personal political but the political profoundly personal.

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Joe Bidenin kampanja 2020: Turvaa kaaoksen keskelle

Outi Hakola
outi.hakola [a] uef.fi
FT, Dosentti, yliopistonlehtori
Itä-Suomen yliopisto

Johdanto

Vuoden 2020 Yhdysvaltain presidentinvaaleissa suuri osa yleisöjen, median ja tutkijoiden huomiosta suuntautui istuvan presidentin Donald Trumpin aggressiiviseen kampanjointiin. Samaan aikaan hänen vastaehdokkaansa Joe Biden työsti omaa kampanjaansa ilmeisen voitokkaasti, joskin vähemmän teatraalisesti. Bidenin kampanjointi heijastaa hillittyä tyyliä ja perinteistä politiikkaa, jossa korostuu asiapohjaisuus ja uutismedioiden ja kampanjatapahtumien kautta yleisöjen tavoittelu.

Vaikkakin Biden on aktiivisesti läsnä sosiaalisessa mediassa, ei hän ole samalla tavalla onnistunut keräämään laajaa seuraajakuntaa kuin Donald Trump. Esimerkiksi siinä missä Trumpilla oli kampanjointinsa aikana yli 80 miljoonaa Twitter-seuraajaa, Bidenilla luku oli hieman yli 12 miljoonaa (Murdock 2020), ja YouTuben puolella Trumpin kanavalla oli 2,75 miljoonaa tilaajaa verrattuna Bidenin 716 000 tilaajaan. Osittain suosioeroa selittää henkilöiden värikkyys ja tunteisiin vetoavuus. Sosiaalista mediaa luonnehtii tunteiden korostuminen sekä hyvässä että pahassa, ja voimakkaita tunteita herättämällä voi tavoittaa laajoja yleisöjä (ks. esim. Hyvärinen ja Beck 2018). Bidenin huoliteltu poliittinen kommunikointityyli välttää liioiteltuja tunteellisia ilmauksia, ja etenkin negatiivisesti tulkittuja tunteita, ja tunteiden sijasta hän tyypillisesti keskittyy tekemiseen, tavoitteisiin ja kansallisten symboleiden hyödyntämiseen viestinnässään (Savoy ja Wehren 2021).

Hillityn ja perinteisen poliittisen viestinnän tyylit ovat nähtävillä myös Bidenin sosiaalisen median audiovisuaalisuuden hyödyntämisessä. Kun tarkastellaan Bidenin YouTube-kanavaa, on nopeasti huomattavissa, että Biden tarjoaa katsottavaksi erityisesti eri tapahtumissa pitämiään poliittisia puheita ja mediaesiintymisiä. Erityisesti sosiaalista mediaa varten tehtyjä videoita on vähemmistö hänen materiaalistaan. Silti presidenttikampanjaa varten hän teki myös mainosvideoita, joissa Biden esittelee tavoitteitaan ja arvojaan. Videossa *One America* Biden toteaa, että "we are in the battle for the soul of the nation" (Biden 2020a), joka on yksi hänen tunteellisesti voimakkaimmista ilmaisuistaan.

Kampanjavideoissa toistuu johdonmukaisesti Bidenin kampanjan ydinteema: kaikkien amerikkalaisten tuominen yhteen ja yhteiskunnallisten jakolinjojen pienentäminen. Yhteisöllisyyden ja yhtenäisyyden puheilla Biden ottaa pesäeroa vastaehdokkaaseensa. Bidenkin silloin tällöin hyödyntää negatiivisen kampanjoinnin keinoja eli vastustajan heikkouksien esille tuontia, mitä on pidetty tyypillisenä amerikkalaiselle politiikalle (ks. esim. Lau ja Rovner 2009; Mark 2006). Suurimmaksi osaksi hän kuitenkin kieltäytyy keskittymästä Trumpiin ja antamaan tälle tilaa omalla kanavallaan, jolloin Trumpin näkeminen

uhkana yhtenäisyydelle ja "amerikkalaiselle sielulle" jätetään vihjailuiden varaan. Näissä vihjailuissa Trump yhdistetään kaaokseen, epäjärjestykseen ja aggressiivisuuteen. Muun muassa samaisessa *One America* - videossa Trumpin nimeä ei mainita kertaakaan, mutta kun ääniraidalla kerrotaan, miten maan murtunut politiikka on johtanut vihaisuuteen, loukkauksiin ja jakolinjoihin, kuvatasolla näytetään puolilähikuvia Trumpin aggressiivista ilmeistä sanojen "the anger, the insults, the divisiveness" kohdalla (Biden 2020a). Tällä tavoin Biden tarjoaa itsensä vaihtoehdoksi Trumpin jakolinjoja korostavalle politiikalle ja poliittiselle tyylille.

Vaihtoehtoisuus oli läsnä myös niissä tavoissa, joilla Bidenin kampanja hyödynsi populaarikulttuuria. Trump, jonka julkiseen profiiliin on vaikuttanut vahvasti hänen tositelevisiotaustansa, on hyödyntänyt poliittisessa profiilissaan viihdekuvastojen mehukasta tyyliä ja mainetta (ks. esim. Hakola 2020). Populaarikulttuuri ei ole ollut samalla tavalla osa Bidenin asiapitoista lähestymistapaa, ja kampanja hakikin populaarikulttuurin suomaa näkyvyyttä eri tavalla, kuten tunnettujen näyttelijöiden ja muusikoiden tuen ilmaisujen kautta.

Musiikkikampanja #TeamJoeSings

Yhtenä erityisenä lähestymistapana Bidenin kampanjasta voidaan erottaa populaarimusiikin kampanja #TeamJoeSings. Kyseessä oli YouTubessa toteutettu virtuaalinen konserttisarja, jossa syksyn 2020 aikana esiintyi eri artisteja, jotka tukivat Joe Bidenin ja Kamala Harrisin kampanjaa. Musiikki on pitkään ollut tärkeä presidenttikampanjoiden populaarikulttuurinen ulottuvuus. Esimerkiksi John F. Kennedy käytti Frank Sinatran "High Hopes" kappaleesta versiota, jossa kehotetaan äänestämään Kennedyä, George W. Bush soitti Brooks & Dunnin "Only in America" kappaletta, ja Barack Obama julkaisi kokonaisen soittolistan, johon oli kerätty kampanjassa käytettyjä inspiroivia kappaleita (Patch 2016, 366–67). Justin Patchin (2016) mukaan kampanjakappaleilla on pyritty paitsi innostamaan, myös luomaan kuvaa jaetusta kulttuurista, sillä populaarimusiikki vetoaa tunteisiin, käsityksiin kansasta ja puhuttelee äänestäjiä "tavallisen ihmisen" tasolla. Samoin Bidenin kampanjalle musiikista tuli keino lisätä tunteellisesti puhuttelevia elementtejä hänen ehdokkuuteensa.

Konserttisarjaa olivat käynnistämässä musiikkimanagerit Jordan Kurland ja Nick Stern, jotka olivat tukeneet myös Barack Obaman kampanjaa "Vote for Change" -musiikkikiertueella vuonna 2004. Tällä kertaa he halusivat tarjota Bidenin kampanjalle tavan päästä yhteyteen artistien kanssa ja artisteille alustan, jolla ottaa poliittisesti kantaa (Baltin 2020). *Forbesin* haastattelussa Stern toteaa, että ottamalla mukaan eri kokoluokan artisteja, myös pienemmän yleisön artisteja, oli mahdollisuus puhua erilaisille yleisöille äänestämisen tärkeydestä (Baltin 2020).

Mukaan valikoituneet artistit noudattavat logiikkaa, jossa he musiikkiesitysten ohella keskittyvät äänestämisen tärkeyteen ja syihin, joiden takia he kannattavat Bidenin–Harrisin kampanjaa. Kannatuslausunnoissa poliittisista agendoista nousevat esille ilmastonmuutoksen torjuminen, globaalin COVID-19 pandemian asianmukainen hoitaminen ja rotu- ja sukupuoliasioihin liittyviin epätasa-arvoisuuksiin puuttuminen (ks. esim. Dawes 2020; Vile 2020; X Ambassadors 2020). Kappalevalinnan tasolla suurin osa artisteista haki inspiraatioita symbolisuudesta, joskin muutama artisteista on valinnut suoraan poliittisesti kantaa ottavia kappaleita. The Harlem Gospel Travelers ovat valinneet esitettäväkseen kappaleen *Fight On*, jonka on innoittanut Black Lives Matter -liike. Siinä missä alkuperäinen versio kertoo mustien kohtaamasta väkivallasta ja kysyy, monenko ihmisen on vielä kuoltava ennen muutosta, on vaaliversioon lisätty taustalauluun kertosäen "Biden for Change" (Biden 2020b). Tällä viitataan toiveisiin siitä, että Bidenin–Harrisin hallinto edistäisi rotutasa-arvoon liittyviä asioita.

Kaikki muusikot eivät kuitenkaan nimeä tiettyjä poliittisia teemoja, vaan eniten muusikoita yhdistää arvoista ja demokratiasta puhuminen. Usea toteaa kyseisten vaalien olevan erityisen tärkeät, koska niissä

kyse ei ole vain presidentin valinnasta, vaan demokratian puolustamisesta (ks. esim. The War And Treaty 2020; Thomas 2020). Muun muassa muusikko Jim James perusteli osallistumistaan kampanjaan sillä, että jokaisen velvollisuus on tukea demokratiaa, äänestysoikeutta ja mahdollisuutta yhteiskunnalliseen keskusteluun (Baltin 2020). Yhtenä elementtinä tähän liittyy myös postilaitoksen puolustaminen, sillä postiäänestämisen kyseenalaistaminen oli yksi Trumpin ja republikaanien kampanjoinnin pääkohteita. Postiäänestyksen puolesta puhui suorimmin Ben Gibbard, joka tunnetaan yhtyeistä Death Cab for Cutie ja The Postal Service. Näistä jälkimmäinen bändi on nimetty Yhdysvaltain postin innoittamana, ja hän esittääkin yhtyeen Such Great Heights -kappaleen tukeakseen postilaitoksen merkitystä poliittiselle osallistumiselle. (Death Cab for Cutie 2020.)

Demokratian ohella artistit korostavat, miten tukemalla Bidenin ja Harrisin kampanjaa, he haluavat puhua yhtenäisyyden puolesta. Esimerkiksi avioparin Michael Trotter Juniorin ja Tanya Blountin duo peräänkuuluttaa yhteen tulemista paitsi videon kannatuspuheessa myös lauluvalinnallaan We Are the One (The War And Treaty 2020).

Yhtenäisyys-tematiikka on musiikkivideoiden elementti, jossa luodaan selkeimmin pesäeroa Trumpin edustamaan politiikkaan. Vaikka Trumpia ei nimeltä mainita, on hän läsnä epäsuorissa viittauksissa. Muun muassa folkrockyhtye Dawesin laulaja peräänkuuluttaa, että on hullua, että inhimillisyydestä ja säädyllisyydestä on tullut ihmisiä erottava tekijä (Dawes 2020). Samoin Andrew Bird toteaa, että nimenomaan säädyllisyys ja arvokkuus ovat puuttuneet politiikasta viimeisen neljän vuoden ajan, ja äänestäjien olisi hyvä pohtia, miten vaarallista tämä on. Hänen kappalevalintansa Sic of Elephants korostaa viestiä kysymällä "Can't you see how dangerous /The one you chose is / Which brings us back to / Might makes right." (andrewbirdmusic 2020.) The Nationalin laulajana tunnetuksi tullut Matt Berninger puolestaan toteaa, että vaaleissa onkin kyse valinnasta rohkeuden ja hyväsydämisyyden sekä pelon ja ilkeyden välillä. Hän on valinnut esitettäväkseen kappaleensa "Distant Axis", jossa hän laulaa jakolinjoista, ja toiveesta, että olisi mahdollista pienentää erottavia tekijöitä palasiksi hajoavassa maailmassa. (Berninger 2020.) Trumpin politikka merkitään tällä tavalla kansakuntaa jakavana, ja Bidenin luvataan palauttavan amerikkalaiset takaisin keskusteluyhteyteen keskenään.

Yhteisöllisyyden sanomaa luodaan videoiden audiovisuaalisissa valinnoissa. Osittain pandemia-ajan rajoitteiden takia videot on kuvattu pienimuotoisesti, tyypillisesti yhdellä otolla joko artistien kotona tai studioilla kännykkäkameralla tai yhdellä kameralla. Musiikki esitetään pääosin akustisina kitara- tai pianovetoisina versioina. Valinnat korostavat kotoisuutta, autenttisuutta ja intiimiyttä: artisti puhuu suoraan yleisölleen ilman musiikkiteollisuuden kehystä tai spektaakkelimaisuutta.

Akustisuus korostaa myös rauhan ja turvallisuuden tunteita, jotka toimivat arvoina Yhdysvaltojen yhteiskunnallisen ja poliittisen elämän kaoottisessa tilanteessa. Rauhallisen tunnelman puhuttelevuus on nähtävillä videoiden katsojakommenteissa. Monet kiittelevät akustisia versioita niiden kauneudesta ja liikuttavuudesta, mutta myös siitä, miten kappaleet antavat mahdollisuuden rauhoittua ja levätä kaiken hulluuden ja kaaoksen jälkeen. Sen lisäksi, että tukilaulut ottavat poliittisesti kantaa Bidenin kampanjan puolesta, niiden kenties vaikuttavin puoli onkin affektiivinen tunteisiin vetoaminen, jossa tarjotaan äänestäjille leposatamaa kansakunnan sisäisten ristiriitojen keskellä. Suuressa osassa valittuja kappaleita onkin selviytymiseen tai toiveikkuuteen liittyvä sävy. MisterWivesin Mandy esittää heidän Superbloom-kappaleensa, joka kertoo lannistumattomuudesta: "So you got that wildfire in your soul / Don't you ever let it go / Make it burn so bright that they all know" (MisterWives 2020). Puolestaan X Ambassadorien (2020) kappale Joyful lupaa: "Can't say I'm perfect, but I certainly tried, to be joyful, joyful."

Kappaleet pyrkivät puhuttelemaan äänestäjiä tunteellisella tasolla ja sitä kautta motivoimaan poliittiseen toimintaan. Kesha esittää kappaleensa Here Comes the Change, joka on alun perin tuomari Ruth Bader Ginsburgin elämäkertaelokuvasta On the Basis of Sex (2018, ohj. Mimi Leder). Laulun avulla hän kehottaa,

että vaikka on vaikeaa olla "the lighthning in the dark", on sen aika, sillä muutos on tulossa. (Kesha 2020.) Daya (2020) puolestaan pyytää The Chainsmokersien kappaleen *Don't Let Me Down* kautta: "I need you right now, don't let me down." Tämän voi tulkita viittaavan kahteenkin suuntaan – yhtäältä äänestäjiin, jotta nämä lähtisivät liikkeelle ja muuttaisivat Yhdysvaltojen politiikan suunnan ja toisaalta Bidenin-Harrisin kampanjalle, jotta nämä seisoisivat lupaustensa takana voiton koittaessa.

