# The Disinformation Society: Misinformation and Disinformation in the Late-Capitalist Public Sphere

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# Statement of Training Completed

I declare that I have completed the required training for the award of DPhil by Publication by satisfactorily passing the following modules in 2019-2020 for a total of 60 credits:

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES - UPCART-30-M (30 Credits)**

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# About

This submission is a retrospective evaluation of a body of published works—referred to by UWE Bristol as a “critical commentary” —submitted alongside those works in partial fulfilment of a Doctor of Philosophy by publication. Despite several important and interesting debates that have expanded since the works listed below were written, the limitation on word count makes significant *new* analysis or reflection on these debates unfeasible and is beyond the scope of the DPhil. Accordingly, this commentary will evaluate the contributions the works made when they were published, as well as their continued relevance to current debates. An abstract for this commentary and the body of works it concerns can be found on the following page.

The works submitted and addressed in this commentary are:

- *Filling the Void: Emotion, Capitalism and Social Media* (2017, Repeater Books, 185pp. 67,000 words approx, written 2014-2016) - **Henceforth “FTV”**
- *After the Fact? The Truth about Fake News* (2020, Repeater Books, 320pp. 96,000 words approx, written 2017-2020) – **Henceforth “ATF?”**
- “What is Wrong with Social Media? An Anti-Capitalist Critique” (2022, *Socialist Register*, 18pp. 8,400 words approx, written June-July 2021) – **Henceforth “WWSM”**

***Total: 172,000 words approx.***

*Please note: Where quoted passages have been incorporated from e-books and no hard-copy is readily available from personal books, libraries, friends or online PDF download, no page number is available. In this case, the page number is substituted with ‘*eb’*

# Contents

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# Abstract

The technological ideologues and internet utopians who championed the world-wide web's adoption promised that it would enable the smooth transfer of information with unprecedented scale and efficiency, characterising it initially as an "Information Super-Highway". Decades later, not only have these cheery predictions not transpired, but the web and its ecosystem of dependent apps and platforms is now commonly blamed for the copious misinformation and disinformation that is said to have arisen since user-generated content became a feature of mainstream commercial media consumption. This body of work consists of two books, *Filling the Void*, published 2017 and *After the Fact?*, published 2020, and one article "What is Wrong with Social Media?", published in 2022. These works contain a variety of analyses and theoretical contributions concerning a range of info-technological challenges that accompany the circulation of information of public importance via digital platforms, including "social media". As well as misinformation and disinformation, these challenges include compulsive and excessive social media use, and platform ownership. Covering the period between 2004 (when Facebook was first launched) and 2021 (when the last of the works submitted was actually written), these analyses aim to make their contribution to knowledge in two simultaneous ways. Firstly, they offer original analyses of what actually *has* transpired, which, besides their aspiration as scholarly contributions, are intended to provide reparative utility for media-makers and digital platforms who are serious about improving the quality of public conversation and information dispersal. Secondly, the works also challenge technocentric and positivist accounts of these phenomena on political-economic grounds, characterising them as a form of mystificatory narrative in themselves that obscures the true systemic causes of these challenges—which are also addressed as part of the analyses offered.

# Chapter I. Introduction, Context and Literature Review

## 1.1 Context

At the core of this research is the question of what people do and do not know about their urgent political and material realities, and crucially the *processes, institutions, technologies* and *practices* by which they either learn about it, become misinformed about it, or are provided with new affordances with which to *replace* information entirely, and thus remain ignorant. The context for this exploration is determined by several interrelated crises associated with the moment in which these works are written:

- Capitalism's[1] merciless exploitation of the world's resources - including human beings and their cultures, discourses, conflicts, private thoughts, desires and vulnerabilities,
- A seeming degradation in the quality of public conversation and levels of informed-ness, and
- An escalation in various large-scale challenges caused by these tendencies in capitalism—such as climate change, the resurgence of reactionary politics and the hollowing of the state—that require comprehension and collective decision-making.

In the context of what I have latterly called the "market-driven society" of late-neoliberal Euro-Atlantic world (expanded at 1.4.1 below), the works addressed in this commentary focus thematically on the complex relationships and overlaps between three corresponding areas of enquiry: (i) Broad political-economic questions about the nature and location of political-economic power in culture, discourse and technology–primarily between the years 2014-2021, plus the historical context of this period; (ii) informational processes such as communication, learning, propaganda and the dissemination of news and other information, especially that relevant to the crises enumerated above; and (iii) the behaviours, exchanges, and forms of power and value that specifically arise on, through and around the widely used consumer digital media "platforms" (Srnicek, 2017) that arose out of the "web 2.0" and "user-generated content" paradigm of the early 2000s, as privatised, extractive communicative infrastructures.

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[1] Here I mean both capitalism both in a longer-term, general sense, and the specific, contemporaneous forms it has taken more recently – see pp. 10-13

As I shall detail in chapter 3, this body of work aims to make contributions that, in this commentary, have been evaluated in respect of four broad areas, and which for reasons outlined towards the end of chapter 2 I have called “rhizomes”:

- The non-informational affectively driven user-experience of “timeline media”
- The intensifying commodification of attention by digital platforms
- A recasting of the idea of “misinformation” in the context of journalism, factual media and public literacy and conversation
- The origins of right-reactionary politics in neoliberal societies

As I will discuss further in chapter 4, it has always been my conviction that thinkers and academics should feel a sense of duty to complicate and interfere in public discourse when those exchanges oversimplify or mislead in relation to the issues they research.

Accordingly, these works originated partly in response to the tendency in popular accounts of major political and environmental issues to dilute, distort or entirely mystify political-economic factors, such as the role of financialisation and neoliberal policy. Closer to home, they arose similarly from an impulse to resist the obfuscatory pseudoscientific or technology-centric oversimplifications in prominent technology-adjacent issues, reflected in terms like social media “addiction”, or “fake news”. As I will discuss in following sections, I view these simplifying tendencies as constituting a variety of hegemonic misinformation that obscures the features and relationships intrinsic to the political economy of what is taking place, and thus as part of the history of how capitalist systems mystify their own operation.

My objections to these kinds of narratives have a certain historical context of their own. For *FTV*, they began to develop after my invitation to teach new generations of digital-native journalists in a university journalism department in 2008. As Deuze has noted, journalism education “has constructed a theoretical framework that considers the profession in terms of its more or less consensual news values, dominant frames, routinized operations, gatekeeping functions, and industrial arrangements.” (2019: 3). Meanwhile, the web was rapidly becoming journalism’s new home, whilst undergoing major transitions of its own, first into “user-generated content”, and then from that into “social media” and “platform capitalism”. Against the backdrop of these issues, both the department where I had been employed and the broader industry seemed manifestly determined to avoid difficult questions—not just about the role of capitalism in what was happening to journalism, but about culture, human cognition, social psychology, or for that matter any other domain of analysis that might disrupt the prevailing view of the problems it was facing, squarely informed by journalistic values, ethics and professional ideology (e.g. Shirky, 2008; Jarvis - columns and blog posts, e.g. 2007). As I will discuss below, my explorations of academic

literature in the field of “journalism studies” proved extremely helpful. However, as I wrote in the opening pages of *FTV*, the nature of the problem was that “rather than just talking about journalism, we [...] needed to talk about the world in which journalism was trying to survive” (2017: xi), for which journalism studies—in all fairness—is explicitly *not* designated. Given the urgency of journalism’s crisis, my main focus was therefore on making interventions into the simplified discourses of the world *beyond* my department, where the dearth of criticality seemed far worse.

Later when I wrote *ATF?*, it was partly because similarly reductive discourses around “post-truth” (Ball, 2017, Davis, 2017), including those framing it as a “war on truth” or identifying “postmodernism” as its root cause (D’Ancona, 2017, Brecher, 2020), demonstrated that there were new places in public conversation where intervention was needed. Even the concept of “fake news” itself tacitly encouraged, with the pejorative “fake”, that its antidote that was surely “real” news—an essentialist framing grounded in an uncritical view of news journalism and its production. Political issues such as polarisation faced a similar treatment with “filter bubbles” and “echo chambers” (e.g. Sunstein, 2018). Again, reliable explanations of what was actually happening seemed at risk of being obscured by this type of superficial, reductive commentary, just at a moment when, ironically, the very status of information and informed-ness seemed to be a prominent issue. Indeed, as I explore in the introduction of *ATF?* and at section 3.3 of this document, mystification *of mystification itself* is an issue of critical importance to the global crises I have mentioned above.

Although not all of these discursive provocations could necessarily be considered “serious” scholarship, their prominence alone represented an urgent and ongoing need for them to be taken to task. These works therefore arise out of a sense of both obligation and opportunity to contribute stronger and more rigorous analyses, elaborating these objections into positive contributions as their urgency increased and their scale became apparent.

## 1.2 Intellectual approach

Although it is not claimed that these are works of “political economy” in the orthodox sense of sovereignty, capital and class relations, they claim a belonging to political economy in a wider sense, as defined for example by Mosco as “the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources.” (2009: 2).

The works also deploy what I now recognise as essentially a Marxian dialectical method in how they address their objects of enquiry: As Stuart Hall wrote, the legacy of Marx in the 20th (and 21st) centuries is not in the enduring accuracy of the characterisations he made of

capitalism in the mid 19th century, nor the predictions he made about where it would lead, so much as in the *questions* one needs to ask (1983: 42). In a lecture given at a similar time, to commemorate the centenary of Marx's death, Hall reminds us that "Marx is always asking about the side you haven't seen. *That* is why [he] has an imagination grounded in the understanding of historical contradiction." (Hall, 2023[1983]: 50:06).

This disposition to the study of cultures and political-economic systems encapsulates well the aspiration that guided the works submitted here. I sought both to ask and to answer these types of questions, and in so doing, reveal exactly this "other side" of consumer digital platforms, economically and socially. And there were a lot of questions to be asked in this context: Who would gain from this embrace of digital platforms? How would the profit motive undermine the supposed public service of information provision that was explicitly evoked in the educational context where I had first started to consider these issues? Did audiences even want "online journalism" in the sense narrowly transliterated from print and broadcast? If not, how else might they encounter information about the world? In what ways would the general tendencies of capitalism seek to extract value from the uncertainty between internet platforms and journalism's clouded future?

## 1.3 Summary of Works

In this subsection I summarise the motivations and timing for each of the works submitted for this DPhil.

### 1.3.1 Timing and Moment

Throughout this commentary, I have used the word "conjuncture", which is a Gramscian term for a historical moment in which "incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves" (Gramsci, 2010[1929-1935], cited in Denning 1997: 22). A conjuncture is, in Denning's words, an "immediate terrain of struggle" at a given historical moment. Overall, the works listed on p.1 examine politically relevant communication and its technologies at the specific conjuncture arising around 2014-2021 at the end of a transition in Euro-Atlantic political culture in which the ideal of a stable, capitalist democracy built on neoliberal foundations appeared to be crumbling (Brown, 2019)—a conjuncture of economic crisis, political stagnation, and disruptive technological affordances.

However, the works were written according to the realities of slightly different political moments within this broader conjuncture: when *FTV* set out to consider the problem of compulsive social media use, mental health, and the explosion of *non-informational* media as self-medication, the political moment in which it did so involved less of the foreground

urgency and instability than the one in which it was completed, in the regions it concerned. A book proposal was first written in October 2014, based on research and observations gained from teaching undertaken in the preceding years, and was finally submitted to the publisher in June 2015, just two days before Donald Trump announced his bid to run for President. Obviously, the climate emergency, Black Lives Matter and the Israeli occupation of Palestine - all of which are addressed in the book - were already urgent issues, and the financial crash of 2008 had already taken place. However, according to an Ipsos MORI poll reported in the *Economist*, only 10% of the UK population believed that Britain's membership of the European Union was "one of the most important issues facing the country" (2017) and according to Google Trends, the word "Brexit" only entered common parlance during the UK's general election in May 2015 (Google Trends, n.d.). While reactionary right-wing politics had undeniably been growing in postwar Europe and elsewhere for some time (see Mudde, 2007), the reactionary turn in Western politics that became far more widely remarked after the combination of Brexit and Trump's election can be seen as a key threshold in the urgent issues to which these works respond. *FTV* straddles these events, Trump's election having occurred whilst editing the manuscript. This led to a three-week extension to connect the book's arguments better to the problem of misinformation which was perceived to be at the centre of that crisis. The final sections are, in some ways, the beginnings of a new project.

Indeed, *ATF?* picked up where the last section of *FTV* (also titled "After the Fact", foreshadowing this second book) finished. Accordingly, it was concerned with the relationship between capital, democratic decline, political literacy, reactionary politics and digital media platforms as constituents of an explicit "misinformation crisis". Again, it sought to intervene in and provide an alternative to what I perceived to be common, mystificatory analyses of this relationship that obfuscated the origins both of misinformation and the reactionary political turn. There are anecdotal accounts that an author's second book often has less momentum and enthusiasm than the first. However, the political moment encapsulated in the Brexit vote and Trump's 2016 victory had re-radicalised and reanimated my desire to write. Researched between May 2017 and February 2020, and completed in June 2020, *ATF?* incorporated the hindsight of a Trump presidential term, some early ramifications of Britain's exit from the EU, and the first stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast to the final moments of *FTV*, it put the *political* conditions of the Euro-Atlantic world at its centre, and responded to the renewed, emboldened, reactionary right-wing politics within mainstream discourse (Mondon & Winter, 2020), and the lost credibility of the nominally democratic institutions of government and civil society (Brown, 2019, Davies 2014), established forms of knowledge such as science, and the idea of civil discourse itself (Davies, 2020; Stanley, 2018).

*WWSM* began during the publicity accompanying the release of *ATF?* when I was approached about writing for the 2022 edition of *Socialist Register* which was themed around polarisation. Colin Leys, the political economist whose work had been so helpful to mine, and who was acting as co-editor of the journal, asked if criticisms I had made of what I saw as superficial and technocentric critiques of social media platforms, might be going too easy on the platforms with respect to polarisation and misinformation. This article was a valuable opportunity to update my earlier arguments with a bit more distance and hindsight.

### 1.3.2 Motivations

Although I have already outlined the overall motivations of this body of works, it is helpful to briefly clarify the specific motivations of each work. Given the moment during which it was written, *FTV* had three interlocking aims. Firstly, it sought specifically to repudiate the information-centric view of social media as mere distribution networks for “the facts” which I had encountered, which it did by exploring the compulsive, irrational nature of social media usage. Secondly, it sought to provide a credible and thorough alternative account of what the primary motivations might be for using social media in these irrational, often self-detrimental ways, reading these media and their compulsive usage as manifestations of a widespread deterioration in mental health that other scholars (James, 2008; Fisher, 2009) had already connected to the specifically “neoliberal” or “capitalist realist” Anglo-American cultural environment in which they were developed. The first three chapters sketch out this central inquiry and contain the theses that seek to answer it. Here, the objective was almost a kind of *translation*; a “making serious” of the mindless scrolling of the timeline and its cultures, which did not seem to be understood properly[2]. Finally, the book also sought to resituate these patterns of compulsive media consumption in the context of both economic exchange and public political discourse, which are covered in chapters four and five respectively. This public conversation element was significantly developed in light of Donald Trump’s 2016 electoral victory, and of course significantly elaborated in *ATF?*.

Indeed, *ATF’s* motivations derived initially from a sense of horror at the ignorance, negation and destructive potential that were so characteristic of the reactionary politics of that moment. On a personal note, many friends and colleagues from the EU felt depressed, melancholic or unwanted, while those in the United States were anxious, even terrified. More personally still, Brexit and Trump represented for me a lost future: in 2015 I was in the privileged position of being an EU citizen with free movement, and for unrelated reasons, I also had the additional possibility of living in the US as a “lawful resident alien”. By 2017,

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[2] Elaborated further at 2.3, page 21

these options and the social and professional possibilities they represented had been eliminated or, in the case of the US, made utterly undesirable. Meanwhile, my housemate at that moment in time was an ardent supporter of Brexit and Trump, and an avowed Islamophobe with whom I had *many* arguments—but from whom I learned a lot about ignorance and reactionary ideation. Faced with these issues, I felt caught between the reactionary belligerence and paranoia of the moment on the one hand, and bourgeois dismissal and determined obfuscation offered by mainstream punditry and journalism on the other, which appeared both to exacerbate that anger and further obfuscate its causes and effects. To deal with the issue of misinformation, as with the other major crises facing humanity such as reactionary politics or the climate crisis, I was motivated to develop a systemic diagnosis that could bring together these emergencies in a reparative way, making the structural visible and explicit.

Based on these fundamental drivers, *ATF?* identified and sought to answer two research objectives that seemed to get to the root of the problem: Firstly, it aimed to unpick the variously interspersed phenomena referred to collectively as "fake news" (see pp. 1-5) and propose a more comprehensive way of talking about misinformation. Secondly it enquired into an alternative model of causation between the economic, cultural and political tendencies often referred to as "neoliberalism", the constituents of "fake news" and the reactionary turn in politics that I have alluded to above.

In *WWSM?* I wanted to add an *ethical* case against social media platforms that the books had omitted. I include it in this DPhil not because it necessarily makes a profound academic contribution by itself, but because it can be seen as a helpful capstone on this body of work, clarifying and refining the positions taken in the books and the various articles and interviews produced to promote them–not included here. Additionally, it contained a final section on possible solutions, requested by the editors, which is not addressed elsewhere in my work (although it was based on notes for a possible but ultimately unwritten seventh chapter for *ATF?*).

## 1.4 Relevant Literature and Conceptual Framing

In general, since this is an interdisciplinary body of work rather than a specific enquiry, a central review of literature is not feasible. Instead, I have endeavoured to make references to literature where they are relevant to the precise enquiry being undertaken. The works themselves also contain extensive literature review that does not need to be rehearsed again. However, the works also rely on conceptual foundations that are largely common to the entire project and determine what the important questions were to ask. In this section I will

identify and assemble a few key strands of scholarship which provide conceptual background for the body of work as a whole.

### 1.4.1 Political moment, “late capitalism” and markets

One area in which a general review of literature will be useful here is in providing context for how the political conjuncture of these works is constituted and delineated. In this subsection I will therefore review relevant scholarship concerning key concepts through which this conjuncture is theorised.

Despite a thematic orientation around media and communication, there is no doubt that these works are to certain extent an attempt to engage with *capitalism itself* at the specific historical moments I have mentioned, *through* its culture, media and communication pathologies and the political spectacles they mediate and enable. I reflect further on this approach in chapter 4. As far as the basic Marxian conventions in the critique of culture and capitalism, I am happy to adopt the account provided by Gilbert (2022) for reasons of space.

On a more structural note, Grossberg reminds us not only that “capitalism” itself is an unreliable signifier, but that it “has no identity, no essence, and no inside that defines it, once and for all, as being exactly what it is.” (2010: 125). Even if one is not inclined to dispense entirely with any ontological consistency to capitalism, it is nonetheless indicative of its plasticity and historical shifts that so many terms have arisen that attempt to capture specific features, moments and tendencies within capitalism’s culture and political economy—far too many to list exhaustively here. Instead, I will focus here on “late capitalism”, “neoliberalism” and “market-driven society” as key conjunctural terms appearing often in the works to connect the contemporary moment in which they are written to the historically specific features of *this* capitalism.[3] These are important issues because, as my works argue, digital platforms represent a development of longstanding capitalist logics such as extraction, exploitation, and ruthless, nihilistic indifference to human subjective wellbeing into new, cognitive domains that were hitherto less accessible.

Since political economy changes over time, and scholars address their own conjunctural conditions with overlapping terminology, the meaning of even fundamental concepts can shift over time. A review of both historical periodicity, and *conceptual* apparatus used to understand this particular conjuncture is therefore necessary. “Late capitalism” is a good example of this type of shift, since rather than being a mere label for some relatively “late” moment in the history of capitalism, it is considerably multi-layered and longstanding.

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[3] The cultural terms “postmodernism” and “modernism”, and the historical term “modernity”, though broadly relevant are excluded from this review for reasons of space and lack of immediate, specific relevance.

Indeed, the choice of this term in the title of this commentary would not be repeated if undertaken again since, somewhat ironically, it borders on anachronism because some of its meanings are not "late" enough. Adorno and Horkheimer, for example, used the phrase in work produced as early as 1947. Later thinkers such as Mandel (1972) and Jameson (1991) use the term "late capitalism" to refer to the developments in capitalism that came about after the Second World War. For Mandel, it was the third stage of capitalism, characterised by new forms of organisation that normalised a global scale. This could be seen not only in the development of global corporations and the international flow of capital and labour they required, but also in the transformation of exchange relationships towards increasing scale and impersonality:

> The private tailor is replaced by the ready-made clothes industry, the cobbler by the repairs division of big department stores, shoe shops and factories, the cook by the mass production of pre-cooked meals in self service restaurants or the branch of industry specialising in them, the housemaid or charwoman by the mechanisation of their functions in the shape of the vacuum cleaner, washing machines, dishwasher, and so on. (1972: 385)

Although these transformations may seem merely contextual to my works, addressed mostly in Chapter 1 of *ATF?*, the transition of media from specific websites and local or national newspapers onto enormous platforms is surely an example of this tendency. The fact that a key affordance of platforms is to personalise themselves for the user is in a way an imprint of the impersonality that their immense global scale, in line with Mandel, would otherwise reveal. Writing in the late 1980s as the Cold War was ending, Jameson distinguished late capitalism from prior capitalisms on account of (i) a newly international division of labour, which includes the "flight of production to advanced Third World areas", the crisis of traditional labour, and containerisation; (ii) a "vertiginous new dynamic" in international finance, including the huge debts of the Global South; (iii) computers and automation, which obviously have proliferated immeasurably since Jameson wrote; and (iv) cultural phenomena such as the postmodern collapse of "high" and "low" culture, gentrification, and alternative systems of cultural valuation (ibid.: xix, Harvey, 2002), which again can be seen in intensified form in the quotidian cultural borrowing, remixing, parody and pastiche of the social media timeline.

While the contextual importance of these ideas to the issues in my work is obvious, they are not the totality of what is meant here by "late capitalism", and several historical developments prevent the conjuncture in which my works were written from being considered interchangeably with these earlier "late capitalisms". One crucial development, to which I have already alluded, is surely the internet. As Gitelman & Pingree (2004) point out,

the internet played an essential role in precipitating a kind of *accelerated* globalisation—particularly regarding culture, discourse and consumerism—that far exceeds that of the 1960s and 1970s, intensifying but also transforming these earlier "late capitalisms". More recently still, "late capitalism" has been re-appropriated in online contexts as a discursive shortcut for younger generations to label the current conjuncture and its excesses (Lowrey, 2017). In a sense, the signifier "late capitalism" has itself been subjected to precisely these intensified, digitalised forms of what it once stood for, suggesting a new term is now needed. That no satisfactory replacement so far exists may simply be because, as Jameson suggests, late capitalism has been developing for a while, and "people become aware of the dynamics of some new system, in which they are themselves seized, only later on and gradually" (1991: xix). In the shadow of Jameson, this may be one reason why Fisher (2009) who was an early influence on me, sought to provide an alternative in "Capitalist Realism", albeit with rather different emphases.

The stability and precision of "neoliberalism" fare even worse than those of "late capitalism", and I regret that *FTV*, alongside many other scholars, uses the term so freely, demonstrating what Grossberg describes as the "reductionism and essentialism" of much cultural studies (2010: 101). This instability in the term not only makes extensive usage inadvisable, but is particularly inappropriate for a book with public-facing aspirations like those described below in chapter 4. Scholars attempting to use or discuss this term have been wise to acknowledge the difficulties it entails. Hall, for example, warned that "The term 'neo-liberalism' is not a satisfactory one. Its reference to the shaping influence of capitalism on modern life sounds anachronistic to contemporary ears." He continued, however, that "there are enough common features to warrant giving it a provisional conceptual identity." Chief among these, he argues, is that neoliberalism is "grounded in the idea of the 'free, possessive individual'. It sees the state as tyrannical and oppressive" (2011: 706). Brown, whose conceptual influence on my work is immense, concurs that "neoliberalism" is difficult to pin down; "a loose and shifting signifier" that is "globally ubiquitous, yet disunified and nonidentical with itself in space and over time" (2015: 21). Brown adds in subsequent work that the "neoliberalism" of the current conjuncture "departs as radically from neoliberal ideals as repressive state communist regimes departed from those of Marx and other socialist intellectuals" (2019: 9) Acknowledging its highly varied character, she has nonetheless defined it as "a distinctive mode of reason, of the production of subjects", a "conduct of conduct," and crucially, a "scheme of valuation." Importantly, it is both "a historically specific economic and political reaction against Keynesianism and democratic socialism, as well as a more generalized practice of 'economizing' spheres and activities heretofore governed by other tables of value." (2015: 21) For the present works, this last conception of neoliberalism has been particularly important. For Murphy, it is, more simply, "an ideology

of privatisation, marketisation and 'small statism'" (2021: 26), while Harvey defines it as "a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." (2007: 2) More specifically, it "values market exchange as 'an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs' [...] It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market." (2007: 3) For Davies, neoliberalism is an attack on the *political*, the common thread of which, across divergent implementations, is the "attempt to replace political judgement with economic evaluation". It is ultimately, he says, "the pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics" (2014: 44-45). More recently, various writers have even proclaimed that neoliberalism is now over, or "dying" (Meadway, 2021; Mazzucato, 2022), the veracity of which depends considerably on how narrowly this term is understood.

Historical developments and varied emphases in "neoliberalism" and "late capitalism" were the main reasons why in *ATF?* I preferred the more conjuncturally and conceptually specific term "market-driven society", inspired by Leys's (2001) term "market-driven politics". Rather than being a question of the "disenchantment of politics", it seemed as though we were facing but the disenchantment of all other systems of valuation—cultural, social and ethical, as well as political. "Market-driven society" is described further in *ATF?*, page 11.

### 1.4.2 Internet, Capital and Society

These works will also inevitably be considered alongside other attempts to think critically about the internet and digital media in everyday life. There is no space here to summarise the entire cannon of what is sometimes called "internet studies" (Dutton, 2013) from the last quarter-century, even if limited to media and/or political economy. However, the internet's incorporation into an ever-broader range of economic, civic, social and cultural activity makes some sketch of this background appropriate, alongside the political-economic developments addressed above.

The period relevant to these works, addressed in the previous section, has sometimes been framed as a "post-industrial-" or "information society", although this phrase has come to have a variety of meanings–some more associated with the digital age than others (Webster, 2014). The notion of an "information society" is far older than the digital platforms of the early 21st Century and has even been used synonymously with the idea of a "post-industrial society" (Bell, 1973). Lazzarato (1996) proposed the concept of "immaterial labor" as a means for thinking about a more general shift from industrial labour to affective and cognitive

labour. Roughly a decade later, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri embraced the concept of immaterial labour to mean "labor that produces immaterial products, such as information, knowledges, ideas, images, relationships, and affects" (2004: 65). Likewise, Marazzi has identified the transition to "post-Fordism" as a key moment at which the "extraction of value" is significantly further extended "beyond factory gates" towards other realms of cultural and social life (2011: 48). However, as the internet and the world-wide web became mainstream in the 1990s, the preoccupation with "information societies" intensified and was to some extent recast in the context of these technologies (e.g. Castells, 1996). Fuchs (2008) has provided a useful summary of how older discourse around "knowledge societies" as manifestations of post-industrial life in the Global North came to be associated with the Internet. The concept of "immaterial labour" has been applied specifically to address this digital shift, but as Fuchs notes, this analysis ignores the materiality intrinsic to the fact that digital activity "changes the state of real-world systems" (2008: 186). As I discuss in all of my works, and evaluate on page 34, digital systems also effect changes in material relationships with power, with capital and with each other. Digital systems' reliance on rare minerals arguably also undermines any straightforward sense of their immateriality or that of the activities for which they are used.

While early efforts to imagine the internet in everyday life such as Barlow (1996) often had utopian foundations, sometimes rooted in what could be interpreted as an unrealised disappointment with aspects of earlier phases of capitalism, it often entailed a sort of apoliticality that had still not fully been extinguished when my own work began. Negroponte (1995), for example, lauded the transition from "bits" vs "atoms" but did not consider the hidden materiality of those "bits". Meanwhile, although Manovich aspired to understand the "logic" of new media's development, this question was framed in a media-centric sense that did not acknowledge that this driving "logic" might amount to a refreshed or intensified capitalistic one: "to understand the logic of new media, we need to turn to computer science. It is there that we may expect to find the new terms, categories, and operations that characterize media that became programmable" (2001: 48). Curran (2012) provides a useful summary of early cyberutopian claims.

As far as critique, it is perhaps unfair to expect writers from nearly three decades ago to have foreseen where the internet's privatisation and mass-adoption in the 1990s would lead, even if thinkers such as Marcuse (1964) had warned long ago about the potential danger that technology would assist the worst aspects of how postwar capitalist power would manifest in culture. Across much of my own work, commercial digital platforms, the conversations they host and the belligerent voices they amplify are argued to have displaced much of the openness and egalitarianism of the early world-wide web, despite the military provenance

and problematic libertarianism of even those nascent webs (Chenou, 2014). Indeed, the broad question of where digital platforms do and do not amount to a genuine divergence from earlier capitalisms, as opposed to mere intensification or globalisation, is a theme to which my works regularly return.

Some contemporary analyses remain reluctant to acknowledge the consistent historical tendencies of capitalism that made the internet we use today so likely to develop, for example in Keen's claim that the commercialisation of the web represented a "new kind of capitalism" (2015: **eb*), largely repeated by Zuboff (2016). Other writers have offered more reliable analyses of platforms in terms of capitalist life, however. Curran (2012) and McChesney (2013) interestingly both use the idea of a "catechism" to evoke the extent to which the possibilities of the internet were repeatedly claimed to embody, intensify or extend the ideology that free-market capitalism was the ideal foundation for democracy. Lovink (2019) traces a "melancholic" resignation to accept this domination, which exemplifies Fisher's (2009) notion of "reflexive impotence".

In my own avoidance of internet exceptionalism, legal scholars were often most influential—enough so that I eventually chose to attend law school, receiving an LL.M in 2012. One of the first thinkers that I encountered who considered the cultural features of the internet in more structural terms was the US lawyer Lawrence Lessig. Although Lessig's most relevant works (e.g. 2006) predate "social media" in the contemporary sense, they underscored the importance of seeing cultural practices of "cyberspace", such as games or participative copyright infringement, as inseparable from the prevailing networks of power and commerce that not only pre-existed the internet but had created much of it. Another important influence was Cohen's (2007) detailed Foucauldian interrogation of internet exceptionalism, including utopian "cyberspace" constructs made popular by Barlow and others. In terms of what kind of forum the internet might represent, Cohen's discussion of three possibilities—utopia, isotopia, and heterotopia—remained an essential tool with which to think about issues such as compensatory media use, public conversation, economic relationships, and the other rhizomatic contributions of my work outlined in chapter 3.

Another distinct but important conceptual influence on how these works resisted exceptionalism was Örnebring's (2010) evaluation of the applicability of the concept of "de-skilling", associated with Braverman (1974), in the more contemporaneous context of journalists' adaptation to new technologies in the newsroom. Not having actually read Marx at that time, this work was one of my first prompts to consider the *provenance* of technological affordances in political-economic terms. Subsequently, Srnicek (2017) was an important influence that helped me to make these connections more confidently in *ATF?*

# Chapter II. Methods and Methodology

As I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the works submitted for this DPhil sought to contribute analyses to both scholarship and public conversation that would highlight the contradictory, dialectical nature of digital platforms and their closely embedded relationships with informational, cultural, political and economic landscapes. They also sought to provide insight into those broader landscapes themselves, using the representations found on digital platforms as material from which to undertake these considerations. This chapter will evaluate the methods and methodological principles employed to produce these works, as well as indicating the influences and epistemic traditions upon which the works draw and some of the key considerations arising when these approaches are applied to digital platforms.

## 2.1 Introduction

The methodological starting point for these works has been my familiarity with traditions of cultural studies—a field arising in the late 20th Century at a radical juncture in the history of the social sciences, to which an unwillingness to reify long-accepted concepts, and the need for collective self-critique in relation to accepted systems of representation, organisation, observation and narrativisation, are fundamental. Cultural Studies has even been said to entail "a reluctance to bring any explicit discussion of methods", due to a "renegade character, and [...] conscious dissociation from established academic disciplines" (Pickering, 2008: **eb*). Consequently, reflection on methodology in these traditions is not always explicitly foregrounded in the way that it tends to be in works where a choice between structured empirical methods needs to be accounted for, and is not made explicit in these works. This seeming absence does not however preclude the consideration of interesting methodological questions in respect either of these works or in cultural studies generally. If a methodology can be understood as the collection of principles according to which a scholar intends to be held accountable for their epistemic contributions, and for the methods used to make those contributions reliably, there is plenty to discuss. A retrospective examination of the methodology underlying these works has been a valuable opportunity to consider some of the issues involved in researching broad enquiries of this kind.

Some of this reflection has also been derived from my experiences of going out into the world to discuss my works with both scholars and the public, and being forced by these conversations to consider my works according to alternative perspectives and expectations—particularly those of different kinds of scholarship. These encounters have involved many

instructive and useful dimensions. Chief among these however, they have highlighted one feature of the works that has raised especially important methodological questions meriting analysis here: Overall, it has been my experience that there seems to be something technically and historically specific about the precise, database-driven nature of *digital* platforms and media that encourages an assumption that the objects of study are data that can be representatively and exhaustively sampled, and that *quantitative* methods are most appropriate for analysing those data. Asked about my "data" on numerous occasions, particularly by US academics, the "renegade" approach I have borrowed from cultural studies, which takes more or less the whole of society's institutions, public communications and historical events as its "data" has on occasion, particularly in combination with my autodidactic scholarship, left me underprepared in how exactly to respond. On their face, these normative assumptions make sense, and are perfectly reasonable. In their original senses, "digital" and "quantitative" are certainly two facets of the same communicative and imaginative apparatus—numbers, meanwhile the surveillance- and database-driven nature of digital platforms suggests an ease of access and of observation. In contrast with these associations, my attempt in these works to understand the messy, incomplete, infinite, and continually changing array of human culture and discourse through its mediation over digital systems perhaps represents a kind of methodological departure.

Having emphasised that the analyses in my works were made from a critical standpoint that sought to trouble the obfuscatory tendencies of technocentric, positivist epistemology in *public* discourse, it would surely be short-sighted for any retrospective methodology that gave rise to these works not to include at least some comparative reflection on the differing varieties of academic research, with my own works as the examples to be interrogated most thoroughly. Indeed, my inclination to turn the critical lens back on myself and on academic research more broadly comes, in this case, precisely from the traditions of cultural studies to which I have referred. However, while the influence of cultural studies' aforesaid "renegade character" on my works may be undeniable, I wish to be very clear before proceeding that here I have no interest in relitigating older debates on the philosophy or indeed politics of scientific enquiry—whatever their broader significance. Neither do I wish in what follows to imply any wholesale critique to quantitative analysis or scientific methods as a whole, nor even do I wish to make any general claims on the value of specific methodologies for the study of digital platforms taken as a whole. My works evaluated here are replete with countless references to scientific and quantitative studies, and as such are clear affirmations of the value of these methodological approaches. Rather, my argument is a more specific and reflexive one about how the issues central to *these* works in particular can best be investigated, in a context in which so much of political life has come to be digitally mediated via large-scale platforms. I will explore what the merits have been of looking beyond "data"

in the conventional sense and how, in addition to the evident value of quantitative approaches in social sciences when the right kind of question is asked, there has been immense value in applying the qualitative, interpretive methodological approaches of social theory to the infinite, chaotic assortment of materials to be found on digital platforms.

## 2.2 Platforms as data and culture

I start from the perspective however that there are valid methodological critiques to be made of these works from a conventional standpoint. Certainly, the works depart from a standard scientific model of observation that has shown value elsewhere, in two distinct, if interconnected ways: They do not analyse a complete, representative data set, collected between exact dates, or in precise, repeatable ways, and barring a few exceptions they do not use quantification in their analysis. How is this justifiable given the many affordances of data accumulation and surveillance that accompany digital platforms? To their proprietors, the interactions that digital platforms mediate–every "view" and "like" and "click" and categorised emotional reaction–are not only *data* in a certain conventional understanding of the word, but quantitative data with an immense commercial value about which we are reminded whenever a new revelation is made about Meta, X (formerly Twitter), or some other platform. Perhaps in direct resistance against platforms' own reduction of their users to "data", it was never my inclination to think of these interactions or activities in those terms, however. In these specific works however, beyond this almost philosophical objection, a number of further obstacles prevented what otherwise might have been a more conventional, and likely quantitative approach.

Firstly, accurate, large-scale data on user behaviours gathered without the conspicuous observation of the researcher are generally only available in collaboration with the platforms themselves, and otherwise locked down to prevent third-party use of platform data. Here, political economy comes together with ethics in a way that means that these avenues represent only a very limited scope for co-operating with platforms—a trajectory that has tended to make things more difficult with time. In a more recent example, shortly after Elon Musk purchased Twitter (now X), which was one of the more permissive and researcher-friendly platforms, the API that provided access to its data was closed (Calma, 2023). Meanwhile, incidents such as the Cambridge Analytica in 2017-2018 (in which operatives were able to exploit loopholes in Facebook to gather user data) have reminded us that generally users (however irrationally) are consenting to data storage and collection on the basis that their personal data are *not* directly available to unknown third parties. When a major study of "emotional contagion" (Kramer et al., 2014) was carried out with the co-operation of Facebook, who provided privileged access to user data, there was significant

public outcry (Selinger and Hartzog, 2016). Furthermore, the frequently critical disposition of my work, already determined by other methods and analyses, if ethically disclosed, would potentially have created an antagonistic context surrounding any co-operation with platforms to obtain privileged access to data, foreclosing any possibility. As I have written in *WWSM*, what I see as the highly dubious moral character of most social media platforms needs to be articulated more prominently than can be concealed in any research proposal. There have simply been too many scandals, too many overreaches, too many damaging leaks and too many apologies for me to have felt comfortable remaining neutral in dealing with digital media platforms. Indeed, as Mondon (2020) has pointed out, it is not always appropriate for scholars to try to maintain their objectivity, and the very scenario of attention-driven, mass-surveillance platforms worming their way into our lives exemplifies many ethical and material relations that a researcher drawing on Marxian concepts and writing on issues of social justice, as in the present case, cannot really accept.

Secondly, the unavailability of this "insider access" to the closely-guarded data on platforms leaves only the general consumer/user experiences of platforms available to the researcher. While these interfaces do not necessarily foreclose the systematic collection of materials from digital platforms, the "opaque" real-time auctioning of a highly financialised attention economy (Hwang, 2020) driven by pre-selected personalisation algorithms that examine potentially thousands of data points, greatly impacts the feasibility of a genuinely *representative* sample in a statistically reliable sense, particularly for longitudinal data collection. With more researchers, more time, and more resources, amazing work can be conducted using multiple accounts. However in the case of the body of works I examine here, these practicalities reduced many of the advantages or certainties that a data-driven approach may potentially have had over a critical discourse analysis of media objects gathered, through careful, theoretically-informed use.

Finally, the aspirations of the works being as I have described, the main issue for my works was really the *type* of research question, from which two further issues flow. The first of these is the *scope* of these enquiries. Stuart Hall has helpfully suggested that epistemic contributions can be offered at different "levels of analysis", which though of equivalent value, offer vastly different types of enquiry: "As you lower the level of abstraction, you come closer to the details of particular concrete historical formations, and you have to bring other determinations into your discourse in order to make sense of what you are talking about" (2016[1977]: 91). Certainly, systematic and repeatable data collection becomes both more feasible and more important in more focused and specific enquiries where observations need to be highly concrete, and as exemplified for instance by Trilling, Tolochko and Burscher (2017), Starbird (2017) or numerous others, remains extremely valuable as long as it is

supported and informed by suitable theoretical and historical context and analysis. Notwithstanding some of the practical limitations I have outlined above, it is my view however that both a preoccupation with structured observation and the use of quantitative research methods would only have been instructive to these works had I wanted to devote more time to questions posed at more detailed and context-specific levels of analysis. Surely then, it is the "level of analysis" at which these particular works engage, combined with the Marxian approach described at pp.6-7, that already invite a certain kind of answer, for which a more "zoomed out" methodological approach built on theoretically-informed interpretivism is better suited. The second issue flowing from the nature of the research questions I have pursued in these works relates not to level of analysis, scope, or degree of critical distance, but to the very nature of the *type* of observation being made. I will illustrate this point by reference to subsequent research I have carried out using more systematic data collection and a far narrower scope of enquiry to analyse Andrew Tate videos on the video platform TikTok (not assessed in this commentary). In this project, my co-investigator and I found that, to our initial surprise, only 22% of the videos we collected contained any sexism or misogyny according to common definitions, and only 34.5% of videos even mentioned women and girls at all, despite the predominant characterisation of Tate as first and foremost a misogynist who is radicalising young boys along those lines. That these numbers may *appear* to be at odds with the role ascribed to Tate shows precisely the mismatch that can arise between a quantitative-first approach to data collection on contemporary digital platforms and broad social issues as represented on those platforms, knitted so finely into the fabric of everyday life and culture. This "surprise" in our quantitative findings was a complete red herring. *Counting* what is or is not misogynist or sexist about the experience of searching for Tate on TikTok utterly overlooked the complex ways in which even a small *minority* of content relating to women and girls in quantitative terms forms part of an overall nexus of misogyny, masculinity, adolescence, extreme neoliberalism and background patriarchal structures that need to be interpreted and theorised *together* as one phenomenon. It was precisely thanks to my earlier experiences in producing the works that I address here, which resolutely see the content and experience of digital platforms as a singular phenomenon in need of direct interpretation, that I was able to sidestep this potential pitfall and focus on a different kind of significance.

## 2.3 Theory and/as method

In keeping with the "level of analysis" at which these works were always intended, the intrinsically qualitative preoccupation that characterises their central enquiry into broad political-economic pictures, and the practical constraints that affected them, the aspiration

was generally to make contributions in the form of "theory", an epistemic tradition to which numerous thinkers and writers have contributed before me. The feminist writer and poet Adrienne Rich called theory "the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees" (1984: 213). The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman said that the theoretical abstractions and models he wanted to offer were "indispensable for any understanding, and indeed for the very awareness of the similarities and differences, connections and discontinuities that hide behind the confusing variety of experience" and "are meant to be 'thought with' and serve as instruments to 'see with'" (2007: 24). Paraphrasing Marx, Stuart Hall argued for the immanence of theorising to the overall production of knowledge. Theory, he writes, is "not simply given in the nature of the facts at which you are looking. Theory is an operation *on* the facts, on the evidence. By necessity, one has to break into the evidence *through* the formation of *concepts*. Observation, theorising, and abstraction are inseparable." (2016 [1977]: 89).

One of the most important ways in which theorisation can lead to new epistemic contributions is in tracing the *connections* it reveals between different theories, data, cultural phenomena and in some cases entire academic fields. These connections can be brought together into *rhizomatic* assemblages, in the sense offered by Deleuze and Guattari (2004 [1980]). The "Rhizome" is a non-hierarchical view of knowledge that explores the value of a vast number of ideas and entities being connected to each other as a "rhizome" or "assemblage". They note that "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order." (ibid. **eb*) When building these theoretical "rhizomes", information and ideas were connected in a way that endeavoured to reveal and produce new insight. Crucially in the case of rhizomatic work, the line between epistemology, methodology and method is also blurred, since the rhizome is simultaneously an epistemic theory in the sense that it is about knowledge and what knowledge production is; a methodology in that it guides the selection of additional methods; and a method in itself, in the sense that it directly leads to the production of new theoretical knowledge about how and why things are connected.

Some of the earlier proponents of modern "critical" theory were refugees from German fascism, and thus the gravity and urgency of understanding these events imbued this mode of theory with an important humanist element. Describing the critical theory that he pioneered, which took account of and valued the irrationalities and vulnerabilities of human beings, Max Horkheimer wrote that "the self knowledge of present-day man is not a mathematical knowledge of nature which claims to be the eternal Logos, but a critical theory of society as it is, a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life." (1972: **eb*). This evocation of the "conditions of life" indicates a recurrent framing my

methodology that, although common to theoretical work focused on broad questions, embodies a somewhat different view of the "empirical" than how it is conventionally understood. Particularly during the writing of *ATF?*, I frequently pondered the practical and conceptual boundaries of the well-known anthropological method of "participant observation", which is generally understood to means learning "about the activities of the people under study in the natural setting through observing and participating in those activities." (Kawulich, 2005). While I do not claim the use of this method in its normative sense, there is another sense in which, given the humanist, anti-capitalist orientation of my works "participant observation" can be applied: the unavoidable participation in a globalised, "late capitalist" society of some kind, saturated by digital communications and representations, or indeed the systems of global trade and capital in which they are embedded. If anything, these works therefore employ a *reluctantly* participatory observation of Euro-Atlantic capitalist realism itself–incorporating and analysing as many different types of material as possible from the course of this unavoidable participation.

For my work, the potential sources informing this observation included almost any kind of cultural or communicative artefact: every unit of content, image macro, news story, observable interaction between users, however inane or forgettable on the surface, was *potentially* relevant to the analysis being formulated, and if so, could be used as an illustration of some specific facet or nuance of the overall argument. In some cases, this work was a kind of illumination; a *making visible* of these seemingly banal or frivolous platforms and materials from the everyday life of the user-generated internet to bring "low" culture into the analytical picture being created–unifying the experiences, ideologies and reference points for the multiple audiences I shall discuss in chapter 4. This approach, used away from digital platforms by many cultural theorists as varied from one another as Slavoy Žižek and Stuart Hall, challenges the boundaries of what counts as "data", which is implicitly re-evaluated by the researcher on an ongoing basis as part of their methodological practice. In a way, this method also resembled how a historian works: looking back at a rich archive of materials and making sense of them. However, in the case of these works, it was not a distant history, but an extremely proximate one, and a different scale was afforded, involving the interpretation of tens of thousands of documents jointly.

There are differences in how these books made use of this highly incorporative approach. *FTV* was researched and produced more organically, driven by a kind of sense-making born of immediate necessity, and developed in teaching materials built up since when I first began giving actual lectures. Its subject matter also required a closer attention to the content of social media platforms. Every time I saw something, whether a "meme", a news story or a journal article, that related to the picture of digital platforms and communication that I

wanted to make, I would bookmark or download it, and then incorporate it into teaching. The book simply develops and proliferates this approach. Although *ATF?* broadly followed a similar method, it is different in several key respects. Besides the confidence that comes with already having written a book and knowing what is possible in a research project, and the fact that it came out of a different political moment as I have described, its intention was also to be comparatively more ambitious in the significance of its academic contribution as well as more overtly political in response to the sense of crisis that inspired it. For this subsequent book, the methods of data collection described above were therefore much more organised and deliberate throughout. It was compiled at first as approximately 38,000 words worth of notes, annotated URLs, DOIs, images and other records, built up over approximately three years, before being written up into a 96,000-word manuscript in the spring and summer of 2020.

Given the tighter focus on the political conjuncture in which *ATF?* was written, news reports were an especially useful type of source from which to synthesise. Indeed, despite its critiques of mainstream journalism, particularly in chapter five, journalism played an extremely important role in this "stockpiling" of materials from which to synthesise, not least because journalists are frequently the ones doing what resembles fieldwork, long before conventional academic modes of discovery can be mobilised to place researchers on the ground for any given issue. For example, when the world learned that teenagers in Veles, Macedonia were publishing "fake news" of a certain description, it was journalists who first did the work of visiting the city and speaking to its residents. Writing about the world contemporaneously, using this invaluable journalistic work, is a challenge because the scenario under analysis is prone to change, and this volatility in the "data" required a well organised array of collection methods such as automated Twitter searches and curated feeds (to minimise the pitfalls of personalised pre-selected exposure), Google Alerts, and following specific tags on mainstream news outlets with this facility. By far the most valuable sources however were trusted independent outlets and individual journalists themselves that could be trusted not to be reductive or protect the interests of corporations or powerful officials.

## 2.4 Theory as interpretative lens

To make the type of observation I have outlined above more systematically, items needed to be evaluated in respect of two key qualities: reliability and significance. In other words, although each media item or story was *potentially* a "data" point, two main methodological questions arose from deriving "data" from such a noisy, saturated media environment: (i) which individual indicators were *reliable* enough to include in analysis, and (ii) of the limitless details of the surrounding world, both mediated and tangible, which can be

considered significant enough for analysis? The answer to (i) is relatively straightforward, even if slightly different for each type of source. Anything that seemed either too anomalous or too supportive of my overall theory was checked against other types of sources, such as peer-reviewed academic work where available. Peer-reviewed academic articles themselves were generally considered reliable unless their findings ran contrary to the established consensus and/or the study showed methodological weaknesses–for example Kross et al. (2013)–in which case they were qualified or framed critically where they were used at all.

The answer to (ii) is more complex, but ultimately provides an illumination as to the enduring role of theory as a methodological tool in itself, rather than simply being an output. When faced with cultural materials for interpretation whose only solid fact is that they exist at all, pre-existing theoretical frameworks are an essential part of how their meaning and significance are determined. As Stuart Hall reminds us, "in the first instance, any set of historical events presents itself to us as a mask of complex, unordered, and contradictory phenomenal forms or events. One has to break into them with the necessary abstractions [and] cut into the thick texture of social life and historical experience with clearly formulated concepts and abstractions." (2016[1977]: 89). These words describe quite accurately the forms of interpretation that accompanied each media item or instance. While the overall process has been as inductive as possible, the conceptual foundations at the root of the works fostered a kind of "instinct" that helped to identify when something "interesting" had been observed. There were many instances in which this framing assisted the processes of observation and interpretation outlined above. For example, explicitly Marxian political economy of digital platforms like that in Fuchs (2008) or Freedman (2012), enabled *FTV* to start from the position that pathological social media usage might be a source of considerable commercial value for the companies facilitating it and their shareholders, alongside the harms it causes. It could also set the parameters against which materials found on social media could be evaluated, according to how they had communicated questions of class, capital or ownership, or how the representations they contained constituted mystified ideology. Likewise, drawing on a feminist understanding of technology inherited from scholars such as Wajcman (2004), I could interrogate the notion that social media having been developed by a mostly-male workforce might shape its features or policies, without needing to evidence the very plausibility of this hypothesis in itself. Similarly, *ATF?* could investigate the idea that societies built around the supremacy of "the market" *might* also tend towards both reactionary politics and misinformation only thanks to other scholars having laid the conceptual groundwork for these connections (e.g. Brown, 2019).

A more specific example of the guiding role that *a priori* theory could play is in the way that Chapter 3 of *FTV* imputes a rather cynical intentionality to the nature of the relationships

cultivated by platforms. The heuristic basis of these claims, lacking any factual "proof" or interview-based methods at the time they were written might reasonably draw a degree of methodological critique from those more accustomed to straightforward observational work, particularly given the damning nature of these implications. However, revelations by former executives and employees of Meta (then Facebook Inc.) and other companies that came to light after the publication of *FTV*–some of whom featured in the 2020 documentary *The Social Dilemma*–have since revealed this theoretically-informed characterisation of the relationship to be well-founded. For example, in 2017 Facebook's founding vice president Sean Parker spoke publicly about his time at Facebook, telling reporters that he and the site's other founders had known when they created Facebook that it was exploiting "a vulnerability in human psychology" (Solon, 2017). Even before these disclosures, there had been occasional glimpses of this intentionality. For example, *Hooked*, by Nir Eyal (2014), outlined the deliberately "habit-forming" aspiration of Silicon Valley software companies from a supportive, "how to" standpoint. To provide a more straightforward example, the image macro on p.179 of *FTV* that uses a mixture of pseudoscience and misleading imagery to undermine the case for battery-driven electric energy over conventional fossil fuels, is a good example of "organic" platform content that can be found explicitly discussed in my work, and for which theoretical context greatly assisted any interpretation. By itself, it is not much, but in the context of an already polarised debate about climate change and its politics, and additionally the difficulties intrinsic to verifying the factual claims in this kind of content, this example became a "datum" that illustrated and supported a broader characterisation of platform-mediated political discourse—supported by a folder of dozens more examples.

