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Automated media and commercial populism

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ABSTRACT
This article considers the link between the increasingly important role of automated information curation online and the rise of what we call 'commercial populism'. We invoke the term to refer to the convergence of populism as a marketing tool – a way of selling, for example, nutritional supplements or survivalist merchandise – with political strategies that cater to the citizen as consumer (whose freedoms are framed in the individual register of personal taste unfettered from civic concerns or constraints). Perhaps unsurprisingly in this context, we draw on the example of Donald Trump's political rise, which while not unrelated to his particular idiosyncrasies, demonstrates how the automated curation of social media aligns itself with what the aggressive rise of commercial populism. The goal of such an analysis is to consider how the combination of hyper-commercialism with the formal attributes of social media contributes to inter-related political pathologies of polarization and conspiracy theory. The consumer-oriented model of personal taste catered to by algorithmic curation highlights the paradox of 'social' media: they promise to enhance the social by displacing or reframing it fundamental a-social. The offloading of social decisions and formation onto commercial, automated systems for curating news and information reinforces this version of individualism, contributing to the forms of misrecognition that enable it.

Spectacular government, which now possesses all the means necessary to falsify the whole of production and perception, is the absolute master of memories just as it is the unfettered master of plans which will shape the most distant future. – Guy Debord (1998), *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*

The informercial presidency

One of the many novelties of the political rise of Donald J. Trump to the highest elected office in the US is the fact that it was reportedly conceived as a commercial venture: an epic publicity stunt. As his former personal attorney and 'fixer', Michael Cohen testified to Congress in 2019,

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> Mr. Trump would often say this campaign was going to be the greatest infomercial in political history … He never expected to win the primary. He never expected to win the general election. The campaign for him was always a marketing opportunity. (Samuels 2019)

It was an opportunity he had been contemplating for some time: as early as 2000, when he was considering seeking the Reform Party nomination he observed: 'It's very possible that I could be the first presidential candidate to run and make money on it' (Bump 2017). As it eventuated, he certainly profited from political spending and campaign contributions, reportedly netting $22 million in payments to Trump properties during the course of his campaign and presidency (Schouten and Wright 2020, Zurcher 2020). He also reportedly spent some $80 million of his own money – however this was recouped by the more than $200 million he raised on the back of his public campaign against his loss of the 2020 presidential election.

If there has been a long-term trend toward the commercialization of politics as McAllister and Applequist (2015), suggest, Donald Trump inverted the formula by using the political campaign apparatus to bolster his commercial appeal and networks. That he allegedly surprised himself, as well as much of the country and the world, by winning, highlights the most recent mediated phase of the convergence of politics and marketing. It is also testimony to the affinity between Trump's commercialized strain of populism and the logics of algorithmically curated self-promotion that paved the way for his political triumph.

The phenomenon of commercial populism is readily visible across the algorithmically amplified realm of social media. Consider, for example, the online success of a right-wing figure like Ben Shapiro, who gamed Facebook's algorithms by creating a network of undisclosed partner pages and secret payments (Baragona 2020). His online success as a political commentator – like that of figures including Alex Jones of InfoWars and former Trump advisor Steve Bannon – served in large part to generate sales for a range of branded products, including modern-day patent medicines, with names like, 'Dawn to Dusk' (which, 'stimulates your brain, body, and cells with slow- release energy throughout the entire day') and 'Radiance' ('to develop youthful-looking skin, healthy hair, strong nails') (Baragona 2020).

Anyone who has spent any time in the right-wing online fever swamp will readily recognize the litany of appeals to access the simple secrets of health and wealth that the 'elites do not want you to know about'. Perhaps the most notorious figure in this regard is the *InfoWars* host Alex Jones, whose excitable, conspiracy-theorist commentary is interspersed with ad pitches for his own line of survivalist gear and supplements ranging from 'male vitality' supplements to air filtration devices. The vociferous, controversial, and often mendacious political commentary between the ads caters to the anxieties addressed by the snake-oil product lines. As the political commentator Rick

Perlstein put it, 'They are two facets of the same coin – where the con selling 23-cent miracle cures for heart disease inches inexorably into the one selling miniscule marginal tax rates as the miracle cure for the nation itself' (2012). *The New York Times* economics columnist, Paul Krugman, remarking on the convergence of political and commercial scams has lamented, 'civilization will be destroyed by marketing scammers taking over our politics' (2018). What will have made such destruction possible is the online commercial environment that readily translates political trolling into online attention that can, in turn, be leveraged for marketing purposes.