Yhteenveto

Samalla kun musiikkivideokampanjointi kannusti äänestäjiä poliittiseen aktiivisuuteen, se toimi vastavetona Trumpin kampanjalle. Siinä missä monet artistit asettuivat mielellään tukemaan Bidenin ehdokkuutta, populaarimusiikin käyttö oli osoittautunut Trumpille kompastuskiveksi jo edellisen presidenttikampanjan aikana. Useat artistit, kuten Neil Young, Rihanna, Queen, Elton John, Adele, R.E.M., The Rolling Stones, Bruce Springsteen ja Pharrell Williams, ovat kieltäneet Trumpia käyttämästä heidän kappaleitaan kannatustilaisuuksissaan. Osa artisteista on muotoillut asian lakikysymykseksi siitä, että heidän musiikkiaan käytetään ilman lupaa. Toiset ovat huomioineet myös ideologisen näkökulman ja eivät halua musiikkiaan yhdistettäväksi Trumpin poliittiseen sanomaan. Esimerkiksi George Harrisonin perilliset kielsivät The Beatlesien kappaleen *Here Comes the Sun* käytön Ivanka Trumpin esittelymusiikkina, mutta ehdottivat, että he olisivat saattaneet hyväksyä *Beware of Darkness* kappaleen käytön (Ivie 2020). Vaikka kiellot eivät ole välttämättä toimineet käytännössä, ne rakentavat symbolisen eleen, jolla kyseiset artistit ovat irtisanoutuneet populaarikulttuurisesta tuesta Trumpin populismille.

Bidenille osoitettu laaja tuki muusikoiden parissa on toiminut arvovaltavoittona populaarikulttuurin kentällä. Ratkaisu toimii myös siksi, että se oli mahdollista toteuttaa positiivisesti, ilman tarvetta turvautua negatiiviseen kampanjointiin. Vaikka artistit lähettivät piiloviestejä Trumpin hallinnon suuntaan, kukaan ei keskity haukkumaan istuvaa presidenttiä, vaan syihin, joiden takia he kannattavat Bidenia. Sama tendenssi näkyy kampanjaa ideoineen Kurlandin kommentissa, jossa hän toteaa, ettei tarkoituksena ollut tehdä "anti-Trump" politiikkaa, koska on tehokkaampaa keskittyä asioihin, jotka tukevat Bidenin ehdokkuutta kuin vain vastustaa Trumpin politiikkaa (Baltin 2020).

Vaikkakin musiikkikampanjaa voidaan pitää arvovaltavoittona Bidenille, ei kampanja itsessään ollut valtaisa menestys, jos sitä tarkastellaan sen tavoittamien yleisömäärien kannalta. Keskimäärin #TeamJoeSings kampanjavideot tavoittivat 25 500 kuuntelijaa, ja yhteensä videot ovat keränneet alle puoli miljoonaa kuuntelukertaa YouTubessa. Jos lukua verrataan esimerkiksi viimeiseen Bidenin ja Trumpin televisioväittelyyn, joka keräsi noin 63 miljoonaa katsojaa (Nielsen 2020), voidaan kyseenalaistaa, kuinka merkittävänä musiikkikampanjaa voidaan pitää. Kampanja kuitenkin osoittaa, miten tuomalla muusikoiden äänen kuuluviin, kampanja pystyi hyödyntämään populaarikulttuurin ja sosiaalisen median affektiivisia ulottuvuuksia tavoittamaan erilaisia kohdeyleisöjä. Samalla #TeamJoeSings -tukikampanja täydensi Bidenin julkista kuvaa tunteellisella tasolla. Artistit korostivat puheissaan yhteisöllisyyttä ja kappaleiden valittu audiovisuaalinen esitystyyli tarjosi hengähdystauon ja korosti Bidenin kykyä tarjota turvaa ja rauhaa kansalaisille. Siinä missä kampanjoita tutkittaessa keskitytään usein siihen, mitä ehdokkaat sanovat ja tekevät, onkin tärkeää huomioida, miten kampanjoita tukevat elementit voivat täydentää niitä piirteitä, joita yleisö kaipaa, mutta itse poliitikko ei omalla profiilillaan kenties pysty tarjoamaan.

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"Jonkin muun" voima: alkuperäiskansojen somekampanjat ja Yhdysvaltain 2020 presidentinvaalit

Reetta Humalajoki
reetta.humalajoki [a] utu.fi
PhD, Historia-aineiden yliopisto-opettaja
Historian, kulttuurin ja taiteiden tutkimuksen laitos
Turun yliopisto

Yhdysvaltain politiikassa yleensä unohdetuilla alkuperäiskansoilla oli vuoden 2020 presidentinvaaleissa poikkeuksellisen merkittävä rooli. Valtaosin demokraatteja kannattavat alkuperäiskansaäänestäjät varmistivat Bidenin voiton erityisesti Wisconsinissa ja Arizonassa (NoiseCat 2020). Vaalien jälkeen Biden vahvisti alkuperäiskansojen kasvavaa asemaa liittovaltion politiikassa nimittämällä laguna pueblo -kansaan kuuluvan Deb Haalandin sisäministeriksi. Miten pitkään poliittisen keskustelun ulkopuolelle suljettu ryhmä nousi näissä vaaleissa tärkeään asemaan? Vastaus löytyy sosiaalisesta mediasta.

Jo vuonna 2016, hupa-, yurok- ja karuk-kansoihin kuuluva tutkija Cutcha Risling Baldy (2016) kuvasi sosiaalista mediaa tärkeänä työkaluna, jolla alkuperäiskansat voivat tukea sekä identiteettiensä tuntemusta että heidän itsemääräämisoikeutensa toteutumista. Viimeistään alkuperäiskansojen aktivoituminen Donald Trumpin ja Joe Bidenin välisissä vaaleissa on osoittanut nämä väitteet todeksi. Pitkän vaalikampanjoinnin aikana ja vielä sen jälkeen eri aktivistit ovat vetäneet useita somekampanjoita, joiden tarkoituksena on ollut vahvistaa alkuperäiskansojen poliittista osallistumista Yhdysvalloissa.

Jo esivaaleihin valmistautuessa sosiaalinen media osoittautui alkuperäiskansojen poliittisen toimijuuden välineeksi. Lokakuussa 2018 demokraattien presidenttiehdokkuutta tavoitteleva senaattori Elizabeth Warren vastasi Trumpin pitkään jatkuneeseen ivaan julkaisemalla nettisivuillaan ja Facebookissa videon DNA-testituloksistaan. Trump oli jo vuosia väittänyt Warrenin pyrkineen edistämään uraansa tekaistuilla cherokee-sukujuurilla. Videolla Stanfordin yliopiston genetiikan professori kuitenkin kertoi DNA-testin viittaavan siihen, että Warrenilla on johonkin alkuperäiskansaan kuuluvia kaukaisia esivanhempia.

Trumpin ja Warrenin välisessä loanheitossa alkuperäiskansojen näkökulma kiistaan unohtui, kunnes erityisesti alkuperäiskansoihin kuuluvat tutkijat ja aktivistit ottivat keskusteluun kantaa sosiaalisessa mediassa. Heti videon ilmestyttyä sekä Oklahoman cherokee-kansan hallinto että tutkija Kim Tallbear julkaisivat sitä kritisoivat lausunnot. Näiden mukaan Warrenin video loukkasi alkuperäiskansojen itsemääräämisoikeutta ja antoi suuren yleisön virheellisesti ymmärtää DNA-testeillä olevan sijaa alkuperäiskansojen identiteettien määrittelyssä. Lausuntoja jaettiin eri sosiaalisen median alustoilla tuhansia kertoja. Vaikka alun perin valtamedian uutisoinnissa alkuperäiskansojen mielipiteitä ei juuri kuultu, jo seuraavana päivänä esimerkiksi *Washington Post* raportoi Warrenin suututtaneen alkuperäiskansojen edustajia "poliittisesti kiistanalaisella DNA-testillään" (Horton 2018).

