

The Future of Media

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The Future of Media

Edited by Joanna Zylinska with Goldsmiths Media

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Contents

Introduction: The Future of Media – *Goldsmiths Media* page 1

HOW TO TALK ABOUT THE FUTURE

1 The Future and the ‘Poetry of the Past’ – *Gholam Khiabany* 7

THE FUTURE OF MEDIA REFORM

2 Media Reform and the Politics of Hope – *Natalie Fenton
and Des Freedman* 25

THE FUTURE OF JOURNALISM

3 An End to Futility: A Modest Proposal – *James Curran* 45

THE FUTURE OF TRUTH

4 Future Faking, Post-Truth and Affective Media – *Lisa Blackman* 59

THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION

5 How Will the Future Cope With(out) Television? – *David Morley* 81

THE FUTURE OF MEDIA WORK

6 Our Platformised Future – *Clea Bourne* 99

THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

7 The Celebrity Selfie: Gender, Race and ‘New’ Old Ways
of Seeing – *Milly Williamson* 113

THE FUTURE OF 'DIVERSITY' IN MEDIA

- 8 Rethinking 'Diversity' in Publishing – *Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente* 135

THE FUTURE OF FEMINISM

- 9 Exit Wounds of Feminist Theory – *Sarah Cefai* 157

THE FUTURE OF QUEER MEDIA

- 10 *Queerama*: Re-Imagining Queer Pasts and Futures – *Daisy Asquith* 177

THE FUTURE OF DANCE

- 11 New Telematic Technology for the Remote Creation and Performance of Choreographic Work – *Daniel Strutt, Andreas Schlegel, Neal Coghlan, Clemence Debaig and Youhong 'Friendred' Peng* 197

THE FUTURE OF AUDIO

- 12 Everywhere in Particular: Some Thoughts on the Practice and Potential of Transpositional Locative Sound Art – *NG Bristow* 225
- 13 If 6 Were 9 (or 2 x 108): A Case Study of the *One Oh Eight* Project – *Richard M. Shannon, NG Bristow and Mathapelo Mofokeng* 239

THE FUTURE OF ACTIVISM

- 14 How Smartphones and Digital Apps are Transforming Activist Movements – *Sue Clayton* 253

THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL HUMANITARIANISM

- 15 Technological Futures as Colonial Debris: 'Tech for Good' as Technocolonialism – *Mirca Madianou* 281

THE FUTURE OF THE CITY

- 16 The Smart City and the Extraction of Hope – *Richard MacDonald* 297

THE FUTURE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

- 17 Does Photography Have a Future? (Does Anything Else?)
– *Joanna Zylińska* 315

THE FUTURE OF ‘THE FUTURE’

- 18 Astronoetic Voyaging: Speculation, Media and Futurity – *James Burton* 333
- Afterword: Forward – *Sean Cubitt* 353
- Notes 363
- Contributors 371
- Index 377

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4

Future Faking, Post-Truth and Affective Media

Lisa Blackman

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus relatively hidden aspects of domestic abuse, with rates rising exponentially into a global epidemic itself. At the same time, there is widespread agreement that we are living in a post-truth age in which we no longer know whether media messages we receive are 'true'. Even if they aren't true, they might *feel* true or have what Foucault (1980) called truth-effects. This is one of the paradoxes of post-truth, which highlights the role of covert and coercive forms of power in shaping perception, attention, feeling, emotion, understanding and behaviour. Post-truth discloses the close relationship between truth, coercion and consensus, revealing that truth-effects can be the object of manipulation and power struggles (Bufacchi 2020; Oliver 2020; Giraud 2017). Manipulation of media and social media became big news after the exposure of the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where users' Facebook data was harvested by Cambridge Analytica to be used in political advertising. The breach of 80 million users' personal data, without their knowledge or consent, allowed Cambridge Analytica to build psychological profiles of users who were covertly targeted through computational marketing techniques. This event drew attention to the weaponising of 'psychological warfare tools' in the attempt to manipulate publics (Wylie 2019, 5). As Venturini and Rogers (2019, 532) have argued, 'the 2016 US presidential election will be remembered for the scandal surrounding Cambridge Analytica ... a marketing firm that illegitimately acquired data on millions of Facebook ... users and used them to contribute to Trump's campaign.' Strategic disinformation is part and parcel of media and other forms of power.