The political triumph of Donald Trump marked the apotheosis of this model of online attention capture. The fact that a septuagenarian political candidate, who came of age long before the rise of the World Wide Web, adapted so effectively to the social media moment, is testimony to the Barnum-esque genealogy of the online attention economy. As the media scholar and historian Michael Schudson put it, 'What is original with Donald Trump is his mastery of Twitter' (Schudson 2018, p. 41). Despite the admonition of the consultants and more established and experienced politicians, Trump used the medium to double down on his most extreme and outrageous claims, seemingly invulnerable to mis-steps that might have toppled an actual politician (such as, for example re-Tweeting quotes from Mussolini and from white supremacists [Haberman 2016, Swasey 2020]). That he could get away with behaving in ways that the career politicians who challenged him could not helped bolster a sense of his invulnerability. The recognition of the political pathology of such behaviour was rivalled only by its perceived success as an attention-getting strategy. Even as media companies bemoaned the impact on democracy, they welcomed his contributions to their bottom lines – a dynamic summed up by CBS CEO Les Moonves in his notorious formulation: 'It may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS' (in Bond 2016). From a branding and marketing perspective Trump's talent for cornering the market on media attention was pure gold. His Twitter success drew coverage from the likes of the *Harvard Business Review,* which invited readers to, 'learn from the tweeter-in-chief about trying to win over large segments of consumers through social media' (Bickart *et al*. 2017).

This article argues that the surprising success of Donald Trump, while not unrelated to his particular idiosyncrasies, demonstrates how the automated curation of social media aligns itself with what the aggressive rise of commercial populism. The goal of such an analysis is to consider how the combination of hyper-commercialism with the formal attributes of social media contributes to inter-related political pathologies of polarization and, 'the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and incivility in public discourse' (Waisbord *et al*. 2018, p. 25). However, our emphasis is not so much on incivility as what we describe as un-civic discourse – an unwillingness to concede the

forms of mutual societal interdependence that might serve as the basis for a shared sense of a *public* interest or *common* good. We argue that the granular meteric-ification of news and information content combined with automated commercial content curation help mask or background the social processes that shape our information environment, and in so doing contribute to the erosion of the historical conditions for the formation of a civic disposition (Pratte 1988). We further explore the specific attributes of commercial populism, which help explain the relationship between polarization and conspiracy theory that is likely to outlast the Trump presidency.

Drawing on the recent formulation of the notion of 'rhythmedia' (Carmi 2020), we speculate that the rhythm and pace of commercial platform media contribute to this erosion, helping to reconfigure public discourse in ways that privilege commercial over civic imperatives, while simultaneously moving back and forth between the two. In this regard, we offer a response to the persistence of the 'filter bubble' critique – one that focuses on the roles of customization and commercialization in promulgating the conditions for the mass- customized populism that undermines confidence in established practices for adjudicating between rival accounts of reality.

This article proceeds by first considering some of the familiar concerns voiced about the contemporary media ecosystem in journalistic and academic quarters and then situates them within the context of the versions of populism shaped by the commercial imperatives of interactive media. Its ambition is to reframe the discussion about the relationship between the curatorial logics of media platforms and political polarization to reflect insights unearthed by recent research suggesting what matters most in the current information environment is the disposition people bring to their information seeking and sharing practices. As Axel Bruns, writing about partisan polarization online (2019) puts it, 'the question is no longer what material these hyperpartisans encounter and how much that information diet is shaped by algorithms, but rather how they receive and process this content and incorporate it into their worldviews' (Bruns 2019, p. 44). If what matters most is the disposition people bring to the information they encounter, it is worth considering the potential role played by the pace, structure and form (including algorithmic curation) of social media in shaping or reinforcing this disposition.

The bubble is us

Recent concern about social media moves beyond an exclusive focus on news content. The sociologist Zeynep Tufekci (2018), for example, argues that social media frame public deliberation along the lines of a sporting event or entertainment spectacle:

> … the problem is that when we encounter opposing views in the age and context of social media, it's not like reading them in a newspaper while sitting alone. It's like hearing them from the opposing team while sitting with our fellow fans in a football stadium. (23)

The result, as Tufekci puts it, is a tendency on the part of interlocuters not so much to listen to opposing viewpoints as to score points against one another: 'We bond with our team by yelling at the fans of the other one. In sociology terms, we strengthen our feeling of "in-group" belonging by increasing our distance from and tension with the "out-group" – us versus them' (Tufekci 2018, p. 24). It is the social rather than the informational environment that forms the 'echo chamber'. The pundit Glen Greenwald uses similar language to critique social media (despite it serving as one of his most prolific outlets): 'The age of social media has fostered a type of reductive thinking and discourse about politics and the world in which pat and trite phrases have replaced critical thought as our primary instruments for making sense of external events' (2020). Such an attitude toward news and information is not unique to social media, of course, but is continuous with the logics of hyper-commercialism familiar from cable news debates, talkback radio, and tabloid newspapers.

The online information economy builds on existing commercial tendencies, amplifying and supplementing them via its particular affordances, including custom- tailored, high-speed, short form content and always-on access. Perhaps the interactive economy's defining contribution is the shift from spectator to participant: on social media, pitched political battles can be waged rather than simply watched. If cable news discovered it could boost ratings and lower costs by displacing conventional reporting with sparring talking heads and increasingly partisan and sensationalist content, social media went even farther – offloading the cost and labour of production on to users and providing them with an even freer rein to boost attention with sensational and misleading content. The result is something more akin to ratings competition than to deliberation. As the critical theorist Judith Butler has observed, 'The quickness of social media allows for forms of vitriol that do not exactly support thoughtful debate' (in Ferber 2020).

Perhaps, as Bruns (2019) suggests, exogenous factors such as increasing economic inequality are driving polarization and social media curation systems simply select for and amplify this tendency, promoting the divisive and misleading content generated by an increasingly antipathetic and disintegrated public. Even if this were the case, it would not absolve social media from critical interest, given its role in selecting for divisive and polarizing messaging. Nor would the role of social media exempt so-called legacy media from critical consideration, especially as these become increasingly reliant on social media platforms. Boxell et al. (2017) found that polarization in the US increased more in an older age bracket, which they posit as the least

likely to use the Internet and social media. This finding raises the question of generational effects, but it also points to the potential role played by other forms of commercial media, such as Fox News and right-wing radio, which cater to an elderly demographic and may better fit the rhythm and schedule of the media consumption practices of this demographic. Concerns about the role played by social media in exacerbating political polarization are not necessarily dispelled by the fact that other successful commercial media rely on similar logics of sensationalism, and hate- and fearmongering.

One fact is well established, however: the commercial algorithms that shape the online media environment select for the content that gets the greatest response, regardless of its accuracy or civic value (Lewis 2018). This may not be the content that reinforces the world view of particular users – simply that which gets them to pay attention, react, and engage. In this respect, platforms do not 'care' about the nature of the content. Nor do they retain any vestige of what might be described as the socio-historical DNA of the journalism industry, which still pays lip service to the notion that there is a civic as well as a commercial function to the news. Social media platforms, by contrast, are not descended from journalistic institutions and for them actual reporting is at best an ancillary affair. These are companies that make their money from organizing and sorting the content generated by others: everyday users as well as journalists, trolls, dabblers, influencers, activists, politicians, celebrities, brands, and self-promoters of all stripes.

Engagement can come in the form of outrage, anger, and even mistrust as well as affirmation, confirmation, and reinforcement. In this sense, it is useful to consider social media as examples of what John Durham Peters calls logistical media: institutions concerned with organizing people and things in time and space (2015, p. 23). From its inception, the model has been content agnostic (although some platforms have responded to political pressure to pay attention to content): the goal is to manage flow and circulation so as to generate the most profit.

In other words, the putative narrowing down of content streams is neither the point nor the goal of attention-maximizing algorithms. If anything, it might be more accurate to speculate that attitudinal *canalizing* is the point, at least insofar as this might make it easier to predict and manage user engagement. We know, for example, that content can be elevated precisely by the fact that it generates outrage among users – and this in turn can attract attention and foster engagement. People who retweeted their disgust at the widespread circulation of a YouTube video falsely claiming a school shooting in Florida was a hoax reportedly helped boost the video to the site's top trending position (Maiberg 2018). A wide variety of content could serve the goal of stimulating engagement – reinforcing viewpoints not through information scarcity but through the formation of a shared attitudinal alignment (outrage over a pernicious conspiracy theory, for example).

The same liberal op-ed piece from the *New York Times* might share the double function of mobilizing the support of the left and the scorn of the right – and thus receiving attention from both groups. The fact that people on both sides viewed it does not imply that their horizons were expanded – on the contrary. Diversity of content on its own – isolated from the context and disposition of its reception – is unlikely to broaden horizons. By the same token, research demonstrating that users are exposed to a wide variety of perspectives does not necessarily dismantle concerns over the reinforcement of attitudinal canalization and the degradation of the conditions for meaningful delibera-tion. The point is not an insignificant one, because it helps shape the expec-tations people bring to social media platforms and the context in which its short form, high-turnover information flow operates. The following section picks up on this point to consider the rhythm and format of social media, as well as the relationship between information tailoring and consumer sovereignty. We argue that the political version of consumer sovereignty results in a form of commercial populism that is fostered by (but not unique to) social media – an argument we take up in the article's final section.

Rhythmedia and BUMMER logic

Commercial social media platforms are designed to provide a particular type of entertainment that users come to expect: a flow of short, quick, hits that provoke, pique interest, and entertain – posts that get a reaction and perhaps mobilize a response. They are crafted to operate on multi-tasking tools like laptops, tablets, and smart phones, in a multi- media environment. Thus, they are platforms that thrive on a high-turnover rhythm of repetition – if one post doesn't work for a particular user, there is always another one, and if a post *does* work, there is likely to be another similar one coming along to provide a similar burst of attentional gratification. Moreover, the process can be interrupted and returned to over the course of the day as time allows: when work eases up, when riding the bus or waiting in line. Such platforms operate as interstitial media, filling the time between other tasks, and, perhaps eventually infiltrating them. This rhythm of intermittent and inter-ruptible positive reinforcement is characteristic of the logic Jaron Lanier describes in his critique of algorithmic curation, which he describes using the acronym 'BUMMER'[1]: 'Customized feeds become optimized to "engage" each user, often with emotionally potent cues … The default purpose of manipulation is to get people more and more glued in, and to get them to spend more and more time in the system' (Lanier 2018, p. 31).

As Elinor Carmi's (2020) description of 'rhythmedia' suggests, the short-form, high- turnover, endless scroll of social media news feeds adds an impor-tant dimension to considerations of media content. For Carmi, the term describes, 'the way media companies render people, objects, and their

relations as rhythms and (re)order them for economic purposes' (119). She is interested in how rhythm becomes an information source and a tool for control, suggesting that a consideration of users' experiences of rhythm has much to add to an analysis of the format and flow of social media. The accelerating pace of information consumption provides increasingly granular information about individual responses and preferences, providing enhanced opportunities for engaging and responding. In the time it takes to read a long form article and write a comment on it, hundreds of tweets can be liked, shared, or responded to. The shorter format allows the metrics to zoom in on the particular point to which users are responding. Engagement in such forums requires a simple, short comment rather than a crafted essay-length argument. Unsurprisingly, then, that there are many more social media posters than long-form bloggers.

Rhythm and pace also give shape to the experience of current events as a torrent of discrete posts – there is always more information on its way, one can never keep up with all the content, but only dip in and out of the flow. The experience is not designed to give users an experience of control and comprehension so much as to highlight the inexhaustible reserve of online information and perhaps to invoke the anxiety associated with a sense of an overwhelming, un-tameable information environment.

The experience recalls Michael Schudson's (1978) analysis of journalism in the 1890s – a period in which he locates two distinct formations of journalistic content: news-as-entertainment for those whose lower socio-economic status places them at the mercy of current events seemingly beyond their control, and news-as-information for those who are positioned to be able to use information to advance their strategies and interests. The commercial model for social media is more closely aligned with Schudson's description of news as entertainment. The glut of information available online serves as a persistent reminder that the 'complete picture' – one which would place in their proper perspective the multitude of rival facts and accounts – remains endlessly deferred.

However, there is an added commercial dimension: the glut of information is provided with an automated remedy: personalized news and information. If the entire world cannot be compressed into an individual's news feed, at least some portion deemed relevant can be carved out and channelled to users. But the notion of relevance on offer, and the de-socialization and disaggregation of news as an informational resource have important consequences for what Sunstein (2001) describes as political sovereignty, or what Pratte (1988) describes as a civic disposition. The message of customization and micro-targeting – the watchwords of the online economy – aligns with that of hyper-commercial media: that news and information are simply consumer goods subject to the vicissitudes of taste.

The consumer-oriented model of personal taste catered to by algorithmic curation highlights the paradox of 'social' media: that they promise to enhance the social by displacing it. Such commercial platforms are allegedly 'social' because they provide us with some discretion regarding whom we follow or link to. But this aspect of sociality is fully mediated by automated systems that channel the content provided by users' networks. The system draws on social and behavioural cues to foster networked solipsism: every user's feed is unique, available only to them. Whether or not such media expose users to a variety of perspectives, they reconfigure the role played by the mass (customized) media in providing a sense of shared informational space – one of the functions ascribed by Sunstein (2001) to so- called 'general interest intermediaries' (such as mass circulation newspapers). For Sunstein, these 'intermediaries' have advantages over physical public spaces, 'precisely because they tend to be national, even international. Typically, they expose people to questions and problems in other areas, even other countries' (2001, p. 12). In this formulation, Sunstein moves beyond a simple consideration of shared content to articulate the role the mass media play in forming a sense of what Benedict Anderson (2006) has described as an 'imagined community'. Anderson describes the daily newspaper – Sunstein's general interest intermediary – as the basis of a rhythmic ritual of reading that reinforces a sense of community:

> The significance of this mass ceremony – Hegel observed that newspapers serve modern man as a substitute for morning prayers – is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. (Sunstein 2001, p. 35)

For Anderson, this awareness is a signal historical achievement insofar as it relies on the mass-produced print medium to call into being the sense of a shared, common, existence with unknown, remote, but imagined others.

Dwelling on the power of this media achievement, we might consider the practical and material components that underwrite a sense of simultaneity as community. The news comes according to a rhythm – morning edition, late edition, evening edition – that synchronizes reading patterns across space. Readers know the stories they are reading are simultaneously being consumed by unknown others in their regional or national sphere. The papers themselves circulate as discrete sharable items. Mass media standardize the informational community – a process that has both its benefits and its pathologies (the latter of which provided the impetus for undermining the former).

Anderson's formulation is suggestive because it highlights the role that media infrastructures, artifacts, and practices play in constituting the

imagined community that contributes to a sense of what Wendy Brown describes as 'concern with the common' (2017, p. 7). As the philosopher J.M. Bernstein suggests, recognizing the claims of unknown others requires that some sense of a shared community interest must already be in place (2014, p. 35). Anderson (2006) explores how media practices and technologies help build this sense of community. The familiar critique of the 'mainstream' media was made possible by the existence of a palpable mainstream, largely built around the consensus of political and media elites and those who depended them for information and access (see e.g. McChesney 2008, Herman and Chomsky 2010, Phelan and Dahlberg 2014). The limitations of mass media meant that there was an 'outside' to the media environment – people were not immersed in the endless flow of customized information and entertainment that characterizes always-on media. There is no need to romanticize the era of the general interest intermediary (shot through from its inception by commercial pressures and constrained by power and convention), to trace the role it might play in the formation of a sense of community that could gesture toward the possibility of something like a shared public interest.

In the era of always-on, customized, online information retrieval, the rhythm of media consumption is disaggregated and reconfigured. The evening newscast is replaced, for many, by the endless drip-feed of customized information. We inhabit customized information worlds in part through the reconfiguration of our spatial and temporal relationships to information, to the world around us, and to each other. Local newspapers fold up, leaving a vacuum to be filled by local Facebook groups created by, among others, civilian militias and right-wing hate groups. The rhythm of reading and viewing is accelerated by the relentless flow of updates and information tidbits. 'TL;DR' ('too long; didn't read') is the watchword of the online news environment, and technologies for speeding up viewing, listening, and reading abound. The implied promise is somehow to attempt to keep pace with the flow of available information. Rhythms of listening and reading become idiosyncratic – untethered from publication cycles and broadcast schedules. Of course, there are exceptions and alternatives, but the tendency is clear, and the implications for our sense of imagined community deserve a central place in any approach to the relationship between digital media and political fragmentation.

Self-branding and ego-casting

The added commercial dimension of social media is provided by its interactive character: users are not just news consumers, but also contribute to the production and distribution of content by commenting, posting, and sharing. Here too, the model is framed in marketing terms: the offer is not so much the

rehabilitation of publicness in its political sense (such as that invoked by Habermas (1994) in the form of public deliberation or by Arendt (1958/2018) in activity that transcends the individual/economic but the democratization of publicity as public relations/branding. From early on, for example, Facebook groups formed around brand identities, and the metrics provided by social media platforms interpellate users as entrepreneurial self-promoters. They can learn about the composition of their followers in terms analogous to market research, they can track their followers, likes, and shares to get a sense of their 'ratings' and reach. Moreover, they are saturated with information about social media influencers – the brand entrepreneurs of the social media environment who count as its 'success stories'. The allegedly social trajectory of social media is toward the translation of interpersonal relations into marketized ones.

One difference between a civic bond and a commercial bond is that the latter reads interdependence though the lens of consumer sovereignty as outlined by Sunstein (2001): tastes and preferences are taken as individual and given rather than the result of deliberation and consideration of the needs and preferences of others in a shared political community. Another is that the market is no surrogate for democracy – precisely because it takes tastes (and distribution of assets) as given. A civic recognition of the underlying forms of interdependence upon which 'personal' taste and primary individualism necessarily rely is suppressed or misrecognized – and framed as a threat to individual autonomy. This reconfiguration of interdependence-as-threat is one of the legacies of the opaque forms of customization that characterize the contemporary online media environment, which gives shape to contemporary, commercial variants of populism and their attendant forms of political polarization. Politics is construed as a matter of personal preference – taste – which means perceived political opponents are perceived as threats to individual autonomy (and personal identity – as constructed through brand loyalty). In this respect, the automation of cultural curation aligns itself with what the political philosopher Wendy Brown describes as statist neo-liberalism: 'within neoliberal reason, politics is cast as the enemy to freedom, to order and to progress' (2017, p. 7).

Automated culture and commercial populism

A consideration of the form, rhythm, and commercial structure of social media platforms moves beyond the question of diversity of content to get at the conditions of its reception. Automated curation, in the context of social media, has a two-fold significance for the disposition according to which information is received: it privileges consumer sovereignty, collapsing political perspectives into taste categories, and it offloads the irreducibly social process of content curation onto automated systems, where this

process can be misrecognized as apolitical, and ostensibly objective – as if such systems simply reflect personal choices (an analogue of market logic). The pathology here is not simply the naturalization of commercial logic, but a deeper threat to a conception of the political: a misrecognition of the necessary relationship between political judgment and an irreducible inter-dependence. This misrecognition takes the shape of freedom construed as an absolute independence – one gravely threatened by any admission of the reality of interdependence. As the philosopher Slavoj Zizek puts it, in his critique of populism,

> … the main threat to democracy in today's democratic countries resides in … the death of the political through the "commodification" of politics … What gets lost in such a view of politics, as another service we buy, is politics as a shared public debate of issues and decisions that concern us all. (2006, p. 559)

We might describe this as the threat of commercial populism – the version of politics that aligns itself with the economic configuration of our current media ecosystem. This is a system in which the nichification of content and the rhythm of its production and circulation forms a continuum that includes the multi-channel era ushered in by cable, digital broadcasting, and, even-tually, the commercial customization of social media (and its growing reliance on crowd-sourcing to produce its voluminous content reservoir).

The notion of commercial populism suggests the convergence of popu-lism as a marketing tool – a way of economically positioning a news network, for example, or of selling products and raising money – with the market as a tool for achieving political ends. Donald Trump is neatly posi-tioned as an avatar of this convergence: his political success (which included the realization of long sought-after goals by the political right, including shift-ing the balance of the Supreme Court) derived from his commercial brand; whereas his economic position was, as investigative reports suggest, in need of the boost provided by his presidential campaign (Buettner et al. 2020). This convergence tells us something about the current configuration of populism – and its reliance on the logic of political polarization.

Consider, for example, Trump's successful mobilization of the spectre of 'political correctness' as an intervention into social struggles over represen-tation. It is an intervention that aligns itself with an incoherent conception of free speech associated with a version of the hermetic subject: anyone should be able to say whatever they want without consequence. Of course, there has never been a society in which one can say anything one wants without consequence. The ongoing public struggles over representation are symptoms of a society attempting to redefine the social values it privi-leges, and thus which forms of representation are appropriate. They are pol-itical struggles that involve the unwritten contract whereby we adjudicate what counts as acceptable behaviour – and thus, what we value. As such

they are perceived, from the perspective of hypertrophied individualism, as inherently threatening, precisely because they assert the controlling (and dominating) aspect of social consensus. At the same time, of course, such struggles tend to coalesce around highly charged issues and real social fault lines. It is no accident that the foes of political correctness get more worked up over attempts to challenge historically embedded racist and sexist representations then, for example, over representations of the earth as round (although there is, unsurprisingly, a resurgent flat earth movement [Picheta 2019]). From the perspective of commercial populism in which the individual is construed as sovereign consumer, the societal nature of of a social judgment – the fact that it invokes an irreducible social interdependence – is read as threatening. This sense of the social as a burdensome limit on individual freedom is a recurring theme in the commercial populist response to collective action, ranging from vaccination programs to public health care and education.

The threat posed by others can be readily converted into a sense of victimization, which is the common theme of Trump's political appeal: a universal (at least amongst his supporters) sense of victimhood. Despite being born fabulously wealthy and benefiting from his father's political contacts and capital, Trump's persistent – almost ludicrously so – performance of the figure of the perpetual, wronged victim is a core feature of his political persona, and his political appeal. He is the avatar of victimhood for those threatened by any attempt to highlight the legacy of historical (and contemporary) forms of privilege and power. Trump's response to his 2020 electoral defeat, delivered to a throng of supporters, highlighted the universalization of his victim status: 'We're all victims', he enjoined his supporters, 'Everybody here, all these thousands of people here tonight, they're all victims. Every one of you' (in Benen 2020).

This message of course, has been Trump's rallying cry since his electoral college victory – which he also paradoxically framed in terms of victimization, claiming he only lost the popular vote because of voter fraud (see Johnson 2017 for a detailed discussion of Trump's demagoguery of victimhood). As Slavoj Zizek notes in his discussion of populism, one of its defining features is the transposition of a systemic failure onto the figure of an external enemy: a transposition that pits a worthy and victimized populace against a corrupt outsider/elite: 'for a populist, the cause of the troubles is ultimately never the system as such, but the intruder who corrupted it' (Zizek 2006, p. 555). In the Trumpian lexicon, the intruder is a floating signifier that takes on multiple guises: denizens of the Washington, D.C. 'swamp' (corrupt insiders); black and brown immigrants; and, of course, members of a shady and malign 'deep state'. But ultimately – and this is the defining attribute of commercial populism – the threat is any concession of societal interdependence, and thus any reminder of its existence. This is why both Trump and his

supporters – despite appearances – can constitute themselves as victims: the fact of society and their inescapable reliance upon it, renders them so. This dynamic recalls the paradox of consumerism transposed into the political realm. The fiction of consumer taste as a sovereign expression of personal identity and individual preference relies on the suppression and misrecognition of the strategies whereby it is constructed. To concede the process as a heteronomous one would be to undermine the promise of individual freedom and self-determination via consumption. To label contemporary forms of populism as 'commercial' is to note a similar promise: that the version of personal freedom and self-identity with which they are associated necessarily suppresses a recognition of the social processes whereby they are constructed. The attachment is the free-floating one of brand affiliation rather than that of ideological loyalty – which perhaps helps explain the success of a candidate who was a brand long before becoming a political candidate.

In this regard, commercial populism adds a reflexive twist to Ernesto Laclau's formal analysis of populism. For Laclau (2004) the formulation of a populist subjectivity ('the people') is constituted through a process in which particular but differentiated demands (for, say, higher wages, economic protectionism, or immigration reform) become aligned with one another through the hegemonic elevation of a particular demand to the status of a general equivalent for all the demands (and, simultaneously, the identification of an oppositional force – the 'enemy'). The result, according to Laclau, is that, 'each individual demand is constitutively split: On the one hand it is its own particularized self; on the other it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of the other demands' (2004, p. 106). The populist subjectivity, in other words, is constitutively riven. This split is not directly conceded by populist ideology, which works to paper it over and portray the people as a united front, but it manifests in the forms of instability enabled by this suppression.

Commercial populism then, carries both the affective charge and the instability of consumer taste. This malleability is a familiar characteristic of the Trumpian version of commercial populism: any moment of resistance can transform someone from an ally to an instrument of the 'deep state'. In the wake of Trump's defeat to Joe Biden in the 2020 US Presidential campaign, for example, the high-profile attorney and conspiracy theorist Lin Wood, who had been litigating lawsuits in Trump's behalf claimed (on social media), that Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (a staunch right-wing Republican) and Vice President Mike Pence were in on the conspiracy against Trump and should be arrested and tried for treason (Ma, 2021). The political lability of this version of populism is generalizable and readily transposable, because the potential threat can be discerned everywhere that the social imposes itself (which is to say, anywhere). Pence and McConnell were recast as enemies precisely because they assserted the validity of

the electoral process that resulted in Trump's defeat – and thus the under-lying societal contract underwritten by this process. In fact, the state itself, its legal structures, and the rule of law – anything that would pose an obstacle to an unfettered, absolutized (and incohate) version of individual autonomy – can all be figured as a form of victimization.

Perhaps the defining moment of the instability of this version of populism came shortly after Trump's 2020 loss in the US presidential election, when his supporters turned against the Republican authorities in Georgia who claimed the election they conducted was secure and free from fraud. The extremity of the response was highlighted by a call from Trump's erstwhile campaign attorney, Sidney Powell, for Republicans to boycott a runoff election in Georgia that would decide which party controlled the Senate. The spectacle seemed both incomprehensible and yet, within the Trump universe, somehow predictable: a Republican operative accusing Republican officials of swinging the election to a Democrat, and then attempting to hold the Republican party hostage by urging Republican voters to boycott a crucial election. Neither the party's agenda nor the rule of law could serve as the basis for this version of populist subjectivity: all that was left was the empty signifier of Trump – a loyalty to a brand that, like the abstract figure of the primary individual, stood only for itself. As Laclau puts it,

> The so-called 'poverty' of the populist symbols is the condition of their political efficacy – as their function is to bring to equivalential homogeneity a highly het-erogeneous reality, they can only do so on the basis of reducing to a minimum their particularistic content. At the limit, this process reaches a point where the homogenizing function is carried out by a pure name: the name of the leader. (2004, p. 108)

Conclusion

The goal of this article has been to outline what might be described as the role of automated media in constructing a commercial version of populism. The goal is to highlight the importance of attending to how the reliance of the online economy on the commercial elevation of consumer sovereignty aligns itself with a version of populism in which a hyper-trophied individual-ism prevails through the suppression of any recognition of the irreducible interdependence that characterizes the realms of the social and the political. The offloading of social decisions, practices, and interactions onto commer-cial, automated systems for curating news and information reinforces this version of individualism, contributing to the forms of misrecognition that enable it. The fact that someone like Trump fits so well with the historical and technological moment does not mean that with his departure, the moment has ended. Commercial news outlets will continue to jockey for a right-wing audience according to whom even *Fox News* remains too far to

the left because of its occasional adherence to a consensual version of reality. At the same time, populist movements will continue to seek out those who can leverage established commercial brands to gain momentum in the political realm: a range of celebrity candidates from the realms of music and sports are lining up to try their hand at commercial populism. They have strong social media presences already in place and can count on the prospect of algorithmic amplification. To the extent that automated news curation systems persist in strategies that contribute to the misrecognition and suppression of the irreducible character of interdependence – which, in turn, serves as the basis for some sense of a shared public interest – polarization will continue apace. Not least because it is profitable.

Note

1. 'Behaviours of Users Modified and Made into Empires for Rent' (Lanier, 2018; 31).

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