DNA-testitapaus antoi osviittaa alkuperäiskansa-aktivistien tavasta ottaa osaa liitovaltion politiikkaan sosiaalisen median kautta. Somekampanjointi jatkui ja voimistui vaalien aikana. Alkuperäiskansojen oikeusjärjestö National Congress of American Indians koordinoi valtavaa #NativeVote kampanjaa, joka pyrki lisäämään alkuperäiskansojen äänestysaktiivisuutta. Kampanjan tarkoituksena oli vastustaa alkuperäiskansaäänestäjien historiallista ja rakenteellista syrjintää vaalitilanteissa jakamalla tietoa äänestysoikeuksista ja -käytännöistä (About Native Vote, n.d.).

Somekampanjalla ja aktivistien toiminnalla olikin merkittävä rooli Bidenin voitossa. Vuoden 2020 vaaleissa demokraatit voittivat viisi Trumpille edellisissä presidentinvaaleissa mennyttä osavaltiota. Esimerkiksi Arizonassa, jossa Bidenin voitto oli reilusta kymmenestä tuhannesta äänestä kiinni, reservaattimaiden vaalipiirit turvasivat demokraattien voiton. Vaalit olivat alkuperäiskansoille myös muilla tavoin historialliset – niissä valittiin ensimmäistä kertaa peräti kuusi alkuperäiskansoihin kuuluvaa edustajaa kongressiin.

Heti vaalien jälkeen alkuperäiskansa-aktivistit siirtyivät aktiivisesti kannattamaan Deb Haalandin valintaa sisäministeriksi #DebforInterior -tunnisteen kautta. Tunniste lähti kiertämään Twitterissä pian vaalitulosten ratkettua marraskuussa 2020 ja jatkui, kunnes senaatti vahvisti Haalandin nimeämisen maaliskuussa 2021.

Vaikka sosiaalisen median kautta alkuperäiskansa-aktivistit saivat äänensä kuuluviin ennennäkemättömin tavoin, perinteisessä mediassa nämä jäivät useimmiten kuulematta. Esimerkiksi vaalitulosten raportoinnissa CNN käytti eri etnisten ryhmien äänestysintoa kuvaavaa taulukkoa, johon moni alkuperäiskansaan kuuluva somekäyttäjä tarttui. Taulukossa valkoisten, mustien, latinoiden ja aasialaisten lisäksi oli listattuna "jokin muu" (*something else*). #SomethingElse -tunnisteen avulla nämä käyttäjät levittivät meemejä, jotka huumorin voimin kritisoivat alkuperäiskansojen marginalisointia uutismediassa. Meemeistä heijastui turhautuminen valtaväestön taipumuksiin virheellisesti määritellä alkuperäiskansoja tai jopa kokonaan unohtaa heidän olemassaolonsa.
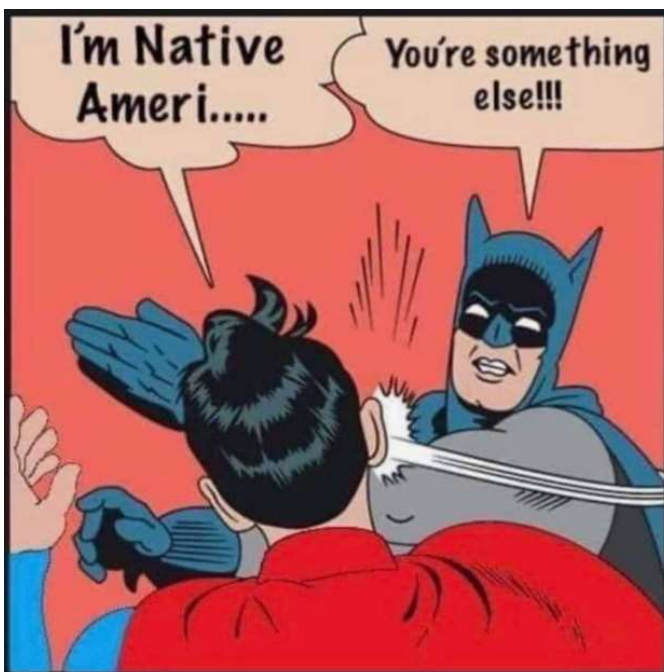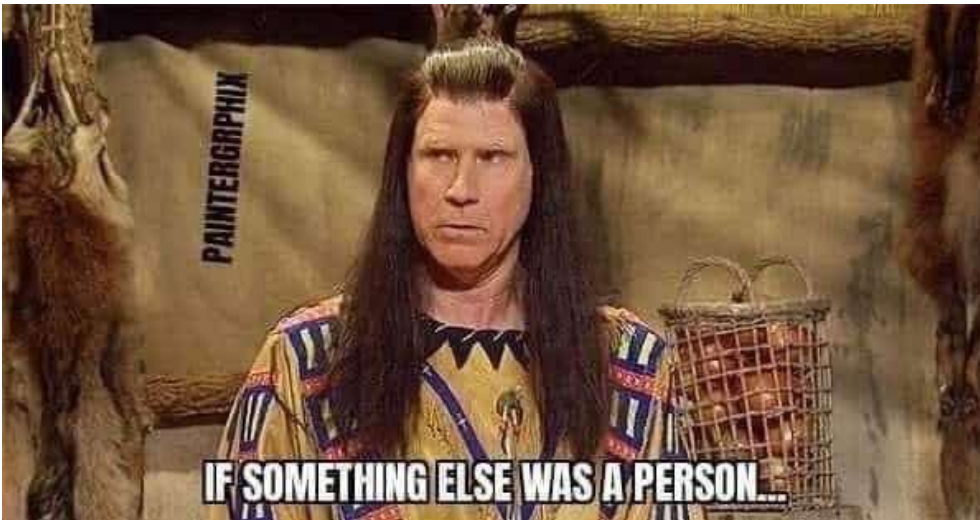
#SomethingElse somekampanja osoitti vahvasti sosiaalisen median voimaa ei ainoastaan poliittisena työkaluna vaan yhteisöllisyyden ja identiteetin luomisen ja vahvistamisen välineenä. Vaikka perinteinen media ja valtaväestö sen edelleen saattavat unohtaa, vuoden 2020 presidentinvaalien myötä on selvää, että alkuperäiskansoilla on tärkeä rooli yhdysvaltalaisessa politiikassa. Heitä ei kannata ylenkatsoa.

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Alueellisuus, Vaalit, Media ja Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimus

Rani-Henrik Andersson
rani-henrik.andersson [a] helsinki.fi
PhD, Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksen vanhempi yliopistolehtori
Helsingin yliopisto

Yhdysvaltain presidentinvaaleissa 2020, kuten aina, seurattiin kiihkeästi vaalien etenemistä eri alueilla, aluksi lähinnä osavaltioiden tasolla. Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksen yksi tärkeimmistä lähestymistavoista on juuri eri alueiden ymmärtäminen, regionalismi, oli sitten kyse osavaltioista, piirikunnista tai intiaanireservaateista. Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksessa käytetään poliittishallinnollisten jakojen ohella muitakin lähestymistapoja alueen monimuotoisuuden ymmärtämiseksi.

Usein käytetty alueellinen jako on bio- tai ekoregionalismi, jossa maantieteelliset, historialliset ja kulttuuriset rajat ovat analyysin pohjana. Puhutaan niin sanotuista orgaanisista rajoista, jotka ovat häilyviä ja muuttuvia. Eräs tunnetuimpia yrityksiä analysoida Pohjois-Amerikkaa alueellisesta näkökulmasta on Joel Garreaun *The Nine Nations of North America* (1981), jossa hän jakaa Pohjois-Amerikan alueisiin, joiden erityislaatuisuutta leimaavat tietyt tekijät, ovatpa ne sitten kulttuurisia, historiallisia, taloudellisia, luonnonmaantieteellisiä tai biologisia. Hieman modernimpi on Colin Woodardin esittämä regionalismi kirjassa *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America* (2011), joka pohjautuu Garreauta enemmän historialliseen kehitykseen. Usein mediassa tarkastellaan vaalien yhteydessä asioita liian yleisellä tasolla, ja unohdetaan Yhdysvaltain alueiden monimuotoisuus.

Vuoden 2020 vaaleissa ei riittänyt, että tarkasteltiin vaalien etenemistä osavaltiotasolla. Vaali-illan aikana näytti siltä, että Donald Trump saa valtavan määrän ääniä ja voittaa vaalit, mutta monille Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksen edustajille oli selvää, että Floridan voitto ei vielä takaa vaaleja Trumpille, toisin kuin media ja muutamat asiantuntijat julistivat aamuvarhaisella. Oli tärkeää ymmärtää, että eri alueiden, osavaltioiden, kaupunkien ja piirikuntien sisällä on valtavasti vaihtelua ja ryhmiä, joiden äänet olivat vasta tuloillaan. Ne tulisivat olemaan, ja olivat, pääsääntöisesti demokraattien. Ääniä tuli postissa, ja niitä tuli suurkaupunkien voimakkaasti demokraattien halussa olevilta alueilta sekä eri etnisten vähemmistöjen asuttamilta alueilta. Oli tärkeää ymmärtää, miltä alueilta äänet tulivat ja keitä näillä alueilla asui.

Valaisen asiaa muutamalla esimerkillä. Yhdysvalloissa on 574 intiaanikansaa, joista osa asuu reservaateissa, mutta suurin osa eri puolilla maata suurkaupungeista maaseudulle. Usein heidän merkityksensä on presidentinvaaleissa ollut vähäinen monista historiallisista ja kulttuurisista syistä johtuen. Monesti myös ajatellaan, että he ovat yhtenäisesti demokraatteja, koska stereotyyppisesti luullaan, että he ovat köyhiä ja siksi kannattavat puoluetta, joka ajaa sosiaalisia uudistuksia. Tämä ei kuitenkaan pidä paikkaansa. Monet etenkin lounaisalueen navajoista, hopeista ja puebloista ovat perinteisesti olleet republikaaneja. Tällä kertaa he kuitenkin esimerkiksi Arizonassa äänestivät hieman kansasta riippuen noin 60–90 prosenttisesti demokraatteja, mikä takasi siellä voiton Bidenille. Samoin tietyt piirikunnat Minnesotassa olivat lähes 100 %

Bidenin takana juuri alkuperäiskansaväestön ansiosta. Trumpin politiikka alkuperäiskansoja kohtaan oli ollut syrjivää ja rasistista, joten tämä oli nähtävissä.

Ehkä ensimmäistä kertaa alkuperäiskansojen äänillä oli ratkaiseva merkitys vaaleissa. Biden palkitsi heidät nimittämällä laguna pueblo Deb Haalandin sisäministeriksi, joka vastaa myös alkuperäiskansojen asioista. Samalla hän vastaa valtion maiden, kuten kansallispuistojen ja luonnonsuojelualueiden hallinnoimisesta. Näillä asioilla on suuri merkitys monille alkuperäiskansoille, jotka esimerkiksi arktisella alueella kärsivät konkreettisesti ilmastonmuutoksesta. Vaikka alkuperäiskansoja ei pidä stereotyyppisesti yhdistää luonnonsuojeluun, heidän maailmankuvassaan ympäristö ja ihminen ovat kuitenkin läheisemmässä, tasapainoisemmassa suhteessa kuin ns. länsimaisessa maailmankuvassa. Ympäristön muuttuminen vaikuttaa suoraan monien elinkeinoon. Lisäksi noin 20 % Yhdysvaltain alueen öljy-, kivihiili-, ja maakaasuvarannoista sijaitsee alkuperäiskansojen mailla. Trumpin hallinto pyrki häikäilemättömästi hyödyntämään sekä näitä että suojelualueiden varantoja. Biden puolestaan lupasi tehdä alkuperäiskansojen kanssa yhteistyötä näiden alueiden suojelemiseksi ja heidän elinkeinojensa ja elintapojensa turvaamiseksi. Tätä taustaa vasten Bidenin menestys alkuperäiskansojen parissa ei ollut yllätys.

Alueellisuus liittyy myös kulttuurieroihin ja etnisiin ryhmiin. Usein stereotyyppisesti ajatellaan, että esimerkiksi latinoväestö on köyhää ja siksi demokraatteja. Hekään eivät kuitenkaan ole monoliittinen ryhmä, vaan eri alueilla on hyvin erilaista väestöä. He ovat monesti katolisia ja siksi ajatellaan, että he kannattavat pääsääntöisesti monien republikaanien ajamaa aborttikieltoa. Mutta tässäkään ei pidä ajatella liian stereotyyppisesti, sillä ylivoimaisesti suurin osa latinoista katsoo, että naisen oikeuteen päättää asioistaan ei pidä puuttua. Tässä asiassa he ovat valmiita myös vastustamaan kirkon johtoa. Usein ensimmäisen sukupolven siirtolaiset kannattavat demokraatteja, mutta myöhemmät siirtyvät republikaanien kannattajiksi. Väestön eroista todettakoon, että Floridan kuubalaiset ovat pääsääntöisesti entistä kuubalaista yläluokkaa, joka pakeni maasta ja vastusti Castron politiikkaa. Republikaanipuolue on heille se, joka on lähempänä tätä ajattelua. Siksikään Floridan pysyminen republikaaneilla ei ollut yllätys. Georgiassa taas osa latinoista on kotoisin Puerto Ricosta, josta hurrikaani Marian jälkeen muutettiin muun muassa Georgiaan. Trumpin käytös puertoricolaisia kohtaan ennen ja jälkeen hurrikaanin oli jälleen kerran syrjivää, ja se saattoi kostautua vaaleissa. Toki ylivoimaisesti suurin osa latinoista niin Georgiassa kuin muuallakin Yhdysvalloissa tulee Meksikosta ja Puerto Rico on tilastoissa toisena.

Mielenkiintoinen kysymys on tietysti se, miten latino määritellään, kuuluuko siihen espanjalaista alkuperää oleva väestö vai myös muu Latinalaisesta Amerikasta peräisin oleva väestö, kuten eri alkuperäiskansoihin kuuluva ihmiset. Monet heistä eivät itse asiassa halua tulla luokitelluiksi latinoiksi, vaan ovat esimerkiksi mayoja tai opatoja. Esimerkiksi Washington DC:n alueen mayat haluaisivat pikemminkin tulla luokitelluiksi – ei Yhdysvaltain alkuperäiskansaksi – vaan Yhdysvalloissa asuviksi mayoiksi. Tässä on tietysti kysymys identiteetistä, mutta jos tällaiseen luokitteluun mentäisiin, niin se tosi tietysti mielenkiintoisen lisän keskusteluun "latinojen" äänestyskäyttäytymisestä.

Viimeisenä esimerkkinä alueellisuuden merkityksestä toimii Wyoming, joka on hyvin republikaaninen osavaltio. Toki senkin sisällä on demokraattien pieniä "linnakkeita". Wyoming on väkiluvultaan pieni, alle 600 000 asukasta, joten sen merkitys vaaleissa on vähäinen. Wyoming on kuitenkin yksi maailman suurimpia kivihiilen tuottajia, ja öljy ja kaasuvarannotkin ovat huomattavia. Monien elintaso riippuu hiilestä, ja siksi Trumpin kannatus on suuri. Toisalta kaikessa hiljaisuudessa siirtymä kivihiilestä uusiutuvien energiamuotojen käyttöönottoon on tapahtunut Wyomingissakin. Valtavia tuulienergiapuistoja on syntynyt viime vuosien aikana. Ei kuitenkaan niin paljon, että se olisi merkittävästi muuttanut ihmisten poliittisia mielipiteitä. Wyoming on myös perinteisesti ollut cowboyden ja ranchien maa, ja on sitä yhä.

Trumpin suosio oli kovalla koetuksella, kun kauppasota Kiinan kanssa johti lihakarjatuotteiden myynnin romahtamiseen. Trump kuitenkin pelasti kannatuksensa Wyomingissa tekemällä sopimuksen Japanin kanssa. Liha meni jälleen kaupaksi, ja karjankasvattajat olivat tyytyväisiä. Tämä jäi Suomessa vähemmälle huomiolle, mikä onkin ymmärrettävää, koska Wyoming on poliittisesti kuitenkin niin "selvä tapaus". Silti tämä toimii hyvänä esimerkkinä siitä, miten eri alueilla eri asiat ovat ihmisten elämän, ja siten politiikan, keskiössä. Tämä onkin regionalismin ja myös Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksen ydin, ja sen selvittämiseksi ja ymmärtämiseksi kenttätyöllä on suuri merkitys. Tämän moninaisuuden ymmärtäminen voi olla haaste ja vaikeaa, mutta Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimus antaa siihen erinomaiset välineet, ja siksi Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksella on myös paljon annettavaa suomalaiselle mediakeskustelulle.

Uutta valtavirtaa – Trumpin jälkeinen media-aika

Benita Heiskanen
benita.heiskanen [a] utu.fi
PhD, Dos., Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksen professori
Pohjois-Amerikan tutkimuksen John Morton -keskus
Turun yliopisto

Donald Trumpin presidenttikauden aikana tuskailimme usein, miksi toimittajat tarttuivat presidentin jokaiseen tunteita kuohuttavaan, pikkutuntien twiittiin. Trumpin presidenttiyden aikainen julkinen keskustelu muistutti showbisnestä, jonka keskiössä olivat henkilökultti, mediakohut ja alati vaihtuvat spektaakkelit. Asiakysymykset jäivät sivuseikaksi, sanomat yksinkertaistettiin ja yksityiskohtien mutkat vedettiin suoriksi. Keskeistä ei ollut mitä sanottiin, vaan *miten* asiat ilmaistiin.

Yhdysvaltain politiikan muuttuessa ympärivuorokautiseksi twiittien seuraamiseksi koko poliittinen kulttuuri muuttui. Twitter-uutisoinnilla ylläpidettiin jatkuvaa moraaliraivoa, mutta vasta Trumpin kauden jälkeinen etäisyys antaa osviittaa, mistä ilmiössä oli pohjimmiltaan kyse. Trumpin presidenttiyden jälkeen ja Joe Bidenin virkaanastumisen aikana kerätystä mediatutkimusdatasta voi päätellä, että median valintoja oli koko ajan ohjannut ansaintalogiikka.

Nielsen Media Research -datan mukaan CNN nautti ennätysmäisiä katsojalukuja Trumpin hallinnon viimeisinä kuukausina, mutta menetti 36 % katsojista vallanvaihdon jälkeisinä kuukausina. Tutkimuksen mukaan CNN:ia oli seurannut 4.11.2020–20.1.2021 välisenä aikana parhaaseen katsomisaikaan 2,5 miljoonaa henkeä; 21.1.2021–15.3.2021 välisenä aikana luku oli enää 1,6. miljoonaa katsojaa.

Heti 2016 vaalien jälkeen oli ollut ilmeistä, että Yhdysvaltain mediakulttuuri oli taitekohdassa. Niin kutsuttu valtavirtamedia oli koko vaalikauden erilaisten hyökkäysten kohteena ja kärsi useita kolhuja. Vaalipäivänä 8. marraskuuta 2016 The New York Times -lehti otsikoi: "Pystyykö media toipumaan näistä vaaleista?"

Vastaus riippuu siitä, kenen näkökulmasta asiaa katsoo.

Valtavirtamedia – sekä sähköinen että printtilehdistö – oli ollut jo useita vuosia muutoksen kourissa. Yhtäältä kyse oli infrastruktuurimuutoksesta. Kymmenessä vuodessa päivälehdissä työskentelevien journalistien määrä oli laskenut yli 50 %. Niin toimittajat kuin lukijatkin olivat siirtyneet verkkoalustoille.

Myös luottamuspula oli ilmeinen. Vuonna 2016 vain 32 % yhdysvaltalaisista (14 % republikaaneja, 51 % demokraatteja ja 30 % sitoutumattomia) sanoi luottavansa median raportoivan uutiset "täysimittaisesti, täsmällisesti ja oikeudenmukaisesti." Luku oli alhaisin sitten vuoden 1972, jolloin Gallup alkoi kyselyä tehdä. Vain kahdeksan vuotta aikaisemmin luku oli ollut vielä 40–45 % välillä.

Trumpin myötävaikutuksena syntynyt "totuuden jälkeinen aika" loi tiedon tuottamiseen, jakeluun ja kuluttamiseen liittyvän kriisin, joka sai kansalaiset kyseenalaistamaan koko olemassa olevan mediainfrastruktuurin.

Mediakulttuurin murros nivoutui sukupolvikokemuksiin. CNN:n katsojatappiot olivat rajuja sen tärkeimmässä kohderyhmässä: 47 % 25–54 vuotiaista lopetti kanavan seuraamisen Joe Bidenin presidenttiyden myötä. Elokuussa 2022 The New York Times -lehti uutisoi CNN:n kärsineen miljardin tappiot.

Muutosten häviäjiä olivat kansalliset televisioverkot ja paikallislehdet, voittajia erilaiset verkkomediat sekä sosiaalisen median alustat. Vanhan ajan portinvartijoiden kanssa ei edes keskusteltu; ne yksinkertaisesti ohitettiin. Sen sijaan lähes kaikki kansalliset televisioverkot alkoivat muokata ohjelmistojaan kuunneltavaan muotoon podcast-alustoille.

Etenkin Z-sukupolvi (1997–2012) ja millenniaalit (1981–1996) siirsivät poliittisen keskustelun omille mukavuusalueilleen Internetin verkkoalustoille. Nuoremmat sukupolvet loivat poliittisen osallistumisen kulttuurin podcastien, verkkomedioiden ja sosiaalisen median avulla jakamalla otsikoita ja videoita TikTokissa, Snapchatissa, Instagramissa ja Twitterissä.

Poliittisen keskustelun siirtymisestä digialustoihin oli tullut uutta valtavirtaa.

Trumpin poistaminen Twitteristä Capitolin valtauksen jälkeen korosti uusmedioiden tee-se-itse -toimintatapaa. Entinen presidentti antoi piut paut potkuille ja perusti oman sosiaalinen mediansa –Truth Social – josta tuli Trumpismin pää-äänitorvi valtakauden jälkeen. Twitterin uusi omistaja Elon Musk palautti ensitöikseen Trumpin jäsenyyden, jonka seurauksena monet käyttäjät irtisanoivat oman tilinsä vastalauseeksi.

Vuoden 2016 presidentinvaalien jälkeen osasimme aavistaa poliittisen kulttuurin murrosta, mutta vasta vuoden 2020 jälkeisten vaalien myötä pystyimme havainnoimaan, miten perusteellisen ja pysyvän muutoksen trumpismi aiheutti mediakulttuuriin. Yksityiskohdista emme vielä tiedä, mutta Trump tulee hallitsemaan media- ja somekeskusteluja myös vuoden 2024 presidentinvaaleissa. Paluuta vanhaan ei ole.

Polarisoimme itsemme hengiltä – Neil Postman ja politiikan viihteellistymisen haaste

Kimmo Ahonen
kimmo.ahonen [a] tuni.fi
FT, projektipäällikkö
Tampereen yliopisto, Pori

Yhdysvaltain politiikan nykytilaa käsittelevissä analyyseissä toistuu väite politiikan polarisaatiosta. Kongressi on niin jakaantunut, että kompromisseja vaativien päätösten teko on yhä vaikeampaa. Yhteiskunnallisessa keskustelussa maltilliset äänenpainot hukkuvat kulttuurisodan lietsojien tuottaman pauhun alle.

Vastakkainasettelun kiihtymisestä on puhuttu jo vuosikymmeniä. Vuonna 2014 Pew Research Center julkaisi laajan kyselytutkimuksen, joka osoitti poliittisen polarisaation kasvaneen merkittävästi vuosina 1994–2014. Puolueiden väliset jakolinjat olivat syventyneet: demokraatit ja republikaanit olivat asiakysymyksissä yhä kauempana toisistaan ja suhtautuivat toisiinsa yhä kielteisemmin.

Moni paikantaa polarisaation käännekohdaksi Bill Clintonin ensimmäisen presidenttikauden ja varsinkin vuoden 1994 kongressivaalit, joissa republikaanit saivat Newt Gingrichin johdolla murskavoiton Clintonin demokraateista. Gingrichin ja Clintonin ottelu johti poliittiseen pattitilanteeseen ja kongressin päätöksenteon halvaantumiseen. Clintonin presidenttikausien aikana myös oikeistolainen media sai uutta tuulta purjeisiinsa. Rush Limbaugh keräsi miljoonia kuulijoita räyhäkkäillä radio-ohjelmillaan, joiden polttoaineena oli Clintonien ja liberaalien estoton pilkkaaminen.

Donald Trumpin presidentinvaalikampanja vuonna 2016 kärjisti entisestään vastakkainasetteluja, jotka olivat muhineet jo Barack Obaman presidenttikausilla. Vasemmistolainen dokumentaristi Michael Moore totesi ennen vuoden 2016 presidentinvaaleja, että Donald Trump olisi "ihmiskäsikranaatti", jonka turhautunut äänestäjäkunta heittäisi kostona koko poliittiselle järjestelmälle. Siksi Moore piti myös Trumpin voittoa todennäköisenä.

Juuri Trumpin valtaannousu ja presidenttikausi jyrkensi poliittisen polarisaation henkiseksi asemasodaksi, jossa karsastettiin kaikenlaisia kompromisseja vastapuolen kanssa. Kongressissa oli yhä vähemmän keskitien poliitikkoja, ja yhä enemmän niitä, joille tärkeintä oli oman puolueen (voimakkaasti ideologisoidun) agendan ajaminen hinnalla millä hyvänsä. Nykytilanteessa MAGA-republikaanien ja vasemmistodemokraattien näkemykset ja poliittiset diskurssit ovat niin kaukana toisistaan, että yhteisen keskustelupohjan löytäminen näyttää haasteelliselta tai jokseenkin mahdottomalta.

Vuoden 2020 presidentinvaaleissa Donald Trumpin ja Joe Bidenin ensimmäinen televisioväittely rikkoi mudanheiton aiemmat ennätykset televisioitujen vaaliväittelyjen historiassa. Sivistyneen argumentoinnin kanssa sillä ei ollut paljoakaan tekemistä. Väitteeseen poliittisen keskusteluilmapiirin polarisaatiosta on siis helppo uskoa ja olen sitä itsekin toistanut eri yhteyksissä.

On kuitenkin muistettava, että Yhdysvaltain presidentinvaalien historiassa likaiset temput eivät ole mitään uutta. Ne osattiin jo vuoden 1800 vaaleissa, jossa vastakkain olivat Thomas Jefferson ja John Adams. Kummankin ehdokkaan kannattajat keksivät jo silloin mitä mielikuvituksellisempia ilkeyksiä toisesta ehdokkaasta. Siinä mielessä polarisaatio, ainakin jos se ymmärretään eri ryhmien välisen vastakkainasettelun kiihtymisenä, on yhtä vanha kuin Yhdysvaltain poliittinen järjestelmä. Kaksipuoluejärjestelmä tuottaa jo itsessään polarisaatiota, ristiriitaistenkin poliittisten näkemysten keskittymistä kahteen kilpailevaan puolueeseen. Kampanjoinnin metodit ovat toki historian saatossa muuttuneet, ja mediateknologian muutos on mahdollistanut uusia muotoja mudanheitolle.

Yhdysvallat on monien vastakkainasettelujen maa, kuten Ari Helo osoittaa erinomaisessa teoksessaan *Amerikan Yhdysvaltojen historia* (2022). Puhe nykypäivän Yhdysvaltojen jakautuneisuudesta asettuu toiseen valoon, kun sitä arvioidaan suhteessa USA:n 1800-luvun historiaan: Intiaaniväestön alistamiseen, orjajärjestelmään ja sisällissotaan (1861–1865), jossa kuoli noin 750 000 ihmistä. Tai yhtä lailla jos arvioidaan sisällissodan jälkeistä aikaa, jolloin rotuerottelu jatkui etelävaltioissa, lopulta korkeimman oikeuden siunaamana Plessy v. Ferguson -päätöksellä (1896). Näistä verisistä vastakkainasetteluista on kuitenkin päästy hitaasti eteenpäin kohti tasa-arvoisempaa yhteiskuntaa. Vaikka tämä 1800-luvun perintö elää yhdysvaltalaisessa kulttuurissa, on nykyinen somemöykkääminen kuitenkin kovin kesyä "polarisaatiota" suhteessa menneen ajan konflikteihin.

Toteutuivatko Huxleyn dystopiat?

Edellä sanottu ei silti poista sitä tosiasiaa, että mediakulttuurissa on tapahtunut valtavia, poliittista polarisaatiota lietsovia muutoksia viime vuosikymmeninä. Eräs avain näiden muutosten ymmärtämiseen voisi olla mediakriitikko Neil Postmanin (1931–2003) teos *Huvitamme itsemme hengiltä: Julkinen keskustelu viihteen valtakaudella* (Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business, 1985).

Postman käsittelee teoksessaan yhdysvaltalaista julkista keskustelua, jota leimasi yhä syvenevä pyrkimys viihteellisyyteen. Syyttävä sormi osoitti televisioon, joka välineenä viihteellisti politiikan helposti omaksuttaviksi iskulauseiksi. Teoksen ankarassa televisiokritiikissä on toki myös nyansseja. Postman korosti, että televisio toimii välineenä parhaiten silloin kun se esittää "roskaviihdettä", ja huonoimmin silloin, kun se esittää asiaohjelmia "viihteellisessä paketissa".

Teoksen kirjoitustapa on pohdiskelevan kantaaottava- Postman esittää argumenttinsa selkeästi eikä pakene postmodernin ironian tai käsiteviidakon taakse. Siksi se on yhä nautittavaa luettavaa.

Esipuheessaan Postman nostaa esiin kaksi tieteiskirjallisuuden klassista dystopiaa: George Orwellin *Vuonna 1984* (Nineteen Eighty-Four, 1949) ja Aldous Huxleyn *Uljas uusi maailma* (Brave New World, 1932). Molemmat kuvaavat totalitaristista järjestelmää, mutta niiden uhkakuva on erilainen. Kuten Postman asian muotoilee:

> "Orwell varoittaa, että joudumme ulkoa päin tulevan sorron alaisiksi. Huxleyn visiossa taas ei tarvita Isoa Veljeä, jotta ihmiset menettävät itsenäisyytensä, kypsyytensä ja historiansa. Huxleyn näkemyksen mukaan ihmiset alkavat rakastaa sortoa, jumaloida tekniikkaa, joka murentaa heidän ajattelukykynsä".

Postman katsoi, että 1980-luvun Yhdysvalloissa Huxleyn ennustukset olivat toteutumassa hyvää vauhtia. Viihteellisyydestä oli tullut julkisuudessa poliittisen debatoinnin ylin mittari.

Postman oli huolissaan valistuksen ihanteiden katoamisesta ja kirjallisen korkeakulttuurin rapautumisesta. Näkemys 1980-luvun mediakulttuurista oli kovin pessimistinen. Sen vastakohdaksi hän maalasi romantisoidun kuvan painetun sanan hallitseman kulttuurin menneistä loiston päivistä. Siinä poliittinen väittely perustui kirjallisesti sivistyneiden miesten rationaaliseen argumentointiin.

Passiivisesta töllöttäjästä aktiiviseen somettajaan

Kun opiskelijana 1990-luvulla luin Postmanin teosta, pidin hänen teesejään elitistisenä. Nyt luettuna moni sen väitteistä tuntuu profeetalliselta.

Muutama vuosi teoksen julkaisemisen jälkeen mediasisältöjen sääntelyssä tapahtui muutoksia, jotka aikalaisten näkökulmasta olivat pieniä, mutta joiden merkitys paljastui vasta jälkikäteen. Vuonna 1987 kumottiin uutistoiminnan tasapuolisuutta vaalinut "Fairness Doctrine", joka oli ollut voimassa vuodesta 1949 lähtien. Sen tarkoituksena oli varmistaa, että radiossa ja myöhemmin televisiossa pyrittäisiin tasapuoliseen uutisointiin erityisen kiistanalaisia kysymyksiä käsiteltäessä.

Tämän "reiluusdokriinin" kumoamisen takana olivat erityisesti Ronald Reaganin hallinnon puuhamiehet. Presidentti osallistui myös purkutöihin. Kun demokraattienemmistöinen kongressi yritti vastavetona tehdä reiluusdoktriinista uutistoimintaa säätelevän lain, Reagan esti sen voimaantulon veto-oikeudellaan. Tuolloin kuitenkin myös eräät konservatiivit, kuten Newt Gingrich, kannattivat lakiesitystä. Heidän mukaansa se olisi toiminut suojakilpenä median vasemmistolaistumista vastaan. Jälkiviisaasti voidaan todeta, että median tasapuolisuusvaatimusten kumoaminen hyödytti nimenomaan konservatiiveja.

Esteiden poistuminen teki uutistoiminnasta asteittain yhä enemmän näkökulmajournalismia. Se avasi myös ovet Rush Limbaughin kaltaisille oikeiston uusille mediapersoonille, jotka pääsivät pidäkkeettömästi moukaroimaan poliittisia vastustajiaan. Seuraava looginen askel tästä oli vuonna 1996 perustettu Fox News, jota tosin kaapelitelevisioyhtiönä nämä reiluusdoktriinit eivät olisi muutenkaan sitoneet. Oscar Winberg osoittaa artikkelissaan, kuinka Fox News muutti mediakenttää ja uutistoimintaa ja kuinka siitä tuli republikaanien oma tv-kanava. Fox Newsin voimahahmo Roger Ailesin (1940–2017) kädenjälki näkyy yhä Yhdysvaltain politiikassa.

Poliittisen diskurssin viihteellistymisen prosessi on jatkunut sosiaalisen median aikakaudella, mutta saanut myös sellaisia piirteitä, joita Postman ei voinut 1980-luvulla ennakoida. Aldous Huxley kuvasi Uljaassa uudessa maailmassa mielihyväkeskeisyyden tuottamaa alistamista ja alistumista. Ihmiset valitsivat omat vankilansa, eikä "isoveljen" valvovaa silmää edes tarvittu.

Huxleyta siteeraava Postman korostaakin television viihteellistyvän diskurssin tuottamaa passivoitumista. Teesi sopii kuvaamaan televisio-ohjelmien poliittisen sisällön kehitystä, mutta sosiaalisen median käyttöprosessien ymmärtämiseen se on jo vanhentunut. Somen uutisvirtaa ahmiva ja sitä aktiivisesti jakava ja kommentoiva kuluttaja ei ole vain passiivinen vastaanottaja, vaan aktiivinen toimija. Algoritmit lietsovat vastakkainasettelua ja aktivoivat somekuluttajia. Avainsana ei ole enää passivoituminen, vaan entistä suurempi aktivoituminen: kierrosten lisääminen.

Natsidemokraatit ja historian muovailuvaha

Donald Trumpin saavuttama menestys on loogista jatkumoa sille politiikan viihteellistymisen prosessille, jota Neil Postman kirjassaan kuvasi. Postmanin kaltaiset 1980-luvun televisioajan tutkijat eivät voineetkaan

ennustaa myöhempää tositelevisio- ja some-ajan mediakulttuurin muutosta. Toisaalta, eivät siihen juuri kyenneet nykyisetkään politiikan mediakommentaattorit. Eräät konservatismin tutkijat, kuten Suomessa Markku Ruotsila, osasivat kyllä ennakoida konservatiivien "sydänmaiden kapinan" ja trumpismin poliittisen nosteen.

Poliittisen argumentoinnin rationaaliset lainalaisuudet selittävät silti huonosti Donald Trumpin kestosuosiota. Tai sitä, miten Marjorie Taylor Greenen (rep) kaltainen QAnonin rasistisia ja antisemitistisiä salaliittoteorioita viljelevä poliitikko voi päästä niinkin vaikutusvaltaiseen asemaan. Greene valittiin kongressin edustajainhuoneeseen vuoden 2020 vaaleissa, Georgian osavaltion 14. vaalipiirin edustajana. Vaalikampanjassaan ja kongressiedustajana hän on – suorastaan johdonmukaisesti – edennyt kohulausunnosta toiseen.

Greene on verrannut demokraatteja natseihin, koronarajoituksia holokaustiin ja Black Lives Matter -liikettä Ku Klux Klaniin. Kouluampumisten hän on väittänyt olevan lavastettuja, kuin myös syyskuun 2001 terrori-iskun. Kalifornian metsäpalojen syyksi Greene nimesi "avaruuslaserin", jota juutalainen Rothschild-suku käyttää tehdäkseen tilaa raideliikenteelle. Hän on tukenut aktiivisesti Donald Trumpia ja tämän "taistelua" globalistien johtamaa satanistista pedofiilirinkiä vastaan.

Greenen lausunnot olivat liikaa sekä kongressin demokraateille että osalle republikaaneista. Hänet siirrettiin syrjään edustajainhuoneen lainsäädäntötyöstä helmikuussa 2021, demokraattien ja myös 11 republikaanin äänillä. Se ei kuitenkaan merkinnyt, että hän olisi joutunut sivuraiteelle omassa puolueessaan. Hän säilytti asemansa republikaanien laitaoikeiston äänitorvena, joka antoi varauksettoman tukensa Trumpille ja jota myös Trump vastavuoroisesti ylisti. Greenen anteeksipyytelettömän radikaalit lausunnot nimenomaan nostivat hänet oikeistomedian lemmikiksi ja puolueen trumpilaisen siiven tähdeksi.

Mitä tulee medianäkyvyyteen, Greene on ollut republikaanien seuratumpia poliitikkoja kongressissa. Greenen menestys on heijastuma mediakulttuurista, jota hallitsee showpainin logiikka. Faktat ja historia ovat vain muovailuvahaa, josta rakennetaan omaan poliittiseen agendaan sopiva kertomus. Mitä enemmän se herättää huomiota, sen parempi.

Sauli Niinistö käytti Suomen vuoden 2006 presidentinvaaleissa mainoslausetta: "vastakkainasettelun aika on ohi". Hän oli väärässä. Sosiaalisen median aikakaudella vastakkainasettelu on asian ydin.

Lähteet

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