Finally, the *a prior* and *a posteriori* positions of different kinds of theoretical insight, situated as foundation and output respectively, were brought together in a self-interrogating process of *active theorisation* that was iterative, cumulative, and highly networked. If the starting point of a research process can be theoretically informed in a way that guides a process of observation that generates new theory and hypothesis, any outcome can also be used to guide further enquiry or re-examination; any new hypothesis tested against new observations, leading to the development of new and/or refined analyses that further guide their own enhancement. This active, iterative, recursive process through which the development of this theoretical work has taken place is a crucial aspect of the methodology of these works, since it allowed them to inform their own development in response to a continuously shifting subject. This type of theoretical self-adjustment in light of new data is reminiscent of what Gilmore (2022: **eb*) calls "the vibrant dialectics of objective and subjective conditions". However, its iterative quality has also come to be known as the "grounded theory" method, which involves the "commitment to continual re-examination of data in the light of developing arguments" (Seale, 2018: **eb*). What I like about it most of all

however is that it reveals theory not to be a passive metaphysical substance or even a fixed tool, but an active, volatile, intentional process that is not only updated constantly by new observation, but which modifies itself as it develops and is never complete.

In the following chapter I will outline four broad “rhizomes” where my works are argued to have made epistemic contributions by forming or revealing these kinds of linkages.

# Chapter III - Works and their contributions

Since the theoretical contributions offered by these works are “rhizomatic” in that they arise from and make the case for the *connections* between different sources, examples and ideas (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004 [1980]), they are intended to be valuable to any areas of study to which they might be deemed relevant, rather than being narrowly identified with “fields” in a conventional sense. While there is insufficient space within the specified word limit to discuss the works in as much detail as I would like, I will nonetheless evaluate each of these rhizomatic contributions in turn. 3.1 and 3.2 begin with digital platforms and how they are used, and evaluate their significance as media forms. 3.3 and 3.4 can be interpreted as part of my attempts to *de-centre* media platforms within the relevant conjuncture, and instead emphasise the political and structural origin of the discursive phenomena that have been (mistakenly) attributed primarily to those technologies.

## 3.1 Rhizome 1. Timeline media

*Chapters 1,2,3 & 5 of FTV, and revisited in chapter 6 of ATF?*

Although the characterisation of this work as a “rhizome” may preclude hierarchy as such, there are two interdependent explorations to this area of my work. Firstly, centred on the social media timeline, this assemblage is concerned with how rational, information-seeking models of the internet like those advocated at earlier moments in its history (e.g. Nielsen, 2008) were no longer dominant on social media platforms. Secondly, it explores what the impacts of this shift might be for information-oriented aspirations and expectations in the production and dissemination of media such as journalism. As I have stated, this enquiry began from my experience as a software developer well-versed both in the perversely logical structures of internet technology, and in the messiness of cognitive psychology, seeking to explain to journalists why rationalist expectations about the dispersal of information via these “new” technologies that was being encouraged elsewhere was unhelpful. I will start with the cognitive aspects.

### 3.1.1 Subjective experience of the timeline

Although the field of human-computer interaction design has long acknowledged a role for emotion and the differences between individuals, it nonetheless relies frequently on rationalist/idealist concepts such “information”, “knowledge”, or “processing”. A human-computer interaction design textbook from 2004, the year Facebook was launched, is instructive in its description of these interactions:

> Information comes in, is stored and processed, and information is passed out. […] In the human, we are dealing with an intelligent information-processing system […] This model is obviously a simplification of the real situation […]. However, it is convenient as a way of grasping how information is handled by the human system. (Dix et al., 2004: 12)

My work first sought to dispense with this view of the human being herself as largely computer-like (also see Epstein, 2016)—in control of how digital media materials and affordances are used, in favour of an *animal* character driven primarily by emotions, reward-seeking impulses and the need for relief from various historically-specific forms of discomfort, rather than by occupations or informational needs. Although invocations of "animal" and even "human" risk a somewhat ahistorical interpretation, I believe this approach enables a far better materialist analysis of what was/is actually taking place. De-centring media themselves places this messy, emotional, impulsive, reward-driven account of how these technologies are used not only in relation to the logics of capitalism (see the following section), and to inescapable features of human cognition and neurology, but also in specific historical and cultural contexts—all of which are material conditions of the real world. No previous analysis had simultaneously examined these in-the-moment subjective experiences and behaviours on social media, the affordances that facilitate them, and the background conditions in which this behaviour takes place.

Indeed, chapter two of *FTV* was one of the first works to discuss the central role of the neurotransmitter dopamine as it relates to the impulses and reward-seeking behaviours immanent to a user's engagement with the linear "timeline" architecture of many social networks. In August 2016 when the chapter was written, the debate around the compulsive social media use and its relationship to dopamine was less common. Even among the scientific community, my work was parallel to, rather than a mere translation of, most of the work on social media use and dopamine. A search of Google Scholar for the keywords "dopamine social media" limited to work published in or prior to 2017 reveals very little - in stark contrast to the same search limited to works published in 2018 and subsequently.

Termed "timeline media", a key concept of this rhizome is a multi-layered analysis of the moment at and means by which the user scrolls aimlessly through social media, the technological affordances, commercial imperatives (addressed separately below), affective and neurological impulses, informational and communicative needs and cultural and social participation are brought together into a unified, seemingly aleatory experience. I offer four factors that aim to account for the intensity of the user's experience: (i) *familiarity* of sources; (ii) *novelty* of stimuli; (iii) *variation* in type, register and tone, and (iv) almost

limitless *abundance*, curated algorithmically. Although new work is planned to update and re-evaluate this model, it nonetheless comprises one of the most important contributions made in the works evaluated here.

### 3.1.2 The non-informational internet

The second facet of this rhizome is comprised of the implications of this non-informational internet for several fields, including journalism and "factual media", the sociology of information, and the political economy of technological innovation. To support my early teaching-oriented explorations in this area, five early sources were assembled in the development of this particular thesis, providing different pieces of the overall argument with which to start. These were:

- Mark Deuze's encapsulation of journalism as a somewhat self-idealising professional ideology, based on interviews with actual working journalists (2005)
- Natalie Fenton's de-centring of the information-centric narratives around social media in favour of an account of it as "communication driven" (2012)
- Ciaran McMahon's analysis of the psychology of "Why we 'like' social media," (2015)
- Mark Fisher's discussion of "capitalist realism" as a major factor in mental health (2009)
- Daniel Kardefelt-Winther's description of "compensatory internet use" (2014)

Turning first to journalism and factual media in the "timeline", there are obviously implications of the above work for any media use-case that aspires to communicate information. As chapter 5 of *ATF?* explores, and as I shall address in 3.3 below, there is no suggestion of a "pure" informational communication, nor of any journalism being unaffected by questions of political power, influence and ideology. However, as Hall et al. (1978) note, these broader structural questions exist in enduring contradiction with individual journalist's own view of her/his professional ideology and aspiration to be an objective public service, as Deuze (2005) also made clear. The aspiring journalists I was teaching about these newer digital platforms often expressed such idealised views of journalism, and in the context of "online journalism", this meant frequent exposure to the discrepancy between what we could call an informational *aspiration* and what I knew to be a non-informational media technology.

On pages 42-45 of *FTV* I discuss the tensions and challenges that exist between the small formats, immediacy and affective orientation of the timeline and the (nominally) informational objectives of news outlets, but the tension between informational rationales and actual modes of consumption is not in itself novel, and it is not argued that the Internet

or other media have ever had an exclusively informational purpose. Scholars have also analysed the important role of "feeling" in other media such as TV (e.g. Gitlin, 2003). Neither is any claim made that media produced with a sincere informational aspiration must be entirely lacking in features that invite or encourage their consumption. Even within journalism there are few pretences that its form is purely informational, nor that all "information" is equally important. For example, there has always been a significant amount of rumour, gossip, and "infotainment" (Allan, 2004). Although these are among some of the oldest features of the "attention economy" (Wu, 2017), journalism has also encountered considerable pressure towards more trivial, entertainment-focused "newszak" stories (Franklin 1997). The idea that journalistic production might be disrupted by the affordances of social media is not a new claim either—for example, Widholm (2015) has analysed the reformatting and "liquidisation" of journalism to fit the online environment of the timeline.

Conversely, shifts in the forms and modes journalism assumes have sometimes improved the accessibility of news themes or other information of objective importance, and the role of comedy in delivering journalism such as the *Daily Show* is well known (Faina, 2012). Likewise, the explosion of "data journalism" around 2010 included a strong emphasis on the graphical presentation of complex figures in a way that was more accessible (Knight, 2015). Indeed, making information "visible" in this way is not new, and the importance of this accessibility to politics and social justice was demonstrated long ago by figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois (Du Bois, Battle-Baptiste and Rusert, 2018) and Florence Nightingale (Bradshaw, 2017).

In the context of these issues however, my exploration is valuable because it reveals the changing nature and scale of that discrepancy between this "informational aspiration" and the widespread *compulsive* internet use as implemented by social media platforms according to their own commercial priorities as highly sophisticated forms of data-driven personalised entertainment and advertising. The challenges that the training journalists I was teaching encountered when experimenting with social media to distribute their (often rather prosaic) local reporting, combined with my own participatory observation of how the timeline was used, suggested that rather than just a change in degree, what we were witnessing represented a dramatic change *in kind*. The processing, networks and instant access of the internet and smartphones, and the combined four features of social familiarity, stimulus novelty, content variation and abundance essential to this new development meant millions of people spending hours of their day scrolling their smartphones for entertainment and escape from social conditions, in any location with internet access. This was a new development requiring new strategies for news organisations. In fact, in 2014 a co-founder of

Al-Jazeera's social media arm AJ+ came to the department where I worked and presented their strategy to try to navigate these issues.

In the context of political shocks that seem to be linked both to widespread ignorance and to outright denial of factual assertions, this discrepancy between an "informational aspiration" on the part of professionalised informational media production and the social and affective impulses of human users, fuelled by the commercially-driven exploitation of the attention they generate, is also argued to have specific historical urgency and resonance. This tension between "hedonic media usage" as embodied in social media timelines (discussed above) and informational understandings of journalism that is entailed in *FTV* may have been offered significantly in advance of the later panic about "fake news" and misinformation that accompanied the election of Donald Trump in 2016, but it was undeniably prescient. While *ATF?* is an attempt to start the conversation about political ignorance, mendacity and denialism in an entirely different place, the closing sections of *FTV* are an attempt to bring these earlier affect- and culture-centric observations of social media timeline use to bear on the new political conditions encapsulated by the political realities of Trump and Brexit.

There are obviously several ways in which this area of the works bears the hallmarks of a first expression of a new idea, which given the benefit of hindsight can (and will) be improved in future work. Firstly, there is imprecision in the nomenclature that should have been avoided. While "hedonia" is an important aspect of the processes analysed, an explicit centring on *pleasure* risks being reductive. As Seymour (2019) has noted in reference to this work, the drivers of participation or "timeline media" use are not always pleasurable in a strict sense, and can include anger, outrage or alarm. This point is made explicit in the work, and the role of "arousal" is also considered, but this could have been developed and clarified. Furthermore, the combination of "hedonia" and "dopamine" risks being confusing or misleading, since dopamine is not in itself responsible for pleasure, but for the anticipation and motivation to seek rewards (Lewis et. al., 2021). Again, this clarification is present, just as it is implicit in Fisher's wording, which describes it as an "inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure" (2009: 22), but this could be clearer. Meanwhile, the roles of other neurotransmitters such as noradrenaline were not discussed in this context due to an emphasis on positive reinforcement. Finally, this work also makes too free a use of the word "affect", and would have done well to build on the work of Leys (2017) in treating the term more cautiously. Nevertheless, the notion of "timeline media" and the interdisciplinary assemblage of varied theory and data that it comprises is argued to be a significant overall contribution to the study of the cultural and informational dynamics of digital media.

## 3.2 Rhizome 2. Value and the attention/emotion commodity

*Chapters 4 and 5.1 of FTV, chapter 6 of ATF? and WWSM*

This area of analysis can in some senses be considered the "economic base" of the one above. Rather than a focus on *content*, it aims to reveal the material reality of social media's growing omnipotence, including the contingent nature of its increasingly central, normalised and intrusive role as de-facto privatised infrastructure, and the logics of extraction and accumulation that are argued to encourage and exacerbate (knowingly) the issues explored at 3.1. Written prior to the publication of Srnicek (2017), Han (2017), Zuboff (2018) or Seymour (2019), *FTV* was one of a new wave of works exploring the broader political-economic relations embodied by the enormous scale and specific features of social media or digital platform use. The work highlights the contingent nature of social media's increasingly central, normalised and intrusive role in daily life, and the general implications of its de-facto role as privatised infrastructure. It also frames social media use as purely cognitive form of *consumption*, in contrast with much of the work that had been published on social media at that time, which either saw it as labour (Fuchs, 2008, 2014) or emphasised expression and participation (e.g. boyd and Ellison, 2007; boyd 2014, Miller et al, 2016). Instead, the starting point of these arguments was more influenced by the designer and digital rights campaigner Aral Balkan (2015).

As with much work on political economy, the themes of mystification, exploitation and accumulation are important to this work.

### 3.2.1 Self-mystification and everyday life

In its analysis of the economic relationships cultivated by social media platforms, *FTV* identifies the conspicuous absence of conventional payment for content on social media as a key means by which platforms mystify these relationships. The history of the internet had frequently involved purist notions of both "freedom" in superficial political sense (Barlow, 1996), and featured content that was "free as in free beer" (see Williams and Stallman, 2010) such as music on Napster (Ku, 2002). Indeed, there was significant anxiety about the viability of revenue models for digital content (Lanier, 2010), and disagreement about the necessity of so-called "paywalls" (Collins, 2011). As Curran observes, "For this reason, it proved difficult to re-educate them into becoming paying consumers." (2012: 47). My work also suggests that this aspect of social networks as businesses could be seen as part of a longer history of "free" products and services in consumerism, designed to generate value at some future point (Anderson, 2009).

It is in this context that the "cost-free" availability of social media platforms and the appealing media experience they are designed to offer, alongside other digital platforms such as Gmail, is argued to be an obfuscatory (if not necessarily mendacious) strategy: It superficially indulges users' "something for nothing" expectation in order to foster a false sense of trust and continuity whilst implementing a highly extractive, economically valuable exchange. Indeed, Mark Zuckerberg is well known for having referred to early Facebook users who "just submitted" their data as "dumb fucks" (Orlowski, 2010).

Even today, very few works have explored the question of *why* so many users were so happy to trust and become dependent on the seemingly free services offered by these corporations in this way, particularly in relation to these early precedents of web use from the 1990s and early 2000s, the stimulating affordances of the timeline, and the compensatory driver of its usage. In my view, social networks are built around human life in a cumulative, longitudinal sense, and the strategy they implement is one in which the relationship develops increasing levels of dependency, which I illustrate with reference to news reports that when Facebook goes offline, people call the police. My work insists that the economic exchange inherent to social media be considered simultaneously with the human factors, including the ethics that these factors impose. Not only is there a moral argument here, articulated in *WWSM*, but the affective, logistical and economic relationships between platform, user and society are actually all facets of the *same* extractive relationship. McChesney (2013) provided an early, helpful grounding of digital platforms in the context of US-American corporate power. However, this account did not really integrate any consideration of the subjective user experience of these platforms (as above at 3.1) into its analysis. A discussion of Facebook's orientation around consumer data and advertising (2013: 149), for example, barely addresses the question of why so many users to interact with these platforms to the degree that they do. Similarly, while Fuchs (2014) had already analysed the economic relationships in various aspects of social media using an extremely precise application of orthodox Marxist political economy, and is pre-eminent in this regard, my encounter with this work reinforced the importance of putting culture and lived experience at the centre of any analysis of these relationships, which I felt was lacking in this work. Meanwhile, works such as Alter (2017) that address the subjective aspects of compulsive social media use have tended to underplay the economic and extractive aspects.

Inverting the rhetoric of the "commons" that had been applied to earlier idealist aspects of the internet, as well as initiatives such as *Creative Commons*, the works develop an analysis of the trajectory represented by social media as a form of *enclosure*, using the work of the legal historian Peter Linebaugh (2008) as a conceptual starting point. The most appropriate referent may seem in one sense to be "privatisation", since the infrastructures of the internet,

once built by the ARPA section of the US government, were literally privatised in 1995 (Berninger, 2015). However, although this process enabled social media to come much later, I wanted an alternative way to address the ongoing process of social media platforms' calculated accommodation and encouragement of their adoption by users as the normative home of longstanding processes of spontaneous human cultural production and exchange. While this is a valuable contribution, I distinguish my use of "enclosure" from that of Rob Coley and Dean Lockwood (2012) because theirs emphasises hardware infrastructures, and Foucauldian questions of power and surveillance. Likewise, drawing on Harvey (2003) and Marazzi (2011), Burdeau (2015) argues that digital platforms are part of a wider enclosure by capital of the "general intellect". This too is a convincing application of this concept, however I have preferred to examine enclosure specifically as a means of digitising and then extracting value from the quotidian banalities of cultural participation, communication and "messy" human life as it is lived, rather than knowledge or culture specifically. In chapter 6 of *ATF?* I strengthen this charge, arguing that "Whereas in previous work I used the idea of enclosure as a metaphor, there is the case to be made that this has not been metaphorical at all, save for the fact that we are not dealing with a spatial problem." (2020: 312) Rather than seeking to undo my earlier application of this metaphor, the aim here–grounded in a view of social and digital media as "advertising platforms" that had developed since *FTV* was published–was to emphasise an intensification in the commodification of culture, communication, and other cognitive aspects of human life by those platforms, which had proliferated to such a degree that a whole new suite of pathologies had emerged.

### 3.2.2 Exploitation and extraction

As may be clear, my core claims in this rhizome are based on the idea that social media are a means of making human cognitive and emotional vulnerability a vastly more efficient and profitable source of surplus value for capitalism. This framing is built by combining multiple literacies in cognitive science, computer science and the political economy informing the overall analysis; as such, it contrasts with the work of other scholars writing at a similar time, as I hope to illustrate.

Many analyses of the political economy of social media conclude that since social media use is ostensibly economically valuable *activity*, it must be labour (e.g. Fuchs, 2014). However, my works see the framing of this activity as labour as wrong. The compensatory, consumptive drivers of media use described above at 3.1 provide an alternative and original model of analysis that does not rely on labour at all, and in hindsight I feel that my works are correct to resist this characterisation. Marx is clear that the use-values of commodities "are combinations of two elements, the material provided by nature, and labour" (1990[1867]:

133). Rather than seeing social media use as the *labour* constituent here, I see this "digital life", and the mesolimbic features of the human brain that drive it, as the "material" provided by nature, while the "labour" is primarily that undertaken by social media corporations. A similar refutation of the "labour" view in favour of "material" has been offered by Srnicek (2017: 55-56), published after *FTV*. Zuboff (2018) is widely acknowledged for her coinage of "surveillance capitalism", and in some ways, my analysis also aligns with her framing of it as a "parasitic economic logic" that "claims *human experience as free raw material* for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales" (2018: **eb* – emphasis added). Elsewhere, my use of cognitive, biological literacy to rethink capitalist exploitation of the human as a body here is reminiscent of what Codeluppi, has explored as "biocapitalism", which "produces value by extracting it not only from the body functioning as the material instrument of work, but also from the body understood as a whole." (2008, cited in Marazzi, 2011:49)[4]

### 3.2.3 Data vs Attention

In its earlier manifestations, my analysis makes what could be seen with hindsight as a mistake going beyond terminology. Following Balkan (2015) and Zuboff (2016), the contention in *FTV* is that the most significant commodity being extracted through this process of exploitation is *data*. Although this was a common claim at the time, it is not necessarily a correct analysis of Google Inc. or Facebook Inc. since it fails to account for the concept of "attention economy" which in *ATF?* I adopt from Wu (2017). Furthermore, these accumulated data are not directly made available for exchange, so much as to enhance a subsequent exchange of *attention*, the primary commodity.

Originally, "attention economy" referred more generally to the scarcity of "attention to meet the information demands of business and society" (Davenport & Beck, 2001). However, subsequent discussions have applied this idea to advertising platforms (e.g. Hwang, 2020), and shown that it is attention itself that is the primary commodity of social media, with data used to refine the targeting of user attention for a variety of advertising purposes. What is interesting is that despite the mention of data, critiqued above, the description of how digital platforms seek to mediate the user's reality in a broad sense (FTV, p.130) already suggests implicitly an acknowledgement of attention as the primary point of value. For example, I say that in "distracting people from the emotional distress in their own lives" social networks "are simultaneously able to fulfil what has come to be their de-facto primary role, which is to draw the **attention** of the masses away from the bigger picture of what else is happening in

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[4] Unavailable in English.

the world.” (FTV, p.137 - emphasis added). This also foreshadows discussions (below) of misinformation, and in Chapter 6 of *ATF?* I clarify and correct this focus on data as the primary commodity of extraction, centring attention and making misinformation more explicitly part of the discussion. The actual and hypothetical harms of this exploitation are also enumerated and discussed in *WWSM*.

## 3.3 Rhizome 3. “Thick” misinformation: Power, ideology and conversation

*Chapter 5.2 FTV, Chapters 1,2,4,5 ATF?*

This account of the works concerns the relationship between the widely discussed “misinformation crisis” associated with the historical moment 2015-2020 (e.g. Weisfeld, 2021), and the changing structure and quality of the discursive features of capitalist, nominally democratic societies. In hindsight, I see one contribution of my works as assembling and analysing a “thick” understanding of misinformation and to some extent disinformation that includes factors such as platforms, discursive spheres, public conversation, civic literacy, ideology, consciousness, ignorance, spin, advertising and propaganda and examines the relationships between people, media and political-economic power. This can be contrasted with a standard “thin” definition encouraged by the phrase “fake news”, that often overlooks political-economy and resorts to idealist reifications such as “truth”.

With this in mind, I have sought to identify and analyse the processes that have culminated in the material conditions labelled as “misinformation crisis”. In retrospect, the questions posed by this aspect of my work appear to be:

1) If false claims were as influential as is widely claimed, why were populations so susceptible to this misinformation/disinformation?
2) What kinds of systems or entities have produced and/or benefitted from this state of affairs?

While section 3.4 below addresses the strong political *affects* to which the adoption of “alternative narratives” are also partially attributed, these alone should not obscure the media problematics that may deepen these vulnerabilities. Although my professional engagement with these issues may have been deepened by the sudden emboldening of reactionary politics in 2016 and the reactions it drew from liberal institutions, the context for such questions is considerably older. A variety of other scholarship is also concerned with the question of what publics or sections of the public believe, know, or do not know according to

structures of power. It is impossible to summarise it all here, but some illustration is helpful grounding upon which to evaluate my contributions.

## 3.3.1 Political economy shaping media; Media shaping consciousness

Issues of political-economic power and culture have long been a concern of cultural theorists who, often drawing on Marx and Engels (1998[1932/1846]) or Gramsci (2010[1929-1935]), have been concerned with the role of ideology in undermining the development of revolutionary class consciousness (Gilbert, 2022). This scholarship eventually developed into fields such as critical theory and cultural studies, but as Hall (2016[1977]) and Gilbert (2022) have observed among others, these discourses can sometimes be reductive, and the applicability of models such as "base and superstructure" for thinking about culture and power in the real world can easily veer towards oversimplification, unlike Marx's own application of his concepts to real historical events (e.g. Marx, 1852).

Foucault, somewhat overlooked in my own work due to my autodidactic route into scholarship, but also resisted because of his extreme prominence, is also associated with the relations between power and knowledge, but rebukes a generic Marxian notion of "ideology":

> Power and knowledge are not linked together solely by the play of interests or ideologies; [...] No body of knowledge can be formed without a system of communications, records, accumulation and displacement which is in itself a form of power and which is linked [...] to the other forms of power. (1971: 283, quoted in Sheridan, 1980).

### 3.3.1.1 Journalism

As an industry at the centre of these questions, as well as the departments where I was employed when writing these works, journalism features regularly in my own enquiry, and is interrogated most explicitly in Chapter 5 of *ATF?* Renowned work by Herman and Chomsky (1988) established an important base on which the ideological commitments of mainstream broadcast media could be linked to proprietorship and other political-economic factors, which they called a "guided market system". Elsewhere, Hall et al. (1987) offered an influential reading of political journalism that explained how journalists "tend, faithfully and impartially, to reproduce symbolically the existing structure of power in society's institutional order." In a conjuncture in which democratic institutions and imagination are so reduced, that power structure is predominantly commercial. But perhaps this is not so historically specific: was this not what Marcuse was referring to when he observed that "Exchange value, not truth value counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it." (1964: **eb*).

Accordingly, I disagree with Lovink's contention that Chomsky and Herman's "manufacturing consent" has "come to a halt" (2019: 13). If anything, my point is that depending on the breadth of how you understand "propaganda" and indeed "misinformation", a market-driven society has essentially *broadened* the patterns indicated by Herman and Chomsky, incorporating the giant corporations of platform capitalism. When Herman and Chomsky were asked about the internet in a follow-up interview 20 years after the publication of *Manufacturing Consent*, they barely acknowledged its significance (Mullen, Herman and Chomsky, 2009). However, the appearance of "fake news" in a media landscape in which the journalism industry had been subsumed by social media (Bell, 2016) required that these kinds of issues in the political economy and culture of the informational landscape urgently be updated.

Perhaps communicating my personal disappointment with the journalism industry, and heeding Deuze's (2019) distancing of his earlier article (2005) that had been so important to my initial understanding of journalists, my works seem to imply two key claims about the status of journalism in the context of "fake news". Firstly, save for the context of major crises such as pandemics (Newman et al., 2022), ever-fewer people require their quotidian access or exposure to political discourse to be mediated by traditional, mainstream journalism organisations. While Deuze sees the shifts as a "messy" reconfiguration of the economics of news gathering, my own work is based on the realisation that without the specific forms of cultural valuation required, the distinct ontologies and epistemologies of work labelled "journalism" were losing their centrality in the subjective experience of information as early as 2009—a theme I will explore in greater detail below.

Secondly, even where these news organisations are involved, they are not likely to be effective at reducing misinformation in the "thick" sense I construct, because of their embeddedness in the broader ideological and political-economic issues I highlight, and because the structural sources of their authority count against them amidst a widespread "politics of suspicion". Relevant journalism scholarship has seldom argued credibly that what journalists produce can remain unaffected by political-economic interference. Rather, an essential question has always been, and remains, how these influences and pressures function and manifest. Space limitations prevent a detailed summary of this work, and I do not claim any direct contribution to this specific field; however, notions of proprietorship (Kleis Nielsen, 2020), objectivity (Schudson and Anderson, 2020; Schudson, 2001), and relationship to the state and politicians (Fenton, 2016) are amongst the most essential (Allan, 2004).

In terms of mediating political-economic power, I have been keen not to be confined to journalism or news, however. In a way, the point is precisely that amidst the nihilism of late

modernity and the mendacity of a fully market-driven society, *every* communication either *is* a form of propaganda or is experienced alongside some suspicion of its of being so, and crucially that this tension has reached a point of rupture; a breakdown in the consensual model of public spheres and discourses. The historical innovation of propaganda and persuasive communication is a dialogue between different forms of power: warring states or ascending monarchs, companies finding new ways to sell (Ewen, 1997), and most importantly, the adoption of commercial techniques into the self-representation of sovereign power. Additionally, I include the hugely important role of think-tanks (e.g. (Chadwick et al., 2018) and their sources of funding (Meyer, 2016) in shaping discourse and consensus.

At the centre of many of these considerations is also the question of media effects, especially given the scale and generality of social media platforms explored above. Zuboff (2018) argues that digital platforms afford "behavioural modification at scale". Certainly, beyond the context of digital media specifically, such effects are not media-centric, but as Fenton and Freedman (2018) note, are "connected to the ideas that people hold at any one moment – a consciousness that is not fixed or immutable but profoundly contradictory and volatile." Scholars have also cast doubt on the capacity for digital platforms to have the impacts with which they are credited in relation to political polarisation (Bruns, 2019; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016).

My initial aim in *ATF?* was to highlight the necessity of this prior scholarship on media and power in both scholarly and popular discourses on "misinformation" or "fake news" – particularly regarding social media – and to trace how their complex interplay reveals the scale and depth of "misinformation" more effectively. However, I found that a confinement to the relationship between the *makers* of media and its consumers did not afford sufficient space for the "messy everyday" existence I have alluded to previously.

### 3.3.2 Public conversations and declining informational competency

Another aspect of this "thick" misinformation is therefore the changing nature of peer conversations about power, democracy and material conditions, and the fora through which these informal conversations are conducted—especially given that the works originate from the question of the centrality (or not) of commercial digital platforms to misinformation. So far as these shifts are internet-mediated, they can be located partly in previous arguments at 3.1 and 3.2. However, refusing platform-centrism also requires a sociological, almost ethnographic view, which I evaluate here and at 3.4 with public and private emphases respectively. A research question for *ATF?* was why people seemed so vulnerable to misinformation to begin with.

Though the notion of a "public sphere" remains commonly used, its original conception, developed during prior conjunctures (Habermas, 1991[1962]) has subsequently been widely problematised (Susen, 2011; Fraser, 1990; Landes, 1988). Fraser, one of the leading critics of its original formulation, nonetheless prefers to retain the overall concept as merely a "theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk" (1990: 57). My works see the relationship between the participative aspect of these conversations about political themes, and the *active* participation in democracy itself more dialectically. The deterioration is both a cause *and* an effect of wider democratic decline. There was a point during the research for ATF when I wrote on my whiteboard "fake democracy, not fake news". Here, I was later heartened to discover that Fenton and Freedman (2021) make a compatible argument, attributing cynical and unreliable media to "fake democracy"—although dismayed that I only encountered it six months after *ATF?* was published.

Implicated in this ostensible deterioration in discursive quality is a possible decline in the general public's seeming competence to evaluate their collective and individual circumstances as individuals and private social groups. It was from re-reading Fenton (2012) after Trump's 2016 victory that I re-encountered Patterson's observation, examining news consumption, that "Today's citizens have a poorer understanding of some topics than even their counterparts of six decades ago, when the typical adult had only a grade-school education." (2010: 15)[5]. In the present conjuncture, the ability of broad swathes of the US and UK populations to make sense of the world around them, already diluted by the social conditions and technological affordances outlined in previous sections, is argued to have also been undermined by neoliberal logics that undermine both institutions and cultural valuation of education and informational media, such that misinformation can spread more easily. Such claims are difficult to evidence systematically, but the interpretivist methods described in chapter 2 have tended to support this premise (see *ATF?*, pp.90-95). One possible framing of these issues can be in terms of "ignorance". Proctor and Shiebinger (2008) have coined a term "agnotology" for the study of ignorance, and McGoey (2019, 2012) has also made highly valuable contributions here, however this work primarily centres on systematic or semi-systematic processes by which informational processes such as accountability are undermined, closer to those discussed at 3.3.1. By contrast, my work seems more concerned with the possibility, besides individual social factors like those explored at 3.4, that individual competence with which to apprehend or "cognitively map"

[5] He later reiterates these claims in a US-only context and with a somewhat positivist reliance on the concept of "reason" (2019)

(Jameson, 1988) conjunctural complexity, may itself have declined—again, both enabled by and exacerbating a market-driven destruction of democracy itself.

### 3.3.3 Conclusion

In the latter pages of *FTV* (5.2), this exploration feels underdeveloped: neoliberal capitalism has undermined and eroded the means by which people can "know", while also producing social media platforms that have flooded the media landscape with more appealing alternatives that exploit their need for escape. The context in which this was written was the challenge of responding quickly to acute political crises, with only two weeks to research, identify, write and edit an analysis, which meant omissions and oversimplifications were likely. Indeed, the entire task of having to account for something so complex in such short order is more akin to journalism than academia. In a sense, *ATF?* was an attempt to re-engage these questions properly. What this latter work hopefully contributes is an emphasis on misinformation as a recursive process of political culture. The obfuscation of *misinformation itself,* even through reifications like "post-truth" and "fake news", is a proxy for all other mystification. Dismantling them is important because they exemplify *precisely* the processes that enable society and its discourses to drift according to the contours of political-economic power, quietly becoming ever more market-driven and undemocratic. Societies that do not resist inconspicuous processes of mystification actively and democratically become far more vulnerable to the real harms caused by otherwise-obfuscated processes of accumulation, exploitation and destruction.

## 3.4 Rhizome 4. Markets, reactions and counternarratives

*Chapter 5.2 FTV, Chapters 1,2,3,5,6 ATF?, WWSM*

Responding most explicitly of all to the overall political climate, this fourth assemblage traces connections between politics, agency, counterpower, narrative, literacy and identity. Again aspiring partly to de-centre digital platforms, it seeks to offer scholarship around misinformation, media and communication that emphasises contemporary political science and sociology scholarship of the reactionary politics of its moment, including the moment of its rapid emboldening embodied in Brexit and the Donald Trump presidency among other events (e.g. Mondon and Winter, 2020; Brown, 2019; Valluvan, 2019).

If my work on the politics of this conjuncture is generally interpretable through the lens of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, much of its other exploration appears to provide alternatives to enlightenment *theses* such as rationalism and scientism, manifested in popular accounts of "fake news" or unhelpful techno- or media-centric

solutions such as "fact-checking" in the context outlined above. However, later work shifts focus towards this conjunctural dialectic's *antitheses*—reactionary politics. As with 3.3, in the later sections of *FTV* (chapter 5.2) my attempt to account for the seeming ignorance associated with reactionary politics is at an embryonic, somewhat simplistic stage that is entirely structural. In *ATF?*, my preoccupation with human subjective experience reappears, and the focus shifts even further towards the *people* who hold these politics, their behaviours, conditions and epistemology. As Barnett (2022) has noted, the expression of any desire to understand or engage with reactionary political movements and epistemologies can be dismissed as support or empathy. However, I felt that this seeming rage *required* comprehension on materialist terms, however unpalatable. What, at this moment, are "reactionaries" reacting *against*, and how are informational/value claims affected?

Centrally, I argue this politics is in a cycle of mutual interdependence with liberal-sounding neoliberal politics: "Thick" misinformation is composed both of "quiet" forms—hegemonic ideology that mystifies, legitimises and depoliticises neoliberal institutions and dogma, despite their increasing failure and destructiveness (addressed at 3.3)—which in turn enrages "loud" forms that not only make themselves conspicuous, but whose conspicuous status at the extremes is frequently highlighted in turn by pundits and elected officials in ways that distract from institutional failure and suggest that they are the entirety of the problem, often using the accusatory narratives of "populism" or "fake news" (which I call the "fake news" of Hillary Clinton)

This contribution develops "thick" misinformation though the subjective *experience* of information, and more specifically of the formal institutions, such as representative democracy, journalism, science that produce, rely on, and proclaim it despite their value having been eroded by a market-driven society. Affective, social and political conditions, I argue—especially those produced by market-driven societies—condition what informational reality people are prepared to accept or value, and these conditions drive certain forms of misinformation and polarisation in the Euro-Atlantic world in themselves. For reasons of space, I will evaluate it briefly under the following two headings.

### 3.4.1 The inverted "value" of being right or wrong

Popular discussion of misinformation at this conjuncture tends to attribute the objective truth with a kind of special intrinsic status. It is as though, as C.P. Scott wrote in 1921, that "facts" really are "sacred". However, while questions of literacy in areas such as science or politics remain important, *ATF?* was one of the first book-length interrogations of "thin" misinformation/disinformation to relinquish the view that if people were more accurately informed according to external, verifiable facts of science or historical record, they would

inevitably think, act and vote differently. While this may be the case some of the time, for certain individuals, I was influenced by Kahan et al (2017)'s rejection of this "science comprehension thesis", based on questionnaire data from the US. Building on Kahan's prior work on "politically motivated reasoning" (2016), they suggest that although individuals "[pay] no price for forming a perception of fact that is contrary to the best available empirical evidence" about matters that are "suffused with culturally divisive meanings", they risk "the loss of trust among peers, stigmatization [...], and even the loss of economic opportunities" should they give the "wrong answer" (2017: 3). Here was a reminder, from well outside any philosophy or cultural interpretivism, that "truth" *must* be considered socially, materially and experientially. Furthermore, this study reports that more numerate individuals actually used these skills in order to undertake this form of distortion even more effectively, undermining elitist expectations that individuals with higher competence are more likely to come to an empirically-supported conclusion an all issues when presented with evidence. This suggests that a self-perception of being "correct" or possessing the "truth" remains subjectively important to these individuals, even if its provenance and veracity are objectively unreliable, which is consistent with the history of fascism[6] (Eco, 1994).

### 3.4.2 The "fake news" of Hillary Clinton and the "fake news" of Donald Trump

Influenced by scholars such as Ali (2015) and Brown (2019), my work also contributes an analysis of how, contrary to socially-conservative styling of earlier political-economic hegemonies, the conspicuous institutions of power, whether national governments or corporations such as Nestlé, have since the 1990s adopted a "camouflage" of socially progressive-sounding mainstream political language and imagination (Foster, 2016; de Freitas Netto et al., 2020; Rusch, 2023; Gulam, 2020), to enable continued implementation of undemocratic, unethical or harshly neoliberal policies that have since undermined important democratic functioning and state provision for all but the very richest (Blyth, 2013). Rather than a mere "fig-leaf", this is similar to what Táíwò (2022) has termed "elite capture". That these *policies* led to resentment, and eventually rupture, is not in itself an original claim (Blyth and Lonergan, 2020). Where perhaps my works can claim originality, however, is in their analysis of the *impact* of this divergence between communication and policy, *why* it should be considered as part of the history of misinformation as a neoliberal feature, and *how* this inconsistency itself harms the collective democratic imagination,

[6] And also the familiar rhetorical style of figures such as Donald Trump and Nigel Farage

particularly anything powerful or official that sounds in any way liberal or democratic, in a way that has contributed greatly to this rupture.

Here, it is important to acknowledge that reactionary politics is a confluence of contradictory and mutually antagonistic elements with highly varied socio-economic and cultural positions. Despite characterisations as a working-class revolt, data suggest it was economically a case of a "squeezed middle" (Antonucci et al., 2017), which, again, is another consistent element in the history of fascism (Eco, 1995).

What caused the rupture, my works suggest, was not solely the pressures produced by declining upward mobility and political agency, increased exposure to the undulations of globalised capitalism, increased costs of housing or living, or even inflammatory headlines. Nor was it solely a reaction to formal, liberal systems of equivalence that undermine historical privilege (Davies, 2020). Reactionary politics, comparable to fascisms of old, often requires denial of the holder's own historic privilege and/or a sense that this position has or will be worsened by progressive measures, which I have subsequently come to call "imaginary victimhood". But to the extent that these changes substantively materialise, reactionary politics do not necessarily even originate from increased liberty for women, LGBTQ+ people, a "liquidation" of traditional cultural identity, nor even necessarily the presence of immigrants (excepting longer-term far-right elements). Rather, amid the pressures introduced by deteriorating material conditions, the specifically liberal-sounding "camouflage" by which the neoliberal hollowing of democratic society has been effected in the 21st century has become an essential driver of the overall incubation of reactionary political movements, not only as a *strategy* enabling the market-driven hollowing democratic function, but also the *spectacle* of that disingenuity itself. Particularly on the right, however, this spectacle is only partially visible: the liberal "camouflage" is believed, while the injuries of neoliberalism become increasingly inescapable, directing and exacerbating "imaginary victimhood" against the wrong targets; the wrong hegemon.

What connects the dismissive "fake news" of Donald Trump, the zealous denial of COVID-19 and its vaccines by "truthers", Michael Gove's claim that populations had had "enough of experts", and the bruised-sounding misogyny of online "incels" is therefore not only "imaginary victimhood", but beneath it a conflation of the information/values they attack, commonly found in hegemonic discourse, with the ostensibly powerful but ineffective institutions that (I claim) are exploiting it. All associated hegemony, even when vested in relatively innocent forms such as Professor Chris Whitty or Professor Sarah Gilbert, is thus seen as mendacious, morally bankrupt and requiring negation and disobedience—sometimes even communicated in utopian language such as "liberation". In subsequent work I have

come to think of this common impulse as “reactionary denialism”. On this basis, the works also demonstrate the role and source of negation in producing the more conspicuous kinds of misinformation and disinformation associated with this conjuncture—conspiracy theories—which are an inevitable result of these conditions, rather than a paranoid style rooted in conservatism (Hofstadter, 1964), or an inability to “cognitively map” (Jameson, 1988).

# Chapter IV. Register and Dissemination

## 4.1 Introduction

These works aim to provide prominent, accessible interventions, as a social benefit in themselves, that refuse the obfuscation of their conjuncture. The works have therefore sought to strike a balance between the ambition to engage directly and enrich public conversations as a form of public pedagogy, and the sincere intention to offer contributions that are original and compatible, with the expectations of institutionalised intellectual labour. This hybridity is essential to these works, and I have increasingly come to identify with the tradition of the "scholar activist" embodied by figures such as bell hooks, but it has also been challenging.

Sometimes, this approach has given rise to conversations about what these works *are,* and how they should be categorised. Are they "academic" books? Does working with a trade publisher, changing your writing style accordingly, and consequently forgoing any official peer review (despite the informal input of many peers) undermine some of the academic value of your work? These questions are obviously fraught with unreliable signifiers and problematic reifications that become very clear when written down in black and white, and generally I have tried to ignore the banal conservatism that they encode. This chapter will evaluate the relationship between the works in this DPhil and the audiences at which the works were aimed—including the general public—and clarify the nature and strategy of the works as *interventions* into the ways that these audiences understand the problems to which they relate.

## 4.2 Dissemination and Accessibility

Belying the works are important differences in intentionality and positionality that subtly changes how these interventions were made. When I wrote *FTV*, the ambition to become a full-time academic was barely in my mind, so much as a (somewhat lofty) aspiration to undertake a kind of public intellectualism. In hindsight, this seems naive–and perhaps reveals delusions of grandeur–but ironically there is a certain freedom to think big as an outsider, so precariously employed by the academic institution that it wasn't even *asking* for my research outputs. By contrast, *ATF?* was written from the position of full-time employment in a university journalism department, with the benefit of an internal research scheme to relieve some workload. Writing *WWSM* for the *Socialist Register* offered its own conundrums to navigate—it is a scholarly journal in a nominal sense with an ISSN, but

unconventional in two ways: it is based on an explicit set of political values in a way that dispels any convention (however misguided) of academic "objectivity"; and its alternative editorial model, while stringent, does not resemble conventional peer-review.

In 2014-2015 when *FTV* was developing as an idea, I had been heavily influenced by how Mark Fisher had, in writing for his students, made abstract theory accessible to a wider audience than works on these subjects often enjoy. Prior inspiration from the works of George Orwell, Rebecca Solnit, June Jordan, my mother Vron Ware, and many other great writers, had also provided a model for how to write beautifully about complex ideas. Furthermore, I had already written in journalistic formats and was inspired by the ways that, beyond reporting the news, it has often fallen to journalists to explain, analyse and clarify important current events (Hartley, 1996).

Academics are sometimes rebuked for their seeming overuse of precise language and abstract ideas, but these are technical aspects of research-driven production of new knowledge and analysis that in the right context, I would defend. However, beyond a love of great writing, I was also motivated not to reproduce certain aspects of normative academic publishing and dissemination which, if publicly funded research and knowledge production are considered to be public benefits *per se,* verge on ethical failure. As George Monbiot has pointed out, formal academic publishing is rarely included in the informational landscape inhabited by the public, instead locked behind aggressively priced paywalls (2011). This has only been exacerbated by the imposition of market-driven logics on the sector (Macfarlane, 2021). Even the academics who write these papers are seldom happy on a personal level with this arrangement. Charges abound that academic paywalls "codify elitism" (Kendzior, 2012) and (as for me with *WWSM*) can be so inaccessible as to stop a researcher from even accessing their own published article (Tsavkko, 2021). Meanwhile, academic monographs are regularly priced so exorbitantly that it is rare for individuals to buy them, and yet it is partly because of their low sales figures that they are priced in this way–a self-defeating system (Cocks, 2021). Somewhat ironically, an outdated Routledge edited volume dedicated to the topic of the pricing of academic volumes in university libraries (Lee, 1987) remains priced at £85 for a hardback, and £21 for digital access only (Routledge, 2021).

Instead, what I hope to have achieved in these works is not only to have offered contributions in relation to the books' topics, but also to have *implemented* the exact same arguments that the books make about attention, media hedonism, literacy and chiefly the *accessibility* of reliable knowledge into the actual manner in which the books were written and disseminated. In the case of *FTV,* this recursive praxis was less conscious and the reasoning far simpler: how could a book about hedonic media usage *not* be written in a way that is

pleasurable to read, consistent with its own theoretical positions? In the case of *ATF?,* which was more directly about the informational landscape and written with more experience, this praxis was entirely deliberate.

Having produced digital media and written software prior to commencing academic work, I have been asked (and asked myself) why my intellectual labour should take the conventional form of books. One rather prosaic answer is that books remain an important part of the public's informational ecosystem, and up to four million new titles were published in 2022 alone (Talbot, 2022). A better answer lies in the *scope* of the enquiries that these works make. Books entail more space for the multidisciplinary, multi-register work, but at a certain point, a change in degree becomes a change in kind, and a book can become a type of project that has fundamentally different aims and structure. Indeed, there is something about books that accommodates my emphasis on connections, in keeping with the *rhizomatic* approach outlined in prior chapters. As Deleuze and Guattari note in their discussion of the rhizome: "In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. [...] All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage*. A book is an assemblage of this kind [...] There is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made." (1980: 22-23).

In keeping with these aims, the books share a strategic approach to how they were titled and labelled. While the works respond to the broad range of topics outlined at the outset of this commentary, their titles ostensibly suggest a narrower focus. *FTV* announces itself as being about social media, while *ATF?* is apparently about "fake news". One Twitter user exclaimed that the latter book's title was itself "fake news as this book is about so much more. It starts with a chunky historical run from the post war consensus to where we find ourselves in 2020" (Twitter user @JahDuran, 2020). In some ways these titles represent an inescapably reductive commercial reality, and the titling of interdisciplinary work is never easy. The use of "nominal" labels and "deep" themes is certainly not unique to these works. However, in this case it is also a reflection of the relationship between the *appearance* of surface details and the deep political-economic structure of what is transpiring that I have discussed in methodological terms. Their object of study is *neither* the "deep" themes *or* the "surface" ones, but in illuminating the tension and mystified connections between the two.

There are significant differences in what *kind* of book *FTV* and *ATF?* sought to be, however. To assist its accessibility, *FTV* was written with the intention to be a series of essays that could be read separately. Save for the first and last chapters, which respectively introduce the main issues and point towards areas for further research, this intention appears to have been

successful, even if these "modular" chapters hopefully offer a certain synergic benefit when read together. It quickly became clear with *ATF?* however that this same modular system of chapters would be impossible, since the book makes one, highly multi-threaded, argument, rather than a succession of separate ones, making the chapters far more interdependent.

Long before Repeater Books existed, the work of Mark Fisher and others had already alerted me to the new model of publishing that was underway at the John Hunt imprint Zero Books. In late 2014 however, those same publishers that had printed *Capitalist Realism* announced that they had departed from John Hunt to set up a more ambitious version of their vision in Repeater Books, which featured bold, colourful covers and were distributed globally by Penguin-Random House. A snapshot of the Repeater Books website from this moment states that their goal was to "expand upon and complete" the goal of Zero Books by "bringing marginal, esoteric, idiosyncratic and necessary literature and thought into a mainstream that would otherwise ignore it" (Repeater Books, 2015). In June 2015, I sent them a proposal for *FTV* stating that I believed in their ambitions and wanted to be part of them. Their editor responded the following day with a contract offer. Its upcoming publication led to my first opinion piece for the *Guardian*, and upon publication, it was sold in airports and railway stations across the UK and Ireland, where it featured in WH Smith's non-fiction "bestsellers" list. It was also in most branches of Foyles and Waterstones. I spoke at literary festivals, at Britain's largest Mosque, and in several podcasts. I have been told that first-time authors with lofty dreams are never satisfied, and despite this seeming success, I wanted more.

The strategy for *ATF?* was partly shaped by these experiences of publishing and promoting *FTV* to a general, public audience. There were aspects of this process that vindicated this type of crossover publication, but I was also ambitious about offering a deeper, more rigorous series of arguments to more people. Having seen bookshops struggle with where to shelve *FTV*[7], *ATF?* was more consciously targeted at specific sections to avoid this confusion. Unfortunately, Covid-19 lockdowns meant that virtually all UK bookshops were closed when the book was published, and its sales never quite caught up with *FTV?*, having been denied this initial wave. However, the book was marked as "sold out" on Amazon within 48 hours of its release–only a week after the 2020 US Presidential Election, and the publisher has since estimated that this involved about 350-400 copies sold.

[7] One London bookshop placed it in the "self-help and wellbeing" section.

# Conclusion

This commentary has endeavoured to demonstrate the contributions made by the works it addresses, as well as their historical context, methods, dissemination, reception, conceptual frameworks, and the prior scholarship on which they depend. The contributions it has identified lie in four interconnected assemblages of theory and analysis, each with different scale and applicability.

Firstly, an interdisciplinary model known as "timeline media" is offered to unite the simultaneous affective, informational, hedonic and social aspects of the experience of scrolling through automatically pre-selected content in a linear manner. The combination of these different facets offers a more comprehensive model of the incentives users have for returning to social and/or digital media platforms, and forming compulsive or repetitive behaviours in relation to them. This contribution was one of the first analyses of these behaviours, and the model it proposes—comprised of familiar sources, novel content, extreme variation between content types, and almost limitless abundance—remains applicable today.

Secondly, the works provide an economic analysis of the *exchanges* that are underway when the compulsive use of "timeline media" takes place. In contrast to *labour-based* applications of Marxian political economy to social media, these works use a literacy of cognitive science to position the more animalistic elements of human cognition, particularly *reward-seeking,* pleasure-anticipatory affects and behaviours, as *raw material* from "nature" that Marx argued were the other component of a commodity—extracted and made into a useful, exchangeable commodity by the labour of social media platform workers. This contribution is a good example of how interdisciplinary theory can offer valuable alternatives, since dislodging the characterisation of social media users as workers enables new insight into how digital platforms produce surplus value in a capitalist economy.

Thirdly, the works contribute to ongoing discussions about misinformation through an analysis of the complex, unstable informational landscape of their conjuncture and its historical development, the varied strands of which they frame as a "thick" misinformation (in contrast to the straightforward, unintentional dissemination of inaccurate information, which is "thin" misinformation). Both the experiential and political-economic aspects of timeline media are then included as constituent parts of a deeper crisis of democracy and political culture that is not *derived* from digital media platforms, but shares a common origin with them: neoliberal capitalism, and the "market-driven society" it has produced.

Finally, in response to the rapid emboldening of the reactionary politics that had been building for some time, the works contribute an original analysis of how the four-way

relationship between “thick” misinformation, digital platforms, reactionary politics and market-driven societies can be better understood. Again, the approach is to combine scholarship from different fields, and the connection between misinformation, the political device of the progressive “camouflage” in Western democracies after the Cold War, and the explosion of political suspicion leading to widespread conspiracy narratives such as QAnon or Covid/5G/Anti-Vax theories is something I am happy to have contributed when I did.

Despite the claim to have contributed in these four areas however, there are admittedly oversights, lacunae and other shortcomings in the works, but these issues provide significant incentives for future scholarship. For example, timeline media incorporates “familiarity of sources” as one of its four components, but it is clear that with the advancement of content pre-selection algorithms and platforms’ desire for scale since 2016, that this “familiarity” aspect has changed, becoming more thematically rather than socially oriented. The algorithms are familiar with *you*, rather than your being familiar with what or whom they feature. There is now also a wider understanding of how technological interfaces and affective states interact on digital platforms, such as the concept of “emotional architecture” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018), which would provide support to any further analysis, but which was unavailable when this work was first written. Likewise, I would like to develop my work in relation to reactionary politics by incorporating a greater literacy of psychoanalysis, anger and imagination, and through a more explicit deployment of feminist theory and critical whiteness studies in relation to the “imaginary victimhood” of figures such as Andrew Tate, Elon Musk, Lawrence Fox or Jordan Peterson. Finally, having primarily addressed the regions of the world where I live and work, I would like to ask questions about digital media, capitalism, political culture and imagination in other global contexts, particularly in the Global South.

Despite these and other shortcomings, it is my sincere hope that these works offer contributions that not only are sufficient written submissions for a DPhil by publication, but ones which make a substantive difference to both scholarship and public debate in these areas.

*21,851 words*

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