But this sense of scandal and public outcry in relation to the effects of covert forms of emotional and psychological manipulation should not be limited to the

media or to particular strategies used by governments and political consulting firms. It is a key aspect of distorted communication from abusers in some forms of domestic abuse, namely coercive control and narcissistic abuse. Coercive control and narcissistic abuse share similar logics, affects, techniques and relations to those found in post-truth media and government strategies. They are forms of non-physical abuse that are exercised through covert psychological and emotional techniques, and a range of deceptive strategies that destabilise facts and fabricate distorted realities. Coercive control has been described as a form of malevolent conduct based on deception and deceit that misdirects attention and *makes* sense based on lies and twisted forms of reality distortion. These techniques enmesh the victim with the abuser by creating ‘invisible chains’, or a trap that makes it very difficult to leave (Stark and Hester 2019). These practices have entered the mainstream in communication and practices well suited to social media and mediatised politics. Their ubiquity in political communications and across social media are normalising communication once only discussed in self-help manuals, workshops, blogs and memoirs, primarily written for victims and survivors of abuse.

In different ways the common communication and behavioural patterns under discussion work through a range of reality-distorting techniques and strategies of disinformation and misinformation, based on fakery, trickery, deception and twisted forms of storytelling. They destabilise facts and manufacture consent through the production of an *indeterminacy* of feeling (confusion, chaos, panic, fear, cognitive dissonance) using devious and covert means. This includes practices such as ghosting, gaslighting, trolling, staging, baiting, charm offensives, deception, deflection, backtracking, blame-shifting, confabulation, boundary violations, guilt-mongering, misinformation, disinformation, stonewalling and an adversarial attitude of righteous indignation. This is an affective tone cultivated through the perpetrator’s sense of injustice when exposed or held to account that reveals their commitment to their own lies, or a deceptive commitment to stating absolute fiction as fact.

The post-truth era is one primarily characterised as an ‘affective politics’ that has an ‘increasingly visible emotionality’ (Boler and Davis 2018, 75), driven by the ‘power of feelings’ (Davies 2018). Feelings and emotions are seen to be transforming democracies ‘in ways that cannot be ignored or reversed’ (Davies 2018, xvii). Boler and Davis go further by stating that we are witnessing the ‘affective weaponization of communications technologies ... used to mobilize and capture affect and emotion’ (2020, 1). However, what are overlooked in some

commentaries that ascribe newness to the role of feelings in politics are the very long traditions of work that have valued the power of feelings as important sources of knowledge about power, oppression and governance. This includes feminist, Black and queer scholarship on public feeling and emotion (Gunaratnam and Lewis 2001; Cvetkovich 2012), as well as reclamations of suggestion as an important modality of communication found within the interdisciplinary field of affect studies (see Blackman 2012; Borch 2019, Gibbs 2010). As we will see, this world, although understood as new, shares features with longer histories of strategic deception and misinformation that have been part of media since their inception (see Blackman 2007; Corner 2017). We might decry or reject these strategies as undermining democracies, even leading to 'fake democracies' in their challenge to the ideal of rational deliberative communication. This is primarily seen as the index and measure of liberal democracies (see Fenton 2018). I will argue, however, that there are important continuities between the past, present and future of media that we might miss if we adopt this position.

This includes taking seriously the role of coercion and covert forms of power in shaping public opinion, belief, feeling, emotion and understanding – what Boler and Davis (2020) call propaganda by other means. These connections have been severed within the public sphere, unmoored from their close genealogy with all forms of abuse and coercive forms of power that historically have been associated with fascism or communism, but that we are less likely to accept as being part of democratic forms of power. I have referred to these forms of power as *affective* as they primarily work through the orchestration of feelings, emotions, nervous states, moods and atmospheres. They modulate the indeterminacy of borders, boundaries and thresholds between self and other, fact and fiction, present and absent, past and present, emotion and reason, human and technical, public and private, trust and doubt, integrity and dishonesty, for example, and often operate at the edges of consciousness rather than through rational deliberation (see Blackman 2012; 2019a; 2019b). They have an association with nineteenth-century theories of suggestion and contagion that have historically been pathologised and rejected from theories of democratic power within the public sphere, displaced onto the working classes, colonial subjects, women, children and people with different sexualities who have been understood as 'overly suggestible' and as lacking the 'power of reason' (see Blackman and Walkerdine 2001).

Extending some of these debates in relation to the future of media, I will examine how forms of coercive power traverse domains (non-physical abuse and

political communications) that mobilise post-truth as a strategy of deception. This focus allows the possibility of moving beyond the simple oppositions of truth and falsehood towards an understanding of how what has been glossed as post-truth actually works, with profound consequences for the understanding of the sociality and polity in our contemporary present. There are various explanations put forward to understand post-truth and its significance, including declining belief in the value of expertise, the militarisation of politics (including a war of attrition), globalisation, entitlement and a lack of investment in the rules of public life (Davis 2019). What is missing but haunts these analyses is the link between post-truth and experiences of non-physical abuse that challenge what has been described as an 'incident and injury' approach, which categorises and recognises domestic abuse through discrete acts of physical assault or violence. This approach misses abuse that is exercised through the manufacture of coercive atmospheres, and through the use of covert tactics of emotional and psychological control and exploitation. The tactics and strategies of deceit and disinformation share a common genealogy linking thought reform, psychological military techniques, non-physical abuse, and the art and science of manipulation, with the use of emotion as a technique of governance (Blackman and Walkerdine 2001).

One contemporary example of the disavowed link between post-truth politics and abuse comes through in political commentaries on Brexit in UK politics. The academic and commentator Will Davies has coined the term the 'Berlusconifying' of British politics in relation to Brexit and the leadership strategies of Boris Johnson.¹ This term is used to identify the collapse of the separation between politics, business interests and the media and its effects on political campaigning. What Aeron Davis (2019) has called a 'new normal' of lies, which includes deception, betrayal, ruthlessness, incoherence, sabotaging, attack and counter-attack, is changing the frame of politics. However, Silvio Berlusconi, the former Italian prime minister (for four terms), was also shrouded in controversy for various alleged sex scandals with young women and girls. The new normal of politics are contexts marked by an industrial-scale and overwhelming normalisation of languages and practices associated with known perpetrators of abuse.

The two political figures that have condensed some of what is of issue are Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, although other world leaders have exhibited marked tendencies towards such practices. Trump and Johnson have both been accused of abuse and sexual misconduct, of being reckless and opportunistic (see Davis 2018), of being pathological liars, of being manipulative and calculating (fake news), of normalising racist practices, language and behaviour² and

of inaugurating and enacting forms of power associated with sociopathy, showing the close links between pathocracies and democracies (Lobaczewski 2007), which is registering as a new form of authoritarianism (also see Venn 2020). As some commentators have suggested, what is glossed as a 'post-truth era' is one where psychological forms of manipulation associated with narcissistic abuse and coercive control are profoundly shaping politics and social relations (see Andronici 2019; Sweet 2019; Sarkis 2018;³ Stern 2018). These practices have come to the foreground in the 'new normal' of politics in many countries, including the USA, the UK, India, Turkey, Mexico, Russia, the Philippines and Brazil.

In order to explore some of these arguments I will focus on an array of practices, many that will be familiar to most readers, that appear in tactics and strategies of manipulation and wilful deception associated with non-physical forms of abuse. They appear in digital practices of communication linked to abuse, harassment and bullying, and increasingly within political communication strategies of misinformation and strategic deception associated with post-truth politics. I will explore the *broken genealogy* that connects these strategies of deception and reality-distortion that traverse the media, government and mental health, particularly within contexts linked to the rise of populisms and right-wing authoritarianisms. My argument will join many commentaries that are grappling with what has happened to politics and the new forms of mediatisation, including fake news, lying and other forms of deception that have entered and significantly changed the media frame. The chapter will discuss the implications of these connections for politics, and particularly the mediatisation of politics, for our online relationships and embodied experiences of digital relations, often discussed in relation to the affordances of different platforms and infrastructures, and how we can best protect ourselves from the many ways in which abuse appears in our lives across different contexts and settings – what I am calling the affective and social lives of abuse.

An Ecosystem of Abuse

Ghosting is a practice estimated to affect millennials more than any other age group and refers to the sudden disappearance of somebody, often on social media, where all communication is stopped. Referred to as a 'unilateral ceasing communication' (LeFebvre 2017, 230), it describes the sudden ending of dating or romantic relationships often through the medium of dating apps without

explanation or dialogue, but can also refer to technologically mediated contact and connection across social media where you might be censored, ostracised or find your views or feelings rejected without notice (see LeFebvre et al. 2019). The person disappears from your life or your social media networks, where you might find you have been ‘unfriended,’ been given restricted access or blocked from somebody’s profile or social media timeline (sometimes referred to as a ‘social media blackout’) in what can feel like a very cold, ruthless way. It is an extension of being completely ignored or given the silent treatment that can be exercised across digital platforms in devastating ways. As well as indifference, ghosting can also be done with a calculated intent to bully somebody through a form of disengagement that can be hurtful, aggressive, vicious, damaging and offensive, enacted through the medium of a resounding silence. It can leave you feeling alienated, distressed, isolated, confused, abandoned, rejected and so on. ‘Ghosting differs from other relationship dissolution strategies insofar as it takes place without the ghosted mate immediately knowing what has happened, who is left to manage and understand what the partner’s lack of communication means and is unable to close the relationship’ (Navarro et al. 2020).

During the Covid-19 pandemic there were warnings made across entertainment and news media in relation to the practice of *zombie-ing*, a close kin of ghosting, where people who have previously ghosted you might return or be resurrected from the dead. You can be haunted through practices of presence and absence with contacts appearing and disappearing in ways that can unnerve and unsettle. Other practices associated with perpetrators of abuse that have been extended and become part of an array of digital practices and communications, linked to manipulation and coercive forms of control, include trolling and baiting. *Trolling* and *baiting* are closely related practices that are rife across social media and in digital forms of communication. Trolling has been described as a deliberate strategy of trying to get a rise, or ‘bait’ somebody for a reaction, through posting inflammatory or controversial comments, often under the cloak of anonymity, and through enacting a form of bullying and harassment. Trolling contributes to ‘uncivil discourse’ and to what has been described as the *affective* nature of communication on the internet, referring to the visible emotionality of what takes place, challenging the idea of communication as primarily rational and deliberative (the so-called ‘power of reason’), as has been assumed within theories of the public sphere influenced by Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structure of Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962).

Mediality

Theories of the public sphere have been subject to queer, Black and feminist critique, drawing attention to who is excluded from such an ideal, and whether communication and our investments and commitments to ideals, beliefs and opinions are ever purely rational. There have been many revisions to this concept, including arguments which have advanced ideas of Black and subaltern public spheres (Squires 2002), feminist public spheres (Fraser 1990), ideas of the counter-public drawing from queer theory (Berlant and Warner 1998) and affective publics (Papacharissi 2014, 2016). The latter works across the aforementioned critiques to explore how our investments and attachments to beliefs, ideologies, opinions and politics are also affective, that is, shaped through emotion, feeling, mood, atmosphere, nervous states and intensities that become co-assembled and conjoined as shared processes. The important focus is on how feelings or desire for connection and disconnection, what Papacharissi (2016) terms 'bonds of sentiment', can be amplified, mobilised and mediated, and the role different forms of media can play as framing devices for shaping these affective desires. This might include television, film, radio, photography, but also hashtags, reader comments and communities that come together across different digital platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Quora, Weibo, TikTok and other forums and platforms. This includes those that gather through friendship communities, specific interests and shared experiences and, as we have seen, alliances and allegiances forged through abusive practices, hate and victim-blaming, each public having a distinctive *mediality*, that is, the general influence, form, content and affect(s) generated by the affordances of different media as they enable, support, shape and become shared processes of *making* sense.

As Papacharissi has argued, 'mediality shapes the texture of these publics and affect becomes the drive that keeps them going. The circumstances that drive each of these public formations are different, but it is a public display of affect that unites, identifies, or disconnects them' (2016, 2). Papacharissi likens processes of mediality to different storytelling structures, which work primarily through affect, feeling, emotion and sentiment, or at least affect is the primary register, force and intensity that drives attachments to different ideas, opinions, beliefs, tastes and politics. Drawing on Raymond Williams' (1977) concept of 'structures of feeling', she argues that 'structures of feeling are both rendered and reorganised by the soft and networked architectures of online media' (2016, 5).

The term 'structure of feeling' is 'a specific structure of particular linkages, particular emphases and suppressions, and, in what are often its most recognizable forms, particular deep starting-points and conclusions' (Williams 1977, 134). These linkages exist at the edge of semantic availability or can only be seen retrospectively or from a different vantage point. These patterns are differentiated in different contexts, which gave Williams a potent way of talking about class differences in feeling, including fear and shame. Although it is an ill-defined concept, for many media and affect theorists it provides a useful way of exploring the background of feeling related to context, history, milieu and setting that is available, or might become available, to consciousness. It has links to Black scholarship exploring how long cultures of systematic racism shape somatic feeling – what the Black feminist Hortense Spillers (1987) called the 'flesh.' Structures of feeling exist at the edges of consciousness or semantic availability, and are a potential driver of different actions and reactions – the processes and mobilising power that might bind and bring people together as a collective or part of a commons: *#BlackLivesMatter*.

We can consider the aforementioned processes in relation to the practice of trolling and to consider what kind of mediality trolls enact. Trolls are often described as mean, nasty, hateful people who are looking to disrupt discussion and take pleasure in offending others (see Cheng et al. 2017). In these more psychologised explanations, the troll refers to a person who deliberately posts inflammatory, controversial, shocking comments, exploiting user-generated content and the capacity to co-create meaning, feeling and understanding to upset people and create discord. They do this to provoke negative emotions and feelings rather than considered debate and dialogue, and to deflect attention from their own actions and to blame others (usually the victim). Trolling has been described as a form of harassment or baiting that the person engages in primarily for his or her own gain or enjoyment. They have fun or even experience sadistic pleasure at someone else's expense.

We know that trolling is both a human and non-human practice, where automated bots (trollbots) extend trolling practices without (human) feeling, enabling them to break into more and more networks, often avoiding detection. They have a close kinship to fake news and political campaigns on social media that circulate lies, untruths and disinformation. Trolling, lying and baiting underpin new forms of algorithmic power that shape and manipulate belief and feeling through orchestrating social media feeds and political commentary. Trolls weaponise forms of emotional and psychological manipulation, remediating

already-existing structures of inequality and power, including racism, sexism and transphobia. In their more socially sanctioned form, these forms of covert and deceptive tactics might appear as soft power, priming and nudge theory, or theories of behavioural conditioning (see Blackman 2019a).

Disinformation

The troll can also be a useful heuristic device to identify a common set of disinformation tactics characteristic of a particular political strategy or persona. Trump is regularly described, for example, as both a liar and a troll, or in some cases the world's greatest troll, an epic troll, or even a 'world champion troll'.⁴ During his presidency he was positioned as the troll in the White House circumventing White House convention through his curveball Twitter posts, becoming the figurehead and helping to build and mobilise a wider political trolling community for 'sustained disruption', such as in the online community that organised through the subreddit */r/The Donald* (see Flores-Saviaga et al. 2018, 82). This community extended across different forms of media and platforms in order to scale up and do maximum damage to Trump's opponents (particularly Hillary Clinton) during the 2016 presidential campaign. Their trolling tactics included PR trolling, using forms of perception management, harassment, firehose trolling (flooding social media with divisive propaganda), satire trolling, creating satirical media including hashtags and memes to mock and ridicule Clinton. All of these related forms of trolling were used to amplify messages from other sources and connect them together as part of an ecosystem of political abuse. This included:

Netflix boycotts after Netflix promoted TV shows opposing their political views ... orchestrated one-star Amazon reviews for Megyn Kelly's book ... Members of T D also organized the 'Great Meme War' to harass Trump's detractors and flood the Internet with pro-Trump, anti-Hillary Clinton propaganda ... Participants of T D also actively promoted the use of satirical hashtags, such as #DraftOurDaughters to troll Hillary Clinton's initiative about supporting women to register for the military draft ... or #ShariaOurDaughters to take Islam ideologies to an absurd extreme ...

(Cited in Flores-Saviaga et al. 2018, 82)

As well as psychological understandings of the troll as a mean, nasty person, in the above examples we can see how the troll is also a social figure who embodies

a mediality that exacerbates and weaponises an already existing fabric and infrastructure of strategic deception and coercion that is built into the internet and digital platforms. As Hal Berghel and Daniel Berleant (2017) have argued, trolling has become synonymous with or even inseparable from social media and digital practices, and some of the reasons for this take us back to much older histories of strategic deception and misinformation that are embedded within platform infrastructures, as we will go on to explore. Trolling can be contagious, attracting others and leading to 'flame wars' and 'doxxing', which are all practices carried out with malicious intent to do harm to, harass, intimidate and injure others. The contagiousness of trolling amplifies what has been called 'networked virality' (Sampson 2012), demonstrating how the networked structures of digital media amplify and extend relationships and connections that can infect others across time and space, increasing and intensifying already-existing 'social, cultural, political and economic contagions' (Sampson 2012, 1). As Sampson suggests, networked virality increases the speed, reach and spread of fads, fashions, political rumours, gossip, scandals, hype, conspiracy theories, for example, cascading and infiltrating like viruses throughout populations.

Trolling is a good example of a practice of 'contagious relationality' that exploits, extends and remediates racism, sexism, transphobia and other forms of discrimination and victim-blaming (encounters shaped through already-existing discriminatory cultures and practices), taking them into, and contaminating, public forums, attempting to close down opposition, silence activists and other critics, conjoining bodily feelings shaped through long histories of oppression, including racism, colonialism, white supremacy, slavery, misogyny and patriarchy, with a volatile mixing and remixing of emotion, affects, feelings, atmospheres and moods. In other words, rather than engage in debate, trolls *bait* for reactions, deliberately provoking their targets through attack and counter-attack, orchestrating hate, fear, shame, guilt, humiliation, paranoia, anger, confusion, chaos, panic, hostility and other negative affects to unsettle and destabilise perception. Interestingly, one strategy to deal with trolls is to 'ghost them', that is, not to give them a reaction or feed them, treating them with indifference and silence. In this example we can see how ghosting, baiting and trolling are all interrelated strategies of manipulation and coercive control that are part of an ecosystem of abuse and harassment that traverses and is mobilised, augmented and modulated in online communication. They are all common practices in narcissistic abuse as described and experienced by survivor communities (see Arabi 2016; Hart and Hart 2018).

Online Abuse

We know that online abuse is a huge problem, not only for public figures, journalists, celebrities and politicians but also for people who seek to draw attention to the very structures and conditions, such as systemic racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia and transphobia, which enable the problem. A good example of this is the controversy surrounding a book published by the activist and psychologist Jessica Taylor, *Why Women are Blamed for Everything: Exploring Victim Blaming of Women Subjected to Violence and Trauma* (2020). After publication she was bombarded with thousands of comments illustrating the very issue of victim-blaming that she is writing about. Examples of the misogynist abuse that she received on Twitter and Facebook, including rape and death threats, and having her personal computer hacked attracted the attention of the news media, who discussed the organised nature of the trolling, including ‘the “alt-right”, men’s rights activists, incel (involuntary celibates) and Mgtow (men going their own way) movements.’⁵ This is one example of a structural endemic problem that is turned against and individualised in relation to an activist who is identifying the structural nature of the problem.

In a revealing analysis of 70 million *Guardian* reader comments left on the newspaper website, it was found that Black and ethnic minorities and female journalists attracted significantly more abuse than their white male counterparts, for example, with journalists describing the chilling effects of these ‘below the line’ comments (see Gardiner 2018). Whether it is journalists writing about racism and sexism, or attracting more abuse because of who they are, the issues reveal how abusive strategies are normalised and enabled through communication practices, such as readers’ comments, opened up to encourage interaction, commentary and user-generated content, but leaving behind a trail, a trace and afterlives of offense, hostility and hatred towards others. Although many of the comments are blocked or moderated, they leave an archive of haunted data that exists as a dynamic presence, exerting influence through the cultivation of ugly feelings and negative affects (Blackman 2019a; Ngai 2007). Victims are left to deal with the affects and effects of these comments through their own safeguarding practices – ‘don’t read the comments!’ or ‘don’t react’ – with little to nothing to protect them from the actions of perpetrators. With smear campaigns, which are also a related part of this ecosystem of abuse, we know that lies and smears of somebody’s reputation or character can stick and do harm regardless of whether

the comments have any veracity. They can have ‘truth effects’, demonstrating clearly the close relationships between coercive forms of power, the production of feeling, including nervous states, anxieties and depression, and the exercise of racism and sexism.

Platform Infrastructures of Strategic Disinformation

In their illuminating article written from the perspective of computer scientists, and from an information-theoretical approach, Hal Berghel and Daniel Berleant (2017) argue that we need a ‘taxonomy of trolling’ to really understand how embedded trolling is within the software architectures of the internet and digital platforms. Indeed, in the example of the subreddit */r/The Donald* we explored how this political trolling community employed a variety of trolling tactics and practices, creating and circulating disinformation across different media, to exert influence in ways that are more difficult to detect and counter due to their deceptive and covert nature. Berghel and Berleant differentiate disinformation from misinformation through the concept of *wilful intent*. Misinformation is a general problem with ‘fake news’ as there is an abundance of information and sources that circulate across digital platforms that are difficult to verify. However, *disinformation* is done with the *calculated intent* to deceive and conceal one’s actions and represents a more insidious form of lying and reality-distortion. As Berghel and Berleant highlight, ‘Disinformation techniques and content vary with the purpose, targeted demographic, medium, and social networking platform’ (2017, 44).

These tactics of wilful intent to deceive and destabilise have much in common with practices associated with coercive control and narcissistic abuse, as well as with longer histories of strategic deception and disinformation. They all deploy a common and shared range of reality-distorting techniques that destabilise distinctions between truth and falsehood, reason and emotion, self and other, private and public, fact and opinion, personal and political, seriousness and satire. The aim is to construct and enlist support for a particular twisted version of reality that often positions the perpetrator as the victim and likens political campaigning to a sport, competition or game enacted with impunity. Donald Trump is perhaps the best example of a former world leader who extends these tactics into politics, deflecting from the injurious consequences of his actions. As with the taxonomy of trolling that Berghel and Berleant call for, the connections also reveal the

complex and differentiated strategies and practices of lying, deception and deceit that underpin the range of communication tactics that come together within the context of post-truth, for example.

Berghel and Berleant (see 2017, 45) make an important related argument about the affordances of the internet and platform infrastructures in enabling and extending these communication tactics. Their argument adds weight to what Papacharissi has called the soft and networked architectures of online media and their role in shaping different forms of mediality. Going back to the history of the development of the web, Berghel and Berleant argue that web-enabled communication is structured by a:

fundamental flaw in the notional roots of the modern Internet-enabled Web. Those roots are typified by, for example, Paul Otlet's Mundaneum system, implemented in 1910 to collect and categorize all of the world's important knowledge (www.mundaneum.org/en); H.G. Wells's notion of a World Brain, outlined in a 1938 collection of essays and addresses with that title; and Vannevar Bush's Memex system, described in his influential 1945 article 'As We May Think' ... the 21st century's spin on Bush's vision might progressively become 'As We May Deceive.'

(2017, 45)

The use of what is called 'associative indexing and browser history-like "paths" not unlike the use of hypertext to organize the Web' (Berghel and Berleant 2017, 45) reveals an imaginary that helped to visualise the internet. This architecture assumed the reliability and validity of information revealing a structural and systemic commitment to 'neutrality', providing fertile ground for disinformation to become normalised and for racism and sexism to become ingrained in algorithmic forms of power (see Noble 2018; also see Chun 2016). Safiya Noble's concept of algorithms of oppression reveals how platform infrastructures carry and reproduce existing cultures and practices of oppression and inequalities. This issue, which is revealed through algorithms such as the Google PageRank, unveils the politics of page rankings and the measures and criteria which govern and enable particular associative links rather than others. Berghel and Berleant's arguments add weight to Bernhard Rieder's (2012) genealogical approach to software studies. His focus is on exploring the conditions of possibility for Google's automated logic of page ranking to take form, what he calls its 'conceptual *a priori*'. Rieder cogently analyses how software programmers have drawn on and materialised a particular ontology of the network, which is derived in

part from sociometry, enacted by a specific algorithm known as Lawrence Page's PageRank.

Sociometry is a broad area of study which purports to analyse and, importantly, visualise the psychological characteristics of populations, linked to Kurt Lewin's topographical approach to psychology. As Rieder argues, the concept of the network, central to these theories, staged connections and links based on status, authority and influence. These concepts were put to work in particular ways where calculations of social status and social *power* were made from sociometric data, rather than other kinds of connections and influences, such as *inequality* and *marginalisation*, for example. The conceptions of social influence that this enacted provided the normative model for various metrics of ranking to be performed. These are based primarily on relations of prestige, hierarchy and power rather than other measures that become foreclosed, disavowed and hidden. The Google PageRank algorithm therefore makes commitments to certain conceptions of the social that are reproduced in the different regimes of visibility and perception, which govern different digital platforms (see Blackman 2016). Rather than simply issues of data reliability and source authentication (fake news), we can see how strategies of disinformation and deception are integral to associative indexing and hypertext, leaving behind a trail of haunted data (Blackman 2019a).

Conclusion: Affective Media

Different media have now become so entangled with who and what we are that it is difficult to make a separation between media and society (see Kember and Zylinska 2012). Mark Deuze has coined the term 'media life' to argue that 'who you are, what you do, and what all of this means to you does not exist outside of media. Media are to us as water is to fish' (2012, x). Deuze gives numerous examples of how media are organising and re-organising politics, celebrity and science, where people, he suggests, might perform themselves in terms of media – a politician imagining him or herself as a photograph, soundbite, tweet or speech. We know politicians are increasingly required to be media-savvy and to imagine how their image, actions and tweets, for example, might be put to work in particular rhetorical ways. Politicians are more literate with the use of different medial concepts such as dramatisation, cutting, framing, staging, liveness, premediation and preemption (see Blackman 2018).

What we might give less attention to are how these medial practices have a close yet disavowed relationship with abuse tactics, and have been extended through post-truth tactics, such as gaslighting and other forms of fakery, staging and trickery. I will finish this chapter outlining a popular example of an abuse tactic that has become associated with post-truth mediated politics. It is an insidious tactic that can seriously destabilise perception and is linked to narcissistic abuse (see Stern 2018), has become a term to talk about racial microaggressions (see Gomez 2015),⁶ is rooted in social inequalities (Sweet 2019) and provides an entry-point to analysing the affective and social lives of abuse. Gaslighting was one of the buzzwords in 2018 identifying the toxicity of some post-truth political contexts. Gaslighting refers to the intent or capacity to manipulate (a person) by psychological means into questioning his or her own sanity. In other contexts gaslighting and related tactics are more explicitly framed as forms of *psychological warfare* that are injurious, corrosive, insidious and difficult to detect, measure and isolate, due to their covert nature.

The term 'gaslighting' was regularly used to identify the rewriting of history that has occurred on an almost daily basis during the pandemic, where, for example, former President Trump's previous comments to the press and on social media and decisions about the pandemic were *confabulated*, such that reality was fabricated, distorted and falsified. These confabulations, whether done with calculated intent to lie and mislead or being the result of disordered thinking, became shared in various satirical videos, memes and GIFs. This includes videos using comedic cataloguing and editing of these 'errors,' such as in the very funny video shared on NowThisPolitics titled, 'Trump's not a Doctor but he plays one on TV.'⁷ As well as an affective economy of disbelief, what we find across social media is an archive of public feeling expressed through astonishment, humour, confusion, anger, rage and the real fear and danger of various of Trump's convictions. As with abusive dynamics it was very difficult for those close to him to challenge him without becoming the target of his rage and retaliation for any perceived slight or criticism. In the case of his conviction about disinfectant being a potential solution to the coronavirus by being injected into the lungs, Trump's statement became a 'media event,' being picked up by news and broadcast media expressing the incredulity of audiences. Trump retaliated through a tone of righteous indignation by saying he was being *sarcastic*, shifting the blame onto audiences and cancelling his daily pandemic briefing by saying he was goading the media, while also accusing them of being hostile to him, what was described as a 'just-joking defence.'

This is one recognisable example of a tactic associated with narcissistic abuse and coercive control that extends post-truth into our hearts and minds in damaging ways. A chilling example of the interrelationship of gaslighting, deflection, blame-shifting, baiting and staging is the image of Trump stood in front of a church brandishing a Bible to pose for photographs. Prior to this he had ordered police in riot gear to fire teargas and rubber bullets against peaceful protestors marking their outrage at the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer. Walking a path from the White House, he stood posing for photographs, without acknowledging the protest, commenting upon his prior actions or offering leadership, but rather chose to engage in an abhorrent use of gaslighting by saying, 'We have a great country, the greatest country in the world.'⁸

This chapter has only focused on examples of those tactics that are more easily identifiable and popularised. However, there are a range of other, lesser-known techniques of reality distortion that are shaping a political and affective economy of lies and strategic deception. There are also counter-media of disbelief, those that actively oppose post-truth claims, often through their own forms of satirical media. These issues are the subject of a forthcoming book, *Abuse Assemblages: Power, Post Truth and Strategic Deception*, of which this chapter is a preliminary introduction to how we might approach the future of media when we accept that strategic disinformation is part and parcel of media and other forms of power.

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