

The Echo Chamber

How our words come back to bite us

Dale Lately

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How do jihadis convince ordinary people to blow themselves up in atrocities such as Paris 2015? Are we retreating into comfortable online communities that confirm everything we already believe? Are we becoming so scared to speak for fear of the echo – and how do we avoid giving extremists the oxygen of publicity when our every mention of them online fuels their cause?

The Echo Chamber examines how our words ricochet back on us – at how terrorists have made the public their publisher by relying on us to spread their snuff videos; at how new shaming forums are combing Facebook to exhibit the words and thoughts of ordinary people; at how cute viral memes can lead to missile strikes, and how “crowdsourced” rumour is leading to vigilante witch hunts which end up claiming innocent lives. As newsfeeds replace news outlets and a picture can fly around the world in seconds, are we being shaped by what we share?

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Bio

Dale Lately has written for The Guardian (leader page, print/online), VICE, Slate, Huffington Post, Big Issue, 3:AM, OpenDemocracy, Pop Matters, Quietus, Litro, Culture Counter, Smoke, as well as a series for the Baffler magazine quoted in the New York Times and currently writes a blog on new media for the Huffington Post.

I've written on these themes for The Guardian (print/online), VICE, Slate, 3:AM, OpenDemocracy, Quietus and a series for the Baffler magazine mentioned in the New York Times, as well as interviewing figures like Andrew Keen and blogging about new and old media for the Huffington Post.

Combining a mix of interview, research, reportage and commentary, this 60,000-80,000 word book would build on my writings and fit in the same niche as recent books by Evgeny Morozov or Jon Ronson, aimed at a savvy but general readership from early twenties to late middle age.

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The Echo Chamber

Introduction

As I scrolled down the screen I couldn't shake the feeling I'd seen this stuff somewhere before. The language seemed eerily familiar: the phrases culled from a thousand guerrilla marketing campaigns and viral YouTube videos, the fragments of my childhood – Nutella, Chupa Chups – jumbled up with gangsta rap, bling. There were echoes of the macho movies I'd watched as a kid, flashes of *Rambo*, *Rocky*. There were guns and ammo belts alongside ski-masks and khaki – Occupy Wall Street meets 50 Cent. And then there were classic customer outreach ingredients so familiar to those of us who'd grown up in the age of ubiquitous marketing: the lifestyle tips, the sneaky product placements, the references to skills training. In a world where everything was refracted, where all cultures were reduced to an image bank waiting for appropriation, a set of references waiting to be turned into more marketing, perhaps all of this was inevitable. I felt like I was looking at a history of my own childhood, my own culture – but horribly distorted and deformed: my world reflected back at me wearing a terrible sneer.

When a small army of young British men – mostly teenagers, straight out of school – flocked to fight with Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or Isis, in early 2014, they did what any bunch of fresh faces might do these days: they kept in touch with everyone at home via social media. The result was some of the most bizarre Facebook, Twitter and Instagram feeds you can imagine – a surreal hotchpotch that mixed tweets about Nutella and Chupa Chups with Kalashnikovs, torture, executions and warcries, and piles of gleaming banknotes. It felt like a gap year postcard gone wrong – where the 19 year olds, some of them straight out of school, would take the time to flirt with girls on Twitter even as they boasted of massacring men women and children in the infidel. It was the birth of something unprecedented in the history of warfare: what could only be called a crowdsourced terrorist recruitment drive.

“What’s the worst thing about life in Syria?” one follower stuck at home asked.

The answer: “No sliced bread and none of that full-fat milk with the blue cover.”

The gap year recruiters were just one tiny part of a powerful and sophisticated social media propaganda machine on the part of the terrorist group, whose various tentacles employed shareable YouTube clips, cute memes, Twitter armies and even sensitive customer feedback. Perhaps the most surreal output of all was the “Islamic State of Cats” (@ISILCats) Twitter account started up around the same time, where extremist propaganda turned to perhaps the most widely accepted vocabulary of our day – kittens and lolspeak. Through the Summer of 2014 @ISILCats tweeted dozens of pictures supposedly showing fighters playing with kittens, along with other memes and homely snapshots of life from Raqqah, then the centre of operations. Even here the feline “mewjahids” (a pun on mujahideen) were given a dark twist – kittens playing alongside bodybuilding weights, guns and ammo, alongside tweets like “#CathairApp makes your #catpics AWESOME #cats #weaponry #apocalypse #cathair #awesomeness #catsofjapan #catsofjihad.” There were even pictures of cats wielding swords and rifles.

At the same time as these tweets went out a video circulated featuring the execution of hostage James Foley and then of Steven Sotloff, causing ripples of horror in the western world not only at the contents but whether or not to share or republish them. By the end of 2015 we’d be looking at the wreckage of Paris through the debris of various attacks orchestrated by Isis, perhaps the most disruptive attack on western soil since 7/7 or even 9/11. In the new year of 2016 a new Isis video would eagerly depict multiple executions and end with an English-accented child making a direct threat to UK leader David Cameron. Again, the world deliberated over the question of whether or not to publish the video. What did it even matter? A cursory Google search would bring up a link to the video for anyone who wanted to watch it. Within hours it was being shared across the world’s smartphones and tablet screens.

As I watched these things unfold, as I sifted through the Nutella and mewjahids posts, through the videos of innocent journalists being executed and the children threatening world leaders, it seemed to me that something profound had changed. There was simply no precedent for the social media streams of the youthful Isis fighters, streams which were “incredibly powerful as a recruiting tool,” according to an analyst from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization – nor any precedent for the way they were absorbed and commented on back home. Unlike the centrally controlled propaganda of Al-Queda in the 2000s, the people spreading the message and changing hearts and minds are not leaders or designated speakers but rather the young foot-soldiers, doing so via status updates and selfies, sometimes without even being aware of

their role. This isn't just a technique of modern ideologues or extremists. It's a technique perfected over the last decade by online marketers, and most famously employed in the "Superfan" promotion campaign of the boy-group One Direction.

We were entering a new world, one few of us barely understood, and one with potentially terrifying implications. Newspapers and broadcasters have always been faced with moral conundrums over what to publish or screen, have always been aware that the news itself shapes the society it aims to reflect, can provide the oxygen of publicity to unsavoury people. But now the rabbit was out of the hat, so to speak, and the stranglehold of the mainstream media on the information supply was slipping. A million blogs and Twitter feeds were doing the work of disseminating that once needed newspapers and TV. Now it was us sharing this stuff – not only consuming the news but reshaping and remaking it as we went. Now we were all complicit.

A cat photo approach to history

To anyone living through the tragic wake of the 2014 Ferguson race riots it might have seemed pretty inconsequential. A black youth clasps his arms around a white cop, who squeezes him in support. The kid's face is stained with tears. In the background a couple of bystanders look on; a woman stands with her cameraphone raised. Just another emotional moment on the confused streets of America.

But it wasn't forgotten. The photo attracted attention on social media, where it caught a viral wind. It ended up being shared nearly half a million times on Facebook. Look at it and it's not hard to see why. It's a great photo. The kid looks cute, confused. The policeman is chunky and kind-faced, a Bruce Willis cop, the kind of cop who reminds you of your dad. Here he plays symbolic father figure to this pained young man. The hug looks utterly unforced, the emotion genuine. *It's possible*, the photo suggests. *Even amongst the chaos and the hate, the conflict, both races can come together.*

A photo can show something, but a photo can also *be* something. In sharing this photo so many times, Americans made it perhaps *the* iconic photo of Ferguson – like the screaming girl in Vietnam, the JFK wave. This, for many, will be the way the race riots of these past couple of years will be remembered. But things might not be quite so simple as it seems. Look again at the photo. That insignia on the cop's shoulder – that's not a St. Louis County police badge. It quite clearly says Portland. This photo wasn't taken from the riots but from a protest about Ferguson held in Oregon, over two thousand kilometers away. It wasn't taken by one of the bystanders. It actually came from a newspaper, the *Oregonian*. But

most importantly of all: the young man, whose name is Devonte Hart, was working on a Free Hugs stand.

Cop Receives Free Hug at Protest Rally: you'd struggle to sell that headline to anyone. Suddenly the photo looks rather less like the unforced moment of racial reconciliation we sort of assumed it was. Perhaps it doesn't really tell us anything about Ferguson or black communities or policing or America? And more to the point: was there something more than a little self-serving, more than a little flattering about the Ferguson photo? A picture of racial harmony at a time of discord: hey, blacks and whites can live together after all! Afro-Americans *aren't so very angry about getting shot up by the cops*. Look at the kid. They're just confused. They just need a hug.

Two things struck me about the photo. Firstly, it seemed a useful forecast of what might be termed "editing history" – the ability we've all been given to take snippets of the world around us and collectively, as a community, to give new reality to their version of events. Secondly, the Ferguson photo seemed a perfect specimen of what I've come to call "context collapse" – a lie that's based on what's around the material rather than what's in it, a fallacy of context rather than content. Nothing about the photo was doctored, and yet its take on reality was skewed and self-serving. No shadowy agenda was at work, and yet – like a puppy story following a *Fox* news item on teenage sex – it might as well have been; the end result was the same, a fluffy distraction, a cute panacea to deeper social problems.

I began to wonder about the other photos like this. I began to wonder about all the tales of people overcoming their circumstances, the tales of people succeeding against the odds; about the inspiring memes and videos, the random acts of kindness and racial reconciliation, all lost in an endless Likes and shares, all showing us how *good* we were, telling us what we wanted to hear. I started to look for more of them. As I stumbled across more such "Facebook fairytales" uncomfortable thoughts followed. Was it possible that instead of providing a fairer view of the world, one led by the will of the masses, all this clicking might actually be creating new distortions and biases? That we might be unconsciously reshaping our view of the world in order to please ourselves? Reaching for reassuring alternative versions of events, choosing to mis-remember history is a practice as old as history itself. But in the age of "news via Facebook" the scope for truth management and reality editing has shot skyward. If we create stories about the world, then those stories reveal as much about ourselves as we do about that world. The people sharing the riot photo weren't attempting to describe reality. They were just telling themselves what they wanted to hear.

Tweeting to the converted

“Social media lost Labour the last election,” wrote *New Statesman* editor Helen Lewis, “and it’s going to lose Labour the next one, too.” It was May 2015, and the question of people using social media to define their own reality, to engineer their social circles, had gained political as well as social dimensions. The phrase “echo chamber” was starting to crop up around the place. Prominent writers were doing op-eds about it. The *Huffington Post* had a tag for it. Was it possible, ran the speculation, that we were herding ourselves into ever more sealed bubbles – bubbles that were becoming increasingly irrelevant?

During the delirious run-up to the 2015 General Election in Britain, I remember one moment very clearly. It might not have seemed like anything very important at the time. Not among all the posts and tweets, the messages of hope and support. Not among the speeches and videos and *Guardian* articles by name-brand leftwingers like Owen Jones and Russell Brand. This was just a brief Facebook post by someone I barely even knew. It went like this:

Just to let you all know, I’m now unfriending anyone who’s going to be voting Conservative.

Just one more comment in my Facebook feed. One more among the posts about newborn babies, the links to cartoon clips, the ads for apps. But the comment got me wondering. How could anyone on the Left ever expect to engage in a serious attempt to represent the country if they simply shut out anyone who disagreed with them?

I began to get more attentive to what was being posted in my Facebook feed. People who voted Tory, people who voted UKIP – people who actually voted left but didn’t agree with all their ideas, who thought that relaxing any controls on immigration whatsoever was going a bit far – they came in for the chop. On one occasion someone declared themselves the enemy of anyone who was even *friends* with someone who voted Conservative. In real life extricating yourself from someone you disagree with is a messy, complex process: how many of us have to go on working alongside people we don’t warm to, or spend a family meal listening to a bigoted relative? But it’s so *easy* on Facebook – just a click. What’s more, you can make it a demonstrative act if you want to. An act of war.

And as the Unfriending Wars grew into full strength, we can assume, people from other sides of the political spectrum were also unfriending leftwingers and liberals, Labour and Lib Dem and Green voters, expunging them from their consciousness. None of this is new of course. People have always been partisan, true, in a “broad tent” kind of way – gathering in tribes according to vote or class

or race. But this felt different. This wasn't just a gathering among the like-minded – it was an attempt to shut anybody else out. To silence and stop them, to pretend they didn't exist. To make something disappear from our lives if it didn't please us.

Perhaps the filtering levers of the internet had simply made it all too easy – to harmlessly edit people out of our lives, to reshape reality in a way that seemed cosy and comfortable. (There's an interesting parallel here with the success the "No Platform" campus movement has had in banning speakers and closing down debate). As the Election approached the very city I lived in – the unloved estates, the poisoned canalsides, the antisocial housing – seemed to heave with the anticipation of a new future. Change was in the air. How could it *not* be, when everyone was on the same page (or on the same Facebook page?) When everyone was tweeting and posting and sharing and linking the same things? "The Tories are fucked this time," a friend told me. "Nobody's going to vote for them." Another guy told me it would soon be the Green Party in Parliament.

It's interesting to speculate what those same people – the ones who'd so vociferously excluded any voice that didn't agree with theirs, who'd unfriended and blocked any sign of dissent and sailed into the Election with righteous unchallenged hope – thought as they watched the Election results come in and the Conservatives swept back to power stronger than ever, wiping much of the opposition off the map in England. We'll never know. Twitter and Facebook predictably and immediately lit up with mutual sympathy and hand-wringing as concerned liberals and lefties chewed over what might have gone wrong. Others started hashtags, new campaigns, new messages of hope. I don't blame anybody for doing this. Social media had become a great place to be: it was optimistic and caring in a cold world that was going to get a lot colder. On the web liberals like me could endlessly speculate and exchange messages of hope, could drift, dream, conjure up futures we liked. It was all way more fun than actual politics.

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As I watched the waves of unfriendings, the righteous tweets and Facebook posts, the grassroots campaigns to push the party ever further towards the left, I began to wonder if there was a danger associated with this insularity. Had we perhaps, as some speculated, simply managed to quarantine ourselves in a bubble of confirmation bias, a self-confirming community who reflected back our every thought and conviction?

I began to read around the subject, only to realize that my reading itself was being shaped. Gone were the days of sifting through the pages of books I didn't need; Google not only found the things it thought I already agreed with but learned from my searches, learned to satisfy me better and better, confirm my views with ever more targeted precision. No wonder Rafael Behr called the web a "giant experiment in confirmation bias". It seemed worth taking the time to explore that bubble a little – to examine the processes by which people seal themselves off in these self-reinforcing communities. If twentieth century media was a clunky one-way process, it seemed to me the hyper-personalized streams of our own time offer ever more opportunities for narrowing, optimization, restriction – precision-shaped to deliver exactly the results we want to hear. How could I really trust the validity of my own conclusions when I knew that simply by typing a few words I could always get the answer I wanted?

For all the opportunities we enjoy to become global citizens, most of us visit a small number of websites, listen and watch from a restricted range of (mostly English language) material. Women and black people are followed less on Twitter than white men. Wikipedia is mostly written by men; most of the top-read bloggers are pale and male. America knows less about Europe than Europe knows about America; Europe knows less about Africa than Africa knows about Europe. It may be a global village, but the social web means it's easier than ever to remain a global village idiot.

And with the potential for such idiocy, comes the potential to exploit it. This borderless free speech may be one of the most profound democratic advances in human history, but like any other advance it comes with a dark side – for the potential to be co-opted and misused, for our words to be used against us. If expression really was so free, why were some women terrified to go near Twitter for fear of the rape and death threats they might receive for the crime of having an opinion? Why was a kid being bullied or prosecuted for a picture or video they'd posted, one that – who knows why – suddenly went viral and got seen by a hundred million people? And worse still: could the essentially democratic nature of these new social tools be exploited, so that "citizen" media might be co-opted, reversed and deployed against the very citizens it was supposed to represent?

Consider the glossy, cutesy Instagram account created by the husband and wife of the Al-Assad family, the ruling family in Syria. Here's a typical picture from 2014. In some kind of paediatric hospital, an attractive middle-aged woman kneels down to guiding a smiling toddler as the child takes faltering steps with the aid of a walking device. Nurses look on, smile. "In order for the people with special needs to give and create," runs the accompanying post, "they must be directed out of the space of pity, charity and compassion." The photo got 1,034 Likes.

It's a nice photo, admittedly. But perhaps not all of those Likes were the result of spontaneous approval. This, after all, is a ruling family also accused of multiple war crimes, including the use of sarin gas on opposition forces, chemical attacks, torture, and the murder of 4,000 of their own civilian populace in air strikes alone. The toddler photo (#syriax#Asma#Assad#handicapped) was only one among many posted by the Syrian Presidency. Here are the two of them together, Bashar and Asma al-Assad, man and wife, talking to a smiling child. Here they are again, leaning down like parents, embracing a patient who gurgles up at them both with delight. "A visit by the President and the First Lady to the people with special needs (#syria#Bashar#Assad)" the text enthuses. It got 776 Likes. Whatever the Syrian president's record is like on human rights, nobody could accuse him of neglecting his public image.

And he's not alone. Putin, Kim Jong Il, Xi Xiping, Mugabe have all done the same, using social media to foster a new kind of Leader Cult – an update from the days when all it took was a framed photo of Stalin on the mantelpiece to win your people over. It's true that those in power the world over have always used a well-timed appearance or photo-op to boost their image. But Twitter and Instagram feeds foster a sense of intimacy between ruler and ruled, a supposed window on the lives of the powerful, however spurious it may actually be. In the process, they humanize the inhuman. Bashar's wife Asma in particular has been prolific, turning dictatorship into a kind of ongoing *Vogue* cover – ladling out soup to hungry children, clutching a humble peasant in her arms, visiting compliant elderly pensioners. It worked, too; in 2011 *Vogue* published a glowing article depicting the al-Assads as a family-focused couple who vacation in Europe and wanted to give Syria a "brand essence". This was just after government crackdown on protestors. The crackdown was alleged to have killed 10,000 civilians.

Just as marketers now seek to promote their brands via hashtags rather than slogans – the idea that your audience will chat about you and effectively do your work for you – the people spreading the message and changing hearts and minds are not leaders or designated speakers but rather the young foot-soldiers, doing so via status updates and selfies, sometimes without even being aware of their role. And it's not only terrorist splinter groups but established state security forces that have seen the power of social media as a platform the make the inhumane humane, the abnormal normal. The writer Huw Lemmey studied the Israeli Defence Force – a force badly in need of some image salvation – and found similar effects at work. As Lemmey puts it, "like many of the more advanced lifestyle brands, the IDF are shifting the focus of image production from their own staff and creative team toward their consumers: in this case, the troops, reservists, and supporters of the IDF. Content is aggregated from individuals and fed back into the social networks of the target audience [my ellipsis] ... making

IDFgram perhaps the first crowdsourced propaganda campaign for a state military.”

The result is photogenic young soldiers striking fun poses with one another, chilling out in their bunks, “a fighting force at play as imagined by Wolfgang Tillmans and BUTT magazine”, with Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest accounts marshaled to bolster the easygoing and friendly lifestyle brand of the IDF (there’s a few kittens in there too). Just as, say, Ralph Lauren sells images of the American Navy with a crew-cut Waspy image that plays on founding myths, these chillout images help to excuse the inexcusable, smooth out the rough edges, present Israel to international audiences as just another dorm room – a summer camp for handsome, fun-loving kids. Perhaps that’s why when female cadets posted semi-nude photos of themselves in uniform the result wasn’t quite as militant as we might expect. “View the Instagram profile for Hot Israeli Army Girls on INK361,” an American website enthused. “Feel free to leave the girls a comment-Send us your hot idf girls picture to idfgirls123 @gmail.com.”

“These girls look just as hot out of their uniforms as they do in them,” drooled another in a post entitled “The Sexy Girls of the Israeli Army (54 pics)”. Many of these came from the U.S. – the place where it’s most important of all to sell the brand, where military support and funding is key. Guns.com and frat-friendly sites predictably got in on the action, uploading and reposting the pictures; there was a YouTube post entitled “Super Hot Israeli girls” with comments like “Why can't Israel and Palestine work out their problems?” (when half a century of diplomacy fails maybe we should leave it to Collegehumour.com). Consider, for a moment, the fallout from such a social media leak. The female Israeli cadets were sternly reprimanded for tarring the image of the army; slips like these are bad news for a fighting force trying to maintain a serious image. But on another level, could the nude photos have actually helped to soften the image of the IDF – to bury the ethics of their presence in Gaza beneath hedonist smut, to reduce war to a pre-club striptease? What better way to deflect attention away from the horror of conflict than a bit of “dormroom diplomacy” via YouTube?

Regimes around the world are actively trying to engineer similar kinds of prurient, infantilized distraction as ideological tools. Take the secret “troll houses” in Russia, which work tirelessly to reprogram public debate in a pro-Putin direction by burying ideology within a pot-pourri of pop culture bible and racist anti-Obama memes. As one junior troll put it, “We had to write ‘ordinary posts’ about making cakes or music tracks we liked, but then every now and then throw in a political post about how the Kiev government is fascist.”

Or take China’s army of 280,000 online piece-workers, paid token amounts to spam the social networks and comment threads with distracting fluff – a story about the Mayor’s daughter’s new car, a video by Justin Bieber, some pointless

and irrelevant rumour. Or the “Electronic Committee” troll army that once functioned in Egypt under Mubarak’s reign, paid to pollute the pipes of the internet in a practice known as “snowing”. This is a new kind of “white noise” propaganda, one that seeks to bury signal in interference, to drown out information rather than deny it, to peddle casual insinuations and disinformation. Political scientist Seva Gunitsky has suggested that authoritarian regimes are now starting to see social media as a key means to maintain their control – that rather than being tools for democratic change, they can be indispensable monitoring tools, a way to get honest feedback about local apparatchiks, who in the absence of free elections “can govern with relative impunity, creating the potential for corruption and local discontent”. As China’s president Hu Jintao told *The People’s Daily*, the Internet “is an important channel for us to understand the concerns of the public.” Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny has suggested the Putin regime uses the Internet as a “focus group” to find out the concerns and desires of ordinary Russians.

This is a world where truth and lies mix and mingle, where everything can be co-opted, turned into part of the story. It’s a world where media and entertainment, fashion and politics can all be wrapped up together in a cute, shareable package, where mass media and social media can be co-orchestrated in a cosy alliance. Isis as we know borrowed from the aesthetic of video games like *Grand Theft Auto* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*; they, in turn, borrow *their* aesthetics from the look and feel of asymmetric warfare – grainy CCTV, cameraphone footage, renegade cells, bomb flashes – as one feeds off the other. Dictators look to the techniques of focus-grouping and savvy social marketing, while social marketers – such as London based agency Archibald Ingall Stretton who led the One Direction campaign – use mass “conscription” techniques for finding their Brand Ambassadors that would not look out of place in the army. We might call it the “military infotainment complex”: you can achieve a lot of things if you’re willing to talk in the language of video games and cat photos.

Writing this book has been a journey through some dark, fascinating and contradictory corners of modern society. It would invite me to examine the rise of Facebook fairytales, the morally appeasing real-life fables of homeless children overcoming adversity via Kickstarter; or New York police selflessly reaching down to bestow shoes on rough sleepers in a way that – coincidentally – served as first rate PR for the NYPD. I would move from online fascists battling with “antifa” groups to the Molotov cocktails thrown across the streets of Venezuela, from policy wonks in Manhattan locking horns with Isis via Twitter to the complaint armies of Chinese piece-workers spreading propaganda via Weibo. The miracle of the networked age is that it brings a new kind of intimacy between the ordinary person and the extremist, that it brings the thoughts and words and breakfast selfies of fascist dictators straight onto our smartphone screens. Why do we tend to assume that just because we associate Facebook

memes with baby photos and light entertainment they can't be marshaled for darker purposes? If we use a breakfast selfie on Instagram to raise a chuckle from our friends and get a couple of Likes, what makes us so sure that murderers and torturers – or young Jihadists – can't do the same?

Advertising standards and news regulation were established in the early days of mass-media because without them unfounded assertions were taken by a credulous populace as true. Now that a third of Americans get their news via Facebook, now that the memes we share and the tweets we trend are perhaps as powerful a force on public opinion as CNN, the BBC or the *Guardian*, we need to get a little savvy. When it comes to the mass media most of us are fairly savvy to advertising bullshit and tabloid “facts”. When it comes to new media this is 1915 and we've got a lot to learn. As the lines between marketer and propagandist, terrorist and convert become increasingly blurry, as terrorists bury their killings beneath an icing of cat photos and the Ayatollah of Iran joins Facebook, we need to start getting savvier. We need to start debating the effects of what we're reading, Liking, sharing and – most of all – believing. Perhaps the most revealing photo in the Al-Assad Instagram account shows ordinary Syrians doing what they find most frightening of all: voting. It got 873 Likes.

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Freedom from speech

Are we scared to speak for fear of the echo?

I feel frightened to even use Twitter now. You never know. Something you've said. Just a joke or whatever. You never know what could happen.

- British Phd student

In a galaxy very, very nearby in the the early noughties, there's a 15-year old who loves *Star Wars*. He loves it so much that he sneaks down to the school basement and videotapes himself wielding a pretend light sabre – actually a golf-ball retriever. Nothing so unusual about that; a quick flick through YouTube will demonstrate how much kids love to role-play on camera. Only this boy does something that will change his life – and, in a way, the world – forever. He accidentally leaves the tape behind.

That's when a bunch of his classmates come across it and upload it to the internet.

The “Star Wars Kid” of 2002 – now entered into the dubious annals of twenty first century history – marked the start of trends that are now so ubiquitous that we barely notice them any more. It was one of the first virals. It was one of the first memes to become so widely shared that it entered popular culture (once online the video spread faster than a pandemic). But it was also the beginning of something else. It was the point at which people who had never intended to enter the public sphere find themselves doing so. It's not hard to see why his video spread. Try as one might try, from the best of intentions, not to see the funny side, the funny side really is quite funny: like it or not there just *is* something innately hilarious about watching a portly boy unwittingly twirling an imaginary sword.

The spread of Star Wars Kid – to millions and millions of people, within just a few days – was unprecedented in human history. As the 2000s progressed a new

wave of Silicon Valley propagandists and social marketers rose up to exploit the power of the viral, seeing in it variously the chance to create a democratic marketplace of ideas and inspiring TEDucation or – perhaps more frequently – a cheap way to sell products. Raza himself, meanwhile, the kid who arguably and unwittingly started all this now growing into adulthood, suffered the unpleasant effects of a fame he never asked for. The viral spread of the video was unprecedented, too huge to ever go away. Hundreds of millions of people he'd never meet had seen him at his goofiest, laughed at him; hundreds of millions more would continue to do so. He would be the throwaway butt of jokes for years to come. Armies of people he didn't know felt it was okay to message him any time they felt like. He was diagnosed with depression.

Had he lived in another age Ghyslain Raza – a.k.a. the “Star Wars Kid” – would have suffered the excruciating but limited embarrassment of the video circulating around his Quebec school. Because he had the dubious honour of being one of the first viral stars his teenage years were very different. He dropped out of high school. He suffered abuse and commentary online, became a comedy staple without ever asking to be made so. Just because the internet has squeezed Ghyslain Raza down into a low-res, sharable meme, doesn't mean there isn't a human being behind all the laughter. Eventually Raza checked into a psychiatric ward. His video has now been watched by an estimated tenth of the planet.

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“Information wants to be free,” Stewart Brand once said back in the '80s, in a soundbite that's since become a banner for free speech advocates and technology activists and still continues to be quoted to our day. Information wants to be free, the internet can free it, and it's the freedom – or duty? – of citizens to share it. It's when you consider the genealogy of this idea that you realise why sharing a video of a kid play-acting Luke Skywalker and trolling him to the point of psychological damage no longer seems problematic. It's just part of a creed. Anyone should be able to comment on anyone they like, and anyone answer back. Nobody should be immune from comment and criticism.

But is that really “freedom”? What of the people who are trolled, bullied, exposed? Is there a chance that such a notional free-for-all might actually replicate the existing powers of structures of society – might be a way for men to keep women in place, whites to suppress blacks, and so on?

At the close of the 1950s the philosopher Isaiah Berlin wrote an essay which attempted to redefine the seemingly self-evident concept of “freedom”. Freedom, he wrote, had to be defined as freedom *from* as well as freedom *to*. Liberty was both positive and negative; one person’s freedom might be another person’s imprisonment. It’s something we all know intuitively, of course. You might want the right to drive as fast as you want, but the aerial freeway that gives you the “freedom” to do that has to be built over the heads of a neighbourhood full of people who suddenly find they have no freedom from constant traffic noise. The smokers who found themselves banned from bars and cafes over the last decade bemoaned their loss of freedom – but the waiters and waitresses rejoiced in their newfound freedom from tobacco fumes. Freedom, like everything else, exists within a social context.

It was an important idea back in Berlin’s day, but in our own – when everybody is connected to everybody else in ever more liquid ways – the notion of “freedom from” has taken on a significance nobody could have anticipated. Rather than the utopian democracy of expression that was supposed to happen as we all got connected, some have found their freedoms curtailed in some pretty nasty ways.

Imagine the following scenario. A grown man breaks into a high school and somehow tracks down the annual Yearbook. He rifles through it until he finds a couple of things that make him laugh – something dumb someone has written, a terrible photo. A teenage girl in a costume she’ll regret later in life. He photocopies everything and sneaks back out. Next, he glues it all up on a wall. Then he invites passing strangers to laugh at them. Some laugh. Some are offended. Some of them laugh so much that they break into more high schools, photocopy more dumb comments and more photos of teenage girls and paste them up too. Pretty soon the wall’s full. They start building a bigger wall. Does any of this sound the tiniest unethical?

Put aside the law-breaking for a second, and it’s plainly inconceivable that anything like that would ever be allowed to happen. In fact it’s such an absurd idea that it sounds like a fairytale. And yet this *does* happen. It happens every day, to people we know. Reddit, the “front page of the internet” as it likes to call itself, is a social networking site set up a decade ago that’s become America’s biggest free speech forum, a place for saying *anything*, where many can and many do exercise their First Amendment rights to fill screens with ceaseless commentary on everything from sunrises to gaming code to hot girls. It’s huge and much of it is very innocent, but there are definitely some very dark corners. The language is salty and the topics saltier: famous threads on the site have included things like r/jailbait (for examining pics of borderline underage girls) and r/thingsniggerssay. Think of Facebook with the stabilizers taken off.

In the summer of 2012, a 20-something college student who goes by the name Drumcowski stumbled on a YouTube clip called “Teen Werewolves,” a local news segment on a high school trend from 2010 featuring students donning fake nails and sharp teeth and howling at the moon. After laughing so much he almost cried Drumcowski hit upon the idea of a forum where people could upload “cringe” material they found on the web. And “r/cringe” – later expanded to “r/cringe pics” – was duly born.

As Drumcowski explained it later, the initial idea was pretty innocent. Who hasn’t stumbled on something absurd online and wanted to share it with a few friends? But hit on something popular and the internet has a way of taking it in directions you never envisaged. Within a few months the threads had expanded to millions of page views, and with the growth came a new culture. Rather than linking to random videos from the web, the new “redditors” uploading stuff to the forums were sharing something rather different – screengrabs from the social media pages of unsuspecting friends and strangers. This wasn’t some stupid clip of a puppy; this was intimate, identifying information. r/cringe, in other words, had become a shaming forum.

Cut your hair and then continually asked a friend to text their opinion? Your feed gets uploaded. Screeched out a rendition of One Direction’s *What Makes You Beautiful*? “It looks like she might have tits so it’s going to be a long while before she finds out she’s a moron.” Posed for a selfie with the caption *I get noticed cause I’m gorgeous*? The cringe community was adamant. “She asked for it.”

Pretty soon r/cringe had itself been named and shamed as one of the worst sources of bullying on Reddit – and given what the rest of Reddit is like, that suggests it must have been pretty extreme at the beginning (the above is the printable end of the spectrum; there were also death threats and worse). Now consider the fact that many of these “cringe pics” and the like were from young people – not young adults, but teens, tweens and even children, people who were in no position to know what they were doing, and certainly in no position to suspect that a narcissistic Facebook post or a Halloween costume they donned would end up pinned to a wall of a forum with half a million subscribers and more than 30 million monthly collective pageviews. That’s quite a punishment for posting something dumb on Facebook.

It’s worth considering the ethics around a thread like r/cringe. We know when we see vicious trolling or rape threats that something terrible, often criminal is taking place. But much of the internet isn’t like that. Much of the internet is something far harder to define: nasty without quite being abusive, prurient without quite being illegal, appropriating stuff without quite actually stealing. There’s no law about linking to something that’s already in the public domain, as social media accounts set to public are; there’s no law either against talking

about the people posted up there. Most of us would probably feel that there's something horrible about it (even the Reddit community itself started a debate over whether or not to close the thread, which given the nature of Reddit is really saying something) – but how to legislate against that in a way that doesn't stifle people elsewhere? Mightn't a law that made such bitching illegal end up impinging on the public's right to comment on political figures?

r/cringe is one of those cases where the technology of connection catches society on the back foot simply because lawmakers and the like never envisioned a world where information could be shared so freely. In 2008 someone created a Google Maps app called Eightmaps to pinpoint every person who'd voted against a Californian ballot to allow gay marriage, resulting in pogroms against the bigots (who were surely entitled to their private views?) that ended in some of their careers destroyed. As Evgeny Morozov points out, the information on voting had always been available, but aggregating records from dusty city hall vaults was nearly impossible; now that we can expose people at the touch of a smartphone, the temptation is to over-extend the privilege. The raw material for r/cringe never existed on a wide scale before because there was no easy way to arrange it (unless you wanted to go breaking into schools and stealing Yearbooks in a balaclava). But the social web makes all things unwittingly communal, blends identities and blurs boundaries between private and public until they no longer refer to ownership but to "a feed on a social media stream", as Astra Taylor puts it in her book *The People's Platform*. Such casual appropriation is just part of life; and so is the casual reputational destruction for the sake of a joke that goes with it.

r/cringe was eventually cleaned up (Drumcowski now moderates a much more placid forum for sharing philosophical thoughts that occur in the shower) but the same thing exists elsewhere, perhaps on Reddit, perhaps somewhere within the unpoliceable vastness of the internet. (When r/creepshots – a forum that posted "voyeur" pics of girls snapped unawares in public – was formally closed by Reddit copycat sites sprung up within days.) But gone or not, it poses thorny questions. Does it matter that many of the young people who ended up on r/cringe may never have found out they were being laughed at? Surely there's some kind of moral limit on our right to post and comment on the lives of others? Parts of Reddit seem to exist purely to test the limits of free speech. In r/CuteFemaleCorpses one finds photos of dead, bloodied, half-naked young women, along with captions such as "I wish I had strangled her." Other groups in its network include r/sexyabortions, r/rapingwomen, r/picsofdeadkids, r/beatngwomen, and r/killingwomen. Again, we see a culture of exposure dancing around the limits of the law. While subreddits featuring nonconsensual sexual photography like r/creepshots were banned, that gesture was never extended to subreddits of sexualized young women who are dead; r/jailbait was

eventually banned, but because of a moderator conflict – the moral equivalent of locking up Al Capone for tax evasion).

Day to day, for most of us, this is what freedom of speech in the networked age really means – accidental oversharing, shining torches into the lives of others, casually picking apart those lives for no other reason that you *can*. The internet has made personal expression possible to a degree unprecedented in history. But a culture of permanent expression seems to also mean a culture of permanent exhibition – and this exhibition is often involuntary. A quick search of image sharing site Tumblr will flash up a swamp of forums for posting “creepshots” – pics snapped with smartphones in public of women unaware of being photographed and then uploaded to the web. There are entire genres within creepshots – nipple-slips, upskirts, downblouses to name but a few – so it seems wise to advise women to be a little bit wary of that guy texting on his phone the next time you’re on public transport. From Creepshots to University “Spotted” pages, the web abounds with new forms of puerile “peer-to-peer spying”, with the results posted involuntarily online – often with a bullying, misogynistic motive. “Women, shut up and indulge us in the right to let us admire your bodies,” declares one voyeur site. The Facebook group “Women Who Eat on the Tube” (“the equivalent of wildlife photography” according to its founder) led to one unlucky model who was involuntarily snapped receiving 12,000 abusive comments for the crime of eating a salad. Elsewhere the interest is less erotic than cruelly voyeuristic. Victorian circus freak shows resurface by focusing on bodyweight and disability “18 Weirdos Caught Taking Public Transport”); Erin Pritchard, a dwarf, has been photographed at least ten times in public, while one schoolgirl developed anorexia after being snapped drooling while asleep.

Again, it’s unlikely that many of the women concerned would be very thrilled about being featured on a public forum without their consent (and one which, if it does well, might be making a bit from advertising). We face the same conundrum we saw with r/cringe: that the new freedoms of the web produce stuff that’s morally disgusting but, as yet, completely legal. And legislating against could prove harder than it looks, when such legislation might impinge our freedoms elsewhere. Nobody wants to enshrine the right of a teenager with a phone to snap the underwear of a woman in public, but what of the citizen journalist who needs to capture a crowd scene? If photographing of strangers was made criminal, might the anti-journalist PR teams of every corporation and celebrity in the land use that legislation to land a lawsuit on the lap of photo-journalists who got in their way?

We live in a world where involuntary exposure is becoming normalized, entrenched as part of our culture. Sussex University-based sociologist Alison Phipps has researched the way girls in particular are subjected to “rate my shag” style scrutiny in school and university environments – something that

entrenches the belief that being on constant exhibition, performing to the crowd (especially if you're female) is not only normal but a social duty. "Young people are measuring their popularity through how many Likes their posts get," she told me over the phone when I interviewed her on the subject. "It's like the culmination of the neoliberal quota system – like women are being audited." Is it any wonder that such a culture is fostering a powerful strain of exhibitionism in the younger generation? There are entire sites devoted to exhibiting oneself in order to fish for praise and ratings; "beautiful teens" pages are frequently appearing on Facebook before being shut down. (It's easy to forget now that the family-friendly Facebook itself began as a misogynist "facemash" prank allowing male college students to rate girls, something the company's press materials are noticeably quiet about these days).

In other words, a world where anybody with an internet connection can say anything they like about anybody they like isn't a necessarily democratic one. There are pre-existing power structures that define the kind of world that emerges – the power of tech-savvy males with more energy, time and hate to fuel their trolling; the power of centuries of misogyny and racism to shape the kind of people who are exposed and commented in this connected utopia. When you look at it more closely, the "freedom" of expression that the internet brings tends to most often mean freedom for a certain kind of person – and while many of these may be more ignorant than nasty, a certain proportion are eminently skilled in turning their digital freedom into a means of curtailing that of others. In fact some of them are very, very nasty indeed.

The art of search-engine-optimized career annihilation

"By the time you finish reading this post, you'll be able to ruin your enemies' lives, end their careers and leave them utterly destitute," the blog post by Matt Forney promises breathlessly. A man's rights activist and heavyweight blogger on a dubious section of the web calling itself the "Manosphere", Forney's post "How to Destroy Someone's Reputation with Google" has all the tip-heavy enthusiasm of someone thrilled to be sharing the secrets of stylish bike hubcaps or cake recipes. The "manosphere" Forney speaks of is home and hearth to angry male bloggers who flirt with misogyny, racism and rape culture with apparent impunity – a blog version of a Hell's Angels bar brawl, only nastier and more calculated. Charming entries on Forney's own blog include "Why Fat Girls Don't Deserve to Be Loved" and "How to Crush a Girl's Self-Esteem"; these meld seamlessly with the rather more spicy strain of entries like "How to Beat Your Girlfriend or Wife and Get Away with It" and "Hurt Your Wife to Show Her You Love Her". It's no wonder that someone like Forney doesn't take too kindly to

young empowered women in the supposedly elitist media. No wonder, either, that he'll spend such energy smearing and defaming them.

But in the case of Figolara, Forney doesn't just want to settle for a bit of bitchy back-biting. He wants total reputational annihilation – and unlike the knee-jerk trolls of Twitter, he realises what a stealth operation this can be.

“Write the article in as balanced a tone as possible,” Forney tells us. “An article full of swear words and far-fetched accusations is useless.” So goes the procedure for carrying out the guerrilla hatchet-job in what amounts to an instruction manual for reputation destruction. Other headings include “Avoid direct accusations against your target” and “Network with other bloggers to get the article ranked on Google.”

Welcome to the world of twenty first century career annihilation – a kind of search-engine-optimized hitjob where all you have to do is write a smear article about someone (true? not true? who cares) and then make sure it registers as high as possible in the Google rankings. Forney proudly displays the head of his latest victim as that of Sarah Figalora, a young ABC News journalist, who Forney has smeared with a piece entitled “Is Sarah Figalora Guilty of Journalistic Fraud?”

Nobody could accuse Forney of not knowing his stuff – indeed, he displays SEO savvy that many online marketers could learn by, outlining useful little tricks for gaming Google like hyperlinking the article to itself (it creates more hits apparently) making it as clear as possible to Google's spiders what the subject of the article is, “giving your post a shot in the arm”. More importantly, he's very careful to cover his *own* ass while destroying the lives of others, never overstepping the kind of legal boundaries that were supposed to make this kind of thing difficult. “Nowhere in the piece do I outright accuse her of journalistic fraud,” he admits. “This is to protect myself from a possible libel lawsuit.” This is reputation destruction *a la* Malcolm Tucker – weaving a web of suggestion and insinuation, always covering one's trail, never directly stating but letting the audience do all the work. Titling the piece with a question simply plants the idea; as an army of tabloid journalists and weasel-words already know, rumour never needs facts, just seeds of suggestion. “People are natively inclined to assume that criminals are guilty until proven innocent,” enthuses Forney, in the energetic tones of a Stasi officer planning a show-trial, “manipulating this instinct is key to writing these kinds of articles.” Welcome to the democratic world of the social web.

And does Forney manage it? “My piece on her is currently the number one Google result for her name, while the number three result is a link to the article from my Facebook page,” he boasts. “Thanks to my articles (as well as everyone else's work) and the might of the manosphere Sarah Figalora and her compatriots' careers are over.”

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Some big claims. When I Googled Sarah Figalora the first result was, indeed, Forney's article entitled *Is Sarah Figalora Guilty of Journalistic Fraud?* – but the others were simply links to her own articles and work at ABC. Not enough to end a career on its own, perhaps. But we shouldn't under-estimate it either; a search result like that can be very, very powerful indeed. In the world of journalism reputations are indeed very, very delicate, and as Forney well knows, HR staff sifting through stacks of C.V.s during a hiring process may well not have the time to check out every link. This result plants a question mark in their heads, smudging and smearing by association. Why take the one with a question mark hanging over them if there's an equally qualified alternative?

I was fascinated by Matt Forney. He seemed a particularly vocal mouthpiece for an entire movement of men a bit like him – pissed off, vengeful, hiding somewhere in the internet: a rage-filled army ready to strike, especially at people who pissed them off. Especially at young *women* who pissed them off. All that Sarah Figalora had done to merit having her life destroyed was to have interviewed Forney for a piece that Forney didn't like very much (a "hatchet job"). She did this in the capacity of her job at ABC. Sarah Figalora was an intern at the time, possibly unpaid, young and at the start of her career. James Forney isn't going to let her forget about it. Neither will Google.

On the contact page of Forney's blog there was no direct email but rather a contact form, one that allowed him to vet all approaches without letting any slip through the net he didn't like. It seemed to perfectly encapsulate the one-way approach to online "empowerment", where anonymous users mask their hate-speech behind avatars while attacking real people brave enough to stand by their real name. The ones who throw stones and shout rape threats get to hide in the shadows while their targets – journalists, everyday people, women who don't shut up – are forced to live in broad daylight, always exposed, hoping to be left in peace.

Welcome to the world of Little Brother

The idea of being on permanent electronic exhibition may sound like something from a sci-fi dystopia, but as a political project it actually stems back to the 1980s, when Stasi boss Erich Mielke began a program of mass-computerization with a view to providing for the eventual logging, tracking and surveillance of every citizen. Behind it lay the impetus for the creation of an entirely new kind of

society, one whose citizens are expected to be on 24/7 exhibition, who would be born, live and die beneath the gaze of all upon them: a “crystal republic”. There are plenty of us today who might feel they know a little about what it means to live under permanent exhibition.

If Keen is right, then this “crystal republic” has given rise to a new kind of crystal person, one who expects to be watched, exhibited, evaluated; a world where our thoughts and words are tracked not by bespectacled government officers but rather by one another. Instead of the total surveillance of Orwell’s Big Brother, we fear a piecemeal, “crowdsourced” version – bored kids snapping and shaming strangers on transport, grown men posting the dumb videos of teenage girls, online mobs descending on the dental practice of a lion killer. The comedian Stewart Lee once observed that if he had a stroke and wanted to reconstruct his memories, all he’d have to do is plug his name into the Twitter search engine to see his movements tracked by Londoners posting their sightings of a local celebrity. “It’s like a state surveillance agency run by gullible volunteers,” he observed: “a Stasi for the *Angry Birds* generation”.

Though there’s definitely a misogynist bent to all this Peeping-Tomfoolery, the culture of citizen surveillance is far from restricted to teens with cameraphones. All walks of life, all social milieus – none are safe from peer-to-peer surveillance. In the UK university “Spotted” pages gave an opportunity for students to comment on one another until they were shut down after predictably leading to stalking and abuse. Even the theoretically much more sedate world of middle-aged parenting isn’t safe – in fact by some accounts it’s one of the most surveilled, commented on and harshly judged ones of all. American education journalist Rebecca Schuman recently wrote that she was “terrified of taking my child literally anywhere” after a rise in public shaming videos documented parent vs. public encounters between unhappy children and the even more unhappy bystanders, proprietors or nearby diners. The videos themselves were only the start; the real shaming occurred when all sides weighed in for lengthy diatribes on the parents – mostly by strangers of course – on the comments sections beneath. The issue is not whether some people’s parenting choices don’t need occasional examination, but rather that a few seconds (the ones with the angriest words exchanged or the loudest children’s screaming) were taken out of context to “prove” that these parents were bad at their job, or just bad people in general. We’ll see this context collapse again and again in this book, and the rumours, myths and lies it can lead to – but here this very twenty first century activity serves as a platform for the oldest social ritual of all: shaming. Like witches burnt for an alleged heresy, we’re condemned as a person for the evidence of a tiny moment of our lives. Welcome to moral justice via YouTube.

Anyone who works in the front end of the service industry, of course, knows full well the might and magic of social media – Yelp is now the backing track to

restaurant life, as TripAdvisor is to the hotel industry. On the face of it, it all sounds like a good idea; shouldn't we, the consumers, be able to advise one another on where to stay and where to eat? The problem is that from that lofty ideal the reviews descend all too often into pettiness and spite – a way for pissed off travelers or eaters to relieve their tensions. Some American restaurants have banned Yelpers or trolled their reviews on social media, while Trip Advisor is proving a goldmine not so much to hoteliers but rather to the lawyers now increasingly drafted in settle the defamation suits arising from a throwaway review.

The problem with the structure of all this customer feedback is that it places nearly all the power with the customer – all it takes is a couple of harsh reviews from a couple of angry people (and let's face it, they're the ones likely to actually bother leaving a review) to poison the profile of a small business, while the views of many others who may have felt pleasantly indifferent to the service – or simply have better things to do with their lives than go on Yelp – remain invisible. TripAdvisor has seen cases where one-star reviewers have gone to lengths to stress how awful the swimming pool of a small hotel was only to be informed by irate managers that the hotel had no pool. In a couple of revealing cases reviews for restaurants and hotels have appeared before they actually opened, which if nothing else is a good demonstration of the responsiveness of the internet.

Reviews of hostels or cafes might not rank up there with the worst of the internet's abuse – though there's no doubt they have affected or even possibly closed some businesses – but they're all a part of the wider culture of digital curtain-twitching that sees everyone and everything as game for comment and appraisal. Most of the time, of course, the majority of us escape anything really nasty. But the culture of citizen surveillance is so widespread now that there's no telling when you might find yourself get caught out – and when you do get caught out, there are fewer and fewer places to hide.

Leak her address, I want her dead

At a protest outside of Jack Trice Stadium in Iowa in 2015 black and Latino students had gathered to protest the appearance of presidential hopeful Donald Trump. It was a peaceful protest: a little chanting, nothing more. A Latino man held up a sign reading "Our lives end the day we become silent about things that matter." Again, not exactly an inflammatory comment.

Then two white girls walk by: young, beach-clad and blonde, a faint air of privilege about them. They're laughing at the protest. One of them reaches for

the sign held by the Latino man and rips it up. There's boos from the audience. She walks on by.

Well, it was a pretty low thing to do, admittedly – if the girl had an opinion or a point to make she could have done so without resorting to vandalism. But then most of us would agree that neither was it the worst thing to have ever happened at a protest – and neither was it even all that uncommon in the midst of a riled-up crowd. Ordinarily, it would have just been one of those things: remarked on, bitched about, and then forgotten.

Not this time though.

Unluckily for the girls, someone not only filmed the incident but submitted the clip to a Tumblr page called Racistsgettingfired – a page where people shame and disgrace those they see as bigots in the hope of losing them their jobs. And if you find yourself discussed on Racistsgettingfired, there's no such thing as a low profile.

The reaction was swift.

“THIS PISSES ME OFF SO MUCH,” fumed a user called mrrobotico.

“the scum bitches make their way into the peaceful crowd,” observed aptheblasian.

And another: “LETS GET HER FIRED”.

When pre-modern villages turned on their witches, when pitchfork mobs descended on villagers following a vicious bit of hearsay, they did so with an advantage that the modern online mob often lacks: they knew who their victim was. But an online shaming often starts from a tiny fragment – an anonymous comment, a photo, a video clip. The process is as much about the crowdsourced detective work unclothing and identification as it is about the shaming itself. Racistsgettingfired is no different. As various readers and users got to work studying the clip of the girl (which college? Which girl?) others publicly fumed about what she'd done on the thread. “She should've got her fronts snatched that day,” one user called thechanelmuse speculated, referring to the frat-boy YouTube genre of running up to women and ripping their clothes off, then filming the results.

But the most revealing comment of all came next.

“leak ha address?” thechanelmuse continued. “i want her dead.”

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Back in the late 1990s, when I was watching what we now know as the social web start to take shape, there was a faint whiff of democratic empowerment in the air – this was to be a platform of the people, where the citizenry might find equality of expression, where the disenfranchised could speak truth to power. Hailing from a family with connections across recently collapsed Iron Curtain, in a household where the tobacco-tinged talk of Soviet dissidents rose up from the kitchen table through my teenage years, I gained a brief personal glimpse into how important the idea of “free speech” might actually be. Millions who grew up last century feared their words might be monitored and recorded, might lead to repercussions or death or worse. East Germany became perhaps the most powerful surveillance state in the history of humanity. At last, it seemed, the power of the citizen was on the rise.

But all of this also begged the question: if “freedom of speech” was already available, what would people actually use all these emerging networks to say? Could it be that some of us simply took the idea of freedom of speech a little too far?

Take the much publicized example of what became known as “Gamergate”, which began when the games designer Anita Sarkeesian received a tweet in August 2014. She reported it to the police and left her flat to stay with friends. The tweet wasn’t unusual. She received many like it every day. The said, “I’m going to go to your apartment at _____ and rape you to death.”

She decided to go and stay with friends for a while.

Sarkeesian’s unforgivable crime was to ask a crowd-funding website for money to make a video series about women in games – a crime for which she was duly punished with years of threats like the above, at one point even provoking a bomb threat that forced her to cancel an appearance at Utah State University. Other women foolish enough to assume they were entitled, in a free society, to work in or comment on the male-dominated world of gaming included developer Zoe Quinn, whose treasonable offence was making a game that got good reviews which some said were the results of her connections, and who following allegations of cheating from her ex was duly punished with years of incessant abuse, including “doxxing” – printing her personal details online – and a constant drip-feed of death threats.

She too was forced to briefly move out of her house for fear of getting murdered in it.

Gamergate is now well known in the media, and it’s a useful illustration of the depths to which online crowds can stoop – a hint of the armies of men busy right

now on the internet, tweeting abuse, posting rumour, participating in a coordinated effort to denigrate women. It would be a mistake to think this sort of thing was confined to the geeky worlds of gaming; Caroline Criado-Perez, a young woman who led the campaign to get Jane Austen's face on an English banknote, for example, found herself receiving about 50 violent threats per hour. It all amounts to what *New Statesman* deputy editor Helen Lewis calls "acts designed to create a spectacle and to instil fear in a target population" – in other words, nothing less than terrorism, although there will be few passports revoked or control orders imposed for the perpetrators.

So as Anita Sarkeesian picked up the tweet that promised to rape her death, as well as the others that promised to hack, cut and dismember her still twitching body, and wearily started throwing things in a bag to go and stay with friends, one might wonder how far she appreciated all the freedom of speech the internet had graciously bestowed on us all.

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Back on the Racistsgettingfired thread, commenters were getting closer to doxxing the girl who'd torn the sign up.

"Shelby Mueller (racist that tore down that protester Jovani Rubio's sign about Trump's vitriolic racism) goes to Mercy College of Health Sciences in Des Moines, IA," the moderators at Racistsgettingfired added to the thread. "She is 20 years old."

Normally in incidents like this the victim's Facebook, Twitter, Instagram pages and cellphone numbers are the key channels of attack – inviting storms of abuse, threats, violence. In this case they weren't available, so the moderators had to settle for reprinting the details for the institution, including a contact form and links to their Facebook and Twitter pages. "No info yet on where she works," someone added.

One can only hope that it actually *was* Shelby Mueller who ripped the flag up.

Racistsgettingfired is just one among many "watchdog" blogs and forums. There are sites springing up from all sides of the cultural and political divide to catch out, publish and punish those who fall foul of accepted norms; not just those from the liberal end of the spectrum but those aimed at shaming black people, poor people, fat people. In an age where any of us can say more or less anything, others can say anything about us. It's not all bad, of course; calling people out on their prejudice may well help to foster a more understanding society. The

problem with these kinds of sites is that they use a sledgehammer to squash a fly – they may aim to attack bigotry, but what they’re really attacking is people’s stupidity to air their bigotry in public. As Jon Ronson said of Justine Sacco, the woman who famously posted the tweet about catching AIDS in Africa and had her career destroyed as a result of it, what Twitter really seemed to be upset about was not the racism itself (which was painfully ironic) but rather poor phraseology in a tweet.

The arch-mysogynists of the “manosphere”, the organized racists who assemble themselves into far-right parties, they’re clever enough to keep what they really think hidden from prying eyes. True intolerance remains largely hidden while the innocuous slips of ordinary people can lead to a career-destroying shaming. A lifetime of tweeting inoffensive material can be wiped out by one stupid moment – like Sacco, who made an unwise joke about going to Africa and ended up a shell-shocked victim with no job and death and rape threats from thousands of people she’d never met. Shelby Mueller couldn’t have been the only white person in America to have made a racist gesture that day; one can’t help wondering if the reason hers in particular has to be captured and publicized has anything to do with the fact that she’s young, blond, attractive and female. But isn’t that the kind of prejudice that such citizen justice sites are aiming to fight? Could it be that the desire to unmask one kind of bias was simply a smokescreen for a set of others?

The echo chamber and the “stream of carelessness”

We forget that words typed and shared are not only on public exhibition but also permanent, a record that may come back to bite us no matter how drunk or distracted we were at the moment we pressed Send. How many of us would withstand the scrutiny if a permanent record of things we’d once said were to be exhumed and used in evidence against us? When the mixed race South African comedian Trevor Noah was announced as a replacement to Jon Stewart as host of Comedy Central’s highly-rated U.S. program *The Daily Show*, audiences eagerly began to rifle through his social media history to dig up anything unacceptable. Noah had been tweeting his thoughts online since at least 2009, when he was a “normal” person with little public presence, and – surprise! – his Twitter stream, like that of many human beings, reflected a complex set of contradictions rather than an unblemished record of adherence to politically appropriate norms. Twitter users duly zeroed-in on a few tweets that played on stereotypes about Jews and money, fat people and a negative comment or two about Israel (nothing to be proud of, but no worse than the average set by fellow comedian Sarah Silverman) and called for his blood. Noah just about survived. Who knows if his successors will.

So keen are some to live in glass cages, it seems, that they're even willing to industrialise this peer-to-peer surveillance. The student government at Ithaca College, New York, recently proposed an anonymous microaggression-reporting system, which would automatically mete out disciplinary action against "oppressors" found guilty (or thought to be guilty) of belittling speech. While "not ... every instance will require trial or some kind of harsh punishment," one of the sponsors of the program said, magnanimously, she wanted the program to be "record-keeping but with impact." Until 2015 Twitter allowed a dependent service called Politwoops, a website that used the Twitter feeds of known public figures to track them. But rather than simply displaying and analyzing the tweets they'd sent, it posted their *deleted* tweets; Politwoops, in other words, was a powerful, 24/7 gaffe-tracker.

Most of us would agree that there's no danger in holding the people who run our country to higher standards than the average person. But could there be a danger to this kind of automatic overexposure? What do we really learn from a deleted tweet when it's obvious that a politician has simply allowed a toddler to get hold of their iPad? Politwoops's scoops were mostly white noise, of course, but the project also took scalps – people who changed their minds, posted something they shouldn't and hastily tried to delete it before being caught out.

At first glance this might seem to be a justification of this kind of tracking, but it's actually a rather insular and autistic approach to political transparency – not attacking the root causes, not even really attacking the worst of the symptoms, but rather catching a few victims unaware, fostering a tabloidy culture of curtain-twitching that simply leads to more apolitical cynicism in the electorate. Might such platforms actually do more harm for democratic transparency than good, doing everything to demean the business of politics without actually exposing anything important? Might they end up making politics *more* clandestine, with PR-cushioned politicians ever more careful in their public appearances while they conduct more and more of their real work behind closed curtains?

The real danger of something like Politwoops however is not that it catches politicians out, but that it can become a weapon to be reversed, and then re-deployed by the very people it was supposed to keep in check. The day after Politwoops launched, savvy Republicans were launching a clever strategy they knew would get their words attention: *intentionally* deleting their tweets. "Where else can you get a message out by erasing it? How cool is that?" observed Montana Republican Denny Rehberg to the *Daily Beast*. "Now, thanks to #politwoops, Twitter mistakes—like government mistakes—are around for good. Best to get both right the first time," he duly tweeted, making sure it was deleted in good time to be picked up by Politwoops. "You know what else has

been deleted? Jobs in the Obama economy,” quipped Speaker of the House John Boehner.

What a platform: not only do you get your normal Twitter audience, but an automatic retweet that will be broadcast to all those following Politwoops, mentioned again by the media covering the story (and mentioned again in books like this). The same people that were supposed to be quivering beneath the gaze of transparency were scrambling for their megaphone.

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A world where we may be defamed in forums, one-starred on apps, bitched about, gossiped about, slandered, and have our personalities reduced to a number isn't a world many of us desire to inhabit. The shibboleth of “free speech” raises complex and important questions in the age of online sharing. If it's not appropriate for adult (males) to go combing the school Yearbooks of teenage girls and cutting bits out to pin up later, why do many of us shrug our shoulders or even join in the sniggering when the same thing happens online? The writer Paul Ohm calls our digital tracks an emerging “database of ruin” – a gigantic dossier on all citizens constructed piecemeal by the crowd and impossible to erase. As the technologies for tracking and preserving grow, there's a danger we forget to speak for fear of the echo.

But there's another danger too – that by concentrating on examples like revenge porn and nasty Reddit forums that we forget our own complicity in all this. Few of us would admire someone like Matt Forney for his program of reputational destruction, but why do millions of us then think it's okay to end someone's career because of one stupid ironic racism joke they made in a tweet? During a recent Californian drought people took to their cameraphones to “drought-shame” rich residents who disobeyed sprinkler bans to water their all-important lawns. Now, wasting vital resources with the impunity of the wealthy seems an ideal target for a shaming when the police seem too busy intervene. But the same shaming instinct aimed at outing Californian “grassholes” also fuels Tumblr forums like “women who eat on the tube”, which aims to perform the same humiliation and exhibition of female strangers for the crime of being hungry on London transport. Creepy and misogynistic to be sure – but if we're going to disallow that, then surely we should also disallow the forum for “men taking up too much space on the train”?

As in comedy, the general rule seems to be okay to use shaming techniques as long as you're “punching up” – afflicting the comfortable and comforting the

afflicted, to use the idealistic axiom of journalists. But who decides which people hold the power in the equation? Me? You? The crowds of Reddit? However strongly we may feel about bigotry, did the people exposed by EightMaps really deserve to lose jobs, livelihoods, reputations simply because someone with a bit of coding expertise didn't like their political views? Who granted them an essentially political right to control the views of others?

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So far I've concentrated on the users of these social platforms rather than the platforms themselves, but of course none of this exists within an economic vacuum. Much as Silicon Valley would like to pass itself off as disinterested enabler of global discourse, the companies that actually control many of the blogs, forums, networks and wikis have a vested commercial interest in getting us to speak as much as possible. More talk means more growth means more money, in what has been called "Zuckerberg's Law"; a cult of connection driving more and more of us onto social platforms (a sixth of the planet now uses Facebook). Ironically, the more corporations become more politically significant, laying down the infrastructure for the global conversation, the more they seem to distance themselves from any kind of civic responsibility. It's not their fault if women get death threats or cyberbullying drives a teenager to suicide – they just build the platforms. Nobody can stop "freedom of speech", right? (Except when they risk multi-billion dollar lawsuits from Hollywood and the RIAA over their users circulating pirate content, when mysteriously they seem to snap into action and freedom of speech is suddenly a lot less sacrosanct).

Things may finally be changing. Even the world's biggest tech corporations are now finally beginning to bow to pressure and recognise their own role and responsibility in curbing a little of the internet's animal spirits and moving towards enshrining "freedom from" as well as "freedom to". Twitter finally rolled out a button to enable site users to report abuse in 2013. Reddit's interim CEO Ellen Pao recently stated that Reddit wasn't "a completely free-speech platform," and shut down several subreddits for violating the company's anti-harassment policies. (Though she was ousted from the job soon afterwards). Nobody should deny our right to free expression, but surely "reputational" rights need to be talked about too.

I sometimes wonder what my one-time stepfather, a dissident Soviet poet who spent time in and out of jails and psychiatric wards for expressing his flirtations with homosexuality and western ideas, would have made of our world if he'd lived long enough to witness the rise of things like Reddit. It might have

surprised him to see a society in which the government let you say more or less what you like (bomb threats notwithstanding) but where all sorts of new policing was in operation: one in which women are afraid to offer an opinion for fear of rape threats, where a grown man has to go into hiding for offending animal rights activists, where a stupid bigoted joke made by a teenager would come to haunt their career at the age of 30. In the echo chamber reputations are more fragile than ever; words are more ubiquitous than ever but carry a higher price than ever before for misusing them. A goofy post or video you once made can rebound on you in ways past societies – including Soviet ones – never imagined possible. At the time of writing a gaming convention in the South by Southwest festival where several women in the gaming industry, people like Anita Sarkaasian, have been invited to speak has just been cancelled. The reason given was bomb threats. Words have always ricocheted in one way or another, but now they might rebound hard enough to kill.

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The darkest mirror

Isis and the triumph of "Open Source Jihad"

"I talked to them so much online I just felt they were strong brothers and they were very religious. I felt love for them. I loved my brothers so much, when they told me something I would listen to them no matter what."

- Colleen LaRose, known as "Jihad Jane"

Pack light. Most clothes can be found here, bring a spare charger with your phone, and to be honest there's nothing that important you need to bring except good trainers.

- Social media feed of 19-year-old Mahdi Hassan, Islamic State fighter, Syria
2014

On January 3rd, 2016, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant released a new video. All the staple elements were there: a nameless desert scrubland; captured hostages in jumpsuits; flashy but somehow cheaply tacky graphics, aesthetics that felt more like a video game or an action movie, *Grand Theft Auto* style slow-mo with portentous wind-blown narration. "Oh British Government. Oh people of Britain. Know that today your citizenship are under our feet, and that the Islamic State, our country, is here to stay," the narration ran. "And we will continue to wage jihad, break borders and one day invade your land where we will rule by the sharia."

Near the end, a young boy with a British accent, dressed in fatigues, points off in the distance. His young face produces words in the sloping speech of a child.

"We will kill kuffar [infidels] over there," he says.

The online news portals weren't running it, but I found it easily on a website called Heavy, just one of a number of free speech platforms that make available stuff that the family-friendly sharing sites of the web refuse to host. On the right hand side of the screen is a sidebar with other links, among them links like "WATCH: Isis Execution Of Russian Intelligence Officer – Video" or "NEW Isis Syria Execution Compilation Video." The sidebar didn't feel like a directory or an index, something used to point the viewer to other useful information; it felt like click-bait, the kind of thing you see lining a million commercial websites these days. It was hard to escape the feeling, watching the video, that what you were viewing was just more internet content, more gory weirdness, more edgy OMG. The executions themselves felt stagey and wooden. In some ways the video felt like a mash-up, a fond homage to previous beheading videos (some said its visual style was a deliberate attempt to revisit the glory of the "Jihadi John" days, the executioner who'd recently been hunted and shot by the Americans – so perhaps the visuals were a two-fingered *riposte* to the infidels). But perhaps the final clue to the idea that this was something more than just propaganda, something more than just a threat to the British establishment for their role in bombing Syria, was the final title: "Video coming soon".

What we were watching might have been temporarily the most high profile snuff video on the planet, but it was also a cliffhanger for more content. It wasn't just a political act in its own right, a provocation. It was a trailer.

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To anyone who had studied the rise of the so-called Islamic State (Isis) from around 2014 onwards, of course, such a hook was nothing surprising. As a revolution in extremist propaganda Isis are truly unprecedented. Their brand ident – a teardrop-shaped logo of Arabic script – is built to vaguely echo that of Al-Jazeera. They have an "Al Hayat Media Center" (perhaps just someone with a laptop) producing content targeted at younger non-Arabic speakers. It makes programs in several European languages with a mixed schedule of multiple formats – from 60 second "Mujatweets" ideal for sharing on phones to an hour-long "documentary" *The Flames Of War*, which was also accompanied by a Hollywood-style trailer. Its film *Eid Greetings from the Land of Khilafah*, filmed in occupied Raqqa, Syria, plays like a jihadi travel show, with Isis fighters from a clutch of European states reporting how happy they are to be there. "I don't think there's anything better than living in the land of khilafah," chirps one British convert amidst scenes of children at a fairground. "We don't need any democracy, we don't need any communism or anything like that, all we need is sharia."

“I wish you were here,” he adds.

Much has been made of Isis’ abilities to “brand” themselves to young men especially with a slew of videos, memes and hashtags modelled on *Loaded*-style vocabulary of contemporary male interests: first-person-shooters, war movies and army recruitment videos. They show graphic combat footage – roadside bomb explosions, gun battles, executions, corpses – alongside clips of images of triumphant soldiers marching, waving AK-47s or Isis flags – and all edited in a style that’s heightened, bloodthirsty and relentlessly overdriven. Analyzing the aesthetic in detail, Steve Rose wrote in the *Guardian*:

Virtually every frame has been treated. The colour is so saturated, the combatants appear to glow with light. Explosions are lingered over in super slow motion. There are effects giving the feel of TV footage or old photographs. Transitions between clips are sheets of flame and blinding flashes. Graphics fly across the screen. Sonorous, auto-tuned chanting and cacophonous gunfire reverberate on the soundtrack.

If there’s an essence to the Isis “brand”, it’s this – a canny mix of modish, edgy fashionability: the masks and combat fatigues speak of anti-capitalist / anarchist protest; a dash of Mad Max post-apocalypticism, guns ‘n’ ammo over a desert backdrop; a pot-pourri of war, video games and make-believe. It’s an aesthetic not a million miles away from the recruitment films of the British Armed Forces, the ones that flashed up in commercial breaks through my youth every time I watched a movie of the Steven Seagal variety. It makes very attractive media material – not only for mainstream news organisations hungry for images of a conflict their own cameras find it difficult to access, but also for hipsterish outlets like *Vice* (who have racked serious page views for their embedded video reporting of the group) or a clutch of similar magazines looking for a bit of post-Cold War cool, for the spiky semiotics of asymmetric ultraviolence. The rapid-fire editing and slo-mo combat make Bin Laden’s fuzzy camcorder sermons of the early 2000s seem like another century. As Rose puts it, “The Isis regime might have outlawed music, singing, smoking and drinking alcohol, but it clearly embraces Final Cut Pro.”

But the most interesting thing about Isis is not style that’s come to be associated with them but rather how that style was assembled – and how it continues to be disseminated. Isis, let’s remember, are a particularly twenty first century version of extremism. Rejecting the centralized propaganda of their predecessors, they instead to choose to parcel the work of propaganda out to their members. They

collect and respond to feedback. They are, in other words, perhaps the closest thing we've even seen to "focus-grouped extremism".

How to crowdsource a terror movement

In early 2014 19-year-old Mahdi Hassan wasn't shy about sharing the details of his day-to-day life. The former public schoolboy missed Coco Pops, Coronation Street, sliced bread and full-fat milk; he made sure to let his social media friends and followers know that during his travels. And it didn't stop there. Hassan was having such a great time abroad that he set up an online advice service to encourage others to join him. "Don't get the USA 2 pin types, they're different," he advises someone from home who's querying plug sockets. When a girl says he looks like Zac Efron he shrugs modestly that "someone said that once but I don't really see the resemblance." Flirting with girls online, foreign plugs, Zach Efron – it's pretty innocuous gap year stuff.

Only Hassan's gap year is rather different to most. It's when you realize exactly *where* he's tweeting from that these kind of trivialities words start to take on a rather different tone. Hassan was in Syria. The people he was staying with were none other than Isis.

"Knives here aren't that great but you can get by or possibly look around in Turkey if you have time," he suggests helpfully, giving details on how much it costs to buy an AK47 assault rifle. Hassan was just one of perhaps 500 young British men who made the journey to the Middle East to fight, finding themselves in the midst of Hellish and dangerous conditions and going online to paint a picture of a "five-star jihad" and Holy War bling where life was good, food plentiful and danger minimal – a kind of guerilla propaganda that represents an eerie collision between the mechanics of savvy relationship marketing and Jihad. Hip hop materialist bling meshes seamlessly with invocations of spiritual purpose. In one shot 24-year-old London rapper, Abdel-Majed Abdel Bary, whose music was once played on BBC Radio 1 and whose family live in a £1 million council flat in Maida Vale, West London, posed in a balaclava with a severed head. The caption: "Chillin' with my other homie, or what's left of him."

Women are of course almost totally absent from these posts, but that's not to say they aren't involved with the recruitment too. At around the same time as Hassan and his friends began posting, a Scottish woman going by the name Umm Layth blogged about her experiences in Syria, with useful tips and practical advice for people interested in going. "The shoes here are bad quality," she wrote. "In addition they only seem to have three sizes here lol so maybe bring trainers with you." She reassures readers that "shampoos, soaps and other female necessities" can be found, "so do not stress if you think you will be

experiencing some cavewoman life here.” There are flashes of Instagram food porn – photos of luxurious meals – designed to big up the comfort factor of life with Isis. You may have to savage the infidel but at least you’ll eat well.

“What they are doing online is incredibly powerful as a recruiting tool,” explained an analyst from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, who had been closely following the jihadists’ online activity. “It creates a narrative in people’s minds that says: “You know that guy is just like me, he just did his A-levels, I just did mine, so if he can make it there, I can make it there.””

True, the seeds of this were to be seen elsewhere. The online English-language magazine for Al Qaeda, *Inspire*, had already advocated a kind of “open source jihad”, aimed at providing information for self-radicalized extremists to help in planning and executing their attacks without having to travel to traditional jihadist training camps. But this felt like something more – a normalization of the very process of jihad, a domestication of extremism that also served as a kind of justification. The sheer anodyne nature of these streams – as pallid as any other social media activity – made the idea of going off to fight normal, acceptable; the domestic meshes with the terrifying, breakfast selfies with rifles, cat posts with images of enemies tortured to death with acid.

“What’s the worst thing about life in Syria?” one follower stuck at home asked of the Instagram heroes. The answer: “No sliced bread and none of that full-fat milk with the blue cover.”

“I have a gym membership,” one question is posed. “Should I wait until it ends before coming out to fight?”

“Cancel it, or give it to your family members.”

As Ali Soufan, the former FBI agent who was a key figure in the arrest of the mastermind behind al-Qaida’s 9/11 attacks, pointed out, it’s the decentralized nature of this group that makes its relationship marketing all the more powerful and believable, one sensitive enough to local conditions to deploy different tools in different markets “using mostly Twitter in the Gulf region, for example, and Facebook in Syria” and trusting its foot-soldiers to do much of the tweeting, posting and blogging. It’s worth noting that many of the people who make up this secondary layer of support have never actually fought; they’re armchair propagandists for a creed of punishing narrowness that simultaneously spans the world in its sense of religious mission, reposting and retweeting the material of people who have gone to fight using networks and messaging services like Kik, Snapchat and the Polish-run justpaste.it. In an interview in *Der Spiegel* Soufan says:

We do know that a whole army of bloggers, writers and people who do nothing else other than to watch social media are working for IS. According to our research, most are based in the Gulf region or North Africa. ... And we know that at one point more than 12,000 Twitter accounts were connected to IS. This is one of the unique tactics used by this group: the decentralization of its propaganda work. The Islamic State has maximized control of its message by giving up control of its delivery. This is new.

Perhaps the strangest thing about the Syrian posts is the obsession with gangsta bling – so jarring because it seems so at odds with the spiritualism of the Jihadi cause. “Are nikes sufficient footwear?” is one of the questions posed; the answer: “I brought one pair of Adidas high tops. You’ll get what you need here.” Images of food, money, plenty abound, perhaps in a kind of denial against the rather harsh conditions that an embattled independent army must have been facing under bombardment from coalition forces. But the brands and bling are more than just a disinterested advertisement for the cause. There’s something salacious, celebratory about them – warfare as a 50 Cent video. As Khan asked in another post, “Anyone want to sponsor my explosive belt? Gucci give me a shout.”

War, violence and relationship marketing

Crowdsourced terror went a step further with Isis’ savvy use of the hashtag. Hashtags – originally spawned as a grassroots way of organizing tweets – have proved a boon to commercial marketers looking to spread their message on all sorts of platforms. (Adding, say, #InternationalWomensDay to your ad copy will get your commercial tweet showing up in people’s feeds when they click on a hashtag). But if the savvy people advertising Oreos can do it, so can the even savvier terrorists; during the 2014 World Cup they deployed so-called “Twitter bombs” by tweeting with the most popular hashtags of the month, like #WorldCup, so that anybody following that hashtag (we’re talking about a lot of people) would receive messages from them. Though impacting only 1 or 2 percent of the people around the world likely to see the message, that’s still 1 or 2 percent of millions of people. Piggybacking popular online conversations in this way still meant galvanising thousands of global supporters into spreading their message. Even the Scottish independence referendum of that year served as a useful vehicle as long as it was trending.

While social media is ideal for the targeting of individuals on fairly narrow and specific lines – what’s been dubbed “narrowcasting”, in contrast to the broadcast techniques of traditional media – it would be dead wrong to assume that that automatically limits their reach to small audiences. Rather it puts them in competition with a million digital branding agencies to “own the conversation”, inserting themselves into the weave of civilian discourse. Only unlike most branding agencies, Isis had armies of supporters worldwide – supporters it drew on to hone its social media strategy. “We need those who can supply us with the most active hashtags in the UK,” a propaganda operative called Abdulrahman al-Hamid asked his 4,000 followers on Twitter. “And also the accounts of the most famous celebrities. I believe that the hashtag of Scotland’s separation from Britain should be the first.”

Suggestions from followers advised using #andymurray, #scotland, #scotlandindependence, #VoteNo and #VoteYes and linking to David Cameron’s twitter handle, as the *Guardian* reported. Hamid urged his supporters to “Please work hard to publish all the links” while an account called @With_baghdadi instructed their supporters to “invade” the #voteno hashtags “with the video of the british prisoner”.

Much like a modern viral marketing campaign to choose the next line of Pepsi, Isis’ marketing team even pretended to involve their “customers” in the name and identity of the group itself. In 2014 the group hinted that it was toying with the idea of changing the name of its organization. Activists then carefully cultivated a hashtag designed to resemble a grassroots initiative, demanding that Isis leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declare not just an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq – from whence the group derives its name – but nothing less than the rebirth of an Islamic caliphate. Within jihadi circles the question of declaring a new caliphate is highly controversial, something very few would assume the right to embark on. Inevitably, then, the hashtag resulted in a great deal of angry discussion, which – as social media expert J.M. Berger noted in the *Atlantic* – Isis very likely tracked and measured, using the information to get a better grip on its customer base. It never announced a name change.

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It seems counter-intuitive perhaps that the world’s most feared terror group, the grotesque step-child of Al-Qaeda formed among the more radical elements of the Syrian opposition after 200,000 of their people were murdered, a group that aims to install a version of caliphate modeled on pre-modern society, should be so savvy in its use of social media. But then this is a group formed during the

internet age; many of its foot soldiers are young people for whom smartphones and social media are not a strategy – they're a way of life.

No wonder that Isis were savvy enough to release their own app.

On downloading the Arabic-language, “official ISIS product” – advertised in 2014 as a way to keep up on the latest updates about the terrorist group – the *Dawn of Glad Tidings* (initially available through the Google store) would post tweets written by ISIS’s social-media division and time them to coincide into a Twitter blitzkrieg – such as thousands of tweets featuring an image of an armed jihadist gazing at the ISIS flag with the slogan *We are coming, Baghdad* as they marched upon the city. The result was that any Twitter search for “Baghdad” on Twitter would have produced that image among its first results. As one journalist put it in the *Atlantic*, “The advance of an army used to be marked by war drums. Now it’s marked by volleys of tweets.”

Gaming search results, trends and algorithms is part of a new kind of information war – the equivalent perhaps of what a leaflet drop might once have achieved, an attempt to control debate and discourse, to give the appearance of power and public support. And it worked. Data from a period in 2014 shows the Isis hashtag consistently outperforming other groups, though they had a similar number of supporters; Isis had created the *impression*, if not the reality, of wide grassroots support. In the smoke-and-mirrors world of asymmetric warfare this was a coup. Today there are nearly 50,000 Twitter hashtags supporting Isis, with an average of some 1,000 followers each. They provide an opportunity for personal engagement – a community for a wide franchise of people to share and discuss grievances, hopes and dreams.

And with such a fanbase, it’s not surprising that Isis stepped up a gear in an area that Al-Qaeda had never really got the hang of: viral marketing.

From 2014 onwards, the Isis beheading video became a staple of news and conversation for people all over the world. Not everybody saw them, but we were all aware of them. Barely a screen was unsplashed with Isis-themed horror at some point or other. Here came their beheadings of Syrian soldiers. Here was Lebanese Army Sergeant Ali al-Sayyed, or British aid worker David Haines. Here was Steven Sotloff, an Israeli-American journalist for *Time* magazine and *The Jerusalem Post*. Former Australian citizen Khaled Sharrouf even posted a photo of his 7-year-old son holding the decapitated head of a Syrian soldier. Their actions went so far beyond the pale of normal morality that they’d actually been kicked out of Al Qaeda's global network. Evil, it seemed, knew no bounds.

But there was a difference between the cave videos that Bin Laden couriered to the doorstep of *Al-Jazeera* for global dissemination during the last decade. Those videos were made before social sharing had become a way of life. Most featured

only words rather than executions. The Isis videos were horrific, brutal, snuff videos – acts of terrorism in themselves, not just discussions of it. And Isis didn't bother to make them palatable enough for national broadcast. They didn't need to.

The viral spiral

"You know what I think?" posted a blogger known as LibyaLiberty on Twitter. "And I know how crazy this sounds, but we need an #IsisMediaBlackout."

It was the summer of 2014, and a video was spreading over the internet.

We all know that video. If we never saw it ourselves – and I advise you not to if you have the choice – we certainly heard about it. A figure in an orange T-shirt kneeling in the hot sun beside another man, tall, cloaked in dark. The man's expressionless face as he recites words learned by heart: "I call on my friends, family, and loved to rise up against my real killers, the U.S. government..."

Something about his look suggests the work of torture, threats of violence – perhaps to him, perhaps to his family. He bears the weariness of the war hostage. "I call on you, John," he continues (his brother John is a member of the U.S. Air Force.) "... think about who made the decision to bomb Iraq recently and kill those people, whoever they may have been." Still the cold eyes, staring straight ahead.

And then: "When your colleagues dropped that bomb on those people they signed my death certificate."

What happens next is unwatchable. It effectively renders this short video clip – difficult to find, scrubbed from the web, but still there on a few free speech and conspiracy sites if you dig around – perhaps the most widely watched snuff video in history.

The online execution of American journalist James Foley didn't just mark a new low in the development of Isis. It also reflected a new fact about the modern world, and about how our tools of connectivity – for so long trumped as bringing about a new and better kind of society – might also do the opposite. Terrorism has always thrived with the oxygen of publicity, but now that the tools for disseminating were in our hands as well as newspaper editors the public was newly empowered with an awful responsibility. Repost or ignore? Should we draw attention to the video, even comment on it, when that was simply playing into Isis' hands?

“From here on out, I won't share any photo or video of violence intentionally recorded & released by Isis for propaganda,” posted LibyaLiberty. “Amputate their reach. Pour water on their flame.”

And hence was born #IsisMediaBlackout.

What else can we do, after all, in the age of the viral, but to starve the offender of the oxygen of publicity? This, after all, is the age of online call-and-response, when every hashtag has an opposite and equal hashtag. Surely the answer to Isis's powerful online campaign was simply to create another, even more powerful online campaign?

#IsisMediaBlackout quickly caught on. “Don't share Isis's beheading video of journalist #jamesfoley. That's what they want - don't give them the satisfaction,” tweeted Wajahat Ali (@WajahatAli), as users began to assemble around the hashtag. “No retweets for terrorists. RIP James Foley,” added Tobias Bunde (@TobiasBunde). The hashtag spawned more similar hashtags. Pro-Iraq social media accounts created one of their own, #No2Isis, which surged on Instagram; anti-Isis protesters in London began using it on posters, while the Iraqi ambassador to the U.S. appeared in photos holding placards displaying the hashtag. As Thomas Gibbons-Neff puts it in the *Washington Post*, “For many Iraqis, the quickest way to counter the Isis propaganda machine is to make one themselves.”

And what was the result? Did it result in the squashing of Isis? Did it quell the spread of their videos and propaganda?

Or was this perhaps exactly the kind of echo what Isis had anticipated and hoped for all along?

Those who live in glass houses should be careful when they throw stones – and as Internet critic Andrew Keen would have it, the world is now one big glass house, and we the “crystal people”, both vectors and victims of rumour and hearsay. Like it or not, the disturbing truth is that hashtags like #IsisMediaBlackout and the like not only failed to prevent the spread of dark propaganda, but may even have contributed to strengthening it. In the hyper-tracked and aggregated world of online life, every tweet, share and mention of the group only serves to boost them in the page rankings, to bolster the impression of their size and strength. Algorithms are bad at determining the nuances of the way the word “Isis” is used in #IsisMediaBlackout; in numerical terms, everything is a mention, and a campaign to stop talking about something may well end up getting more people talking about it. In effect, all our horrified discussion of Isis' beheading videos served as one elaborate work of search engine optimization. After the release of the Foley video one news source

tracked 3,800 tweets in less than two hours mentioning the word Isis in a hashtag. That's the kind of response that social media marketers dream about.

Fighting terror via sarcastic tweeting

But if silence doesn't work on the social web, might something more aggressive – an offensive campaign to re-take the territory within public discourse? After all, if terrorists can spread their propaganda, can't we do the same?

From the office where George Marshall conceived the plan for Europe's postwar reconstruction, former *Time* editor Rick Stengel oversees a governmental public relations offensive, part of which resides in a Twitter account called Think Again Turn Away. It's an outfit that aims at a counter-propaganda program to negate the lies of the extremists, to provide information in the face of disinformation. It is, in effect, the anti-Isis: instead of international diplomacy, instead of airstrikes or sanctions or aid, the West imply talks to the terrorists on Twitter.

On September 4th, 2014, when the world was still reeling from the unflinching horror of Isis, an Isis-supporting Twitter user going by the name of @de_BlackRose posted a tweet. Over stomach-churning pictures of tortured prisoners from the Abu Ghraib Prison scandal in 2003-2004, their message stood in stark capitals: "REMEMBER HOW YOU AMERICA ARRESTED AND HUMILIATED OUR BROTHERS IN IRAQ AND HUMILIATED THEM IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY!!"

The post attracted a couple more of support – a brief ripple in the cultural wars. It would have been forgotten in the normal scheme of things. But this time, someone replied.

"US troops are punished for misconduct, #Isis fighters are rewarded," ran the counter-tweet. Above it was a photo collage of U.S. soldiers interacting happily with children in the Middle East.

Witness the majesty of the web: politics can climb down from the podium and into the sandpit – ditch the suits and get all informal on social media. But as a million ad campaigns that attempted to "engage" with their customers only to be hijacked by jokey vigilante groups found out, spreading a message isn't quite as easy as it seems when you expose yourself to a global audience already divided along ethnic and religious lines. Instead of providing a peaceful source of information in the face of radical propaganda, Think Again Turn Away quickly descended into petty disputes with fighters and supporters of groups like Isis, al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab. As this book will demonstrate time and time again, our words bring echoes we never anticipated. In other words, these squabbles didn't

just fail to win them over (a pretty unlikely outcome). Effectively they made Twitter a forum for jihadists.

Take the conversations from the period following the Foley video with “Amreeki Witness”, a pro-IS follower of late jihadist Anwar al-Awlaki. Amreeki Witness’s Twitter account profile – since deleted – was an interesting sight in itself, with the Arabic text from the IS banner overlaid inside of the Department of State seal and the IS flag on top of the White House; a telling illustration of the way he and his followers felt about Think Again Turn Away. On August 6 2014 Amreeki Witness posted a tweet stating, “IS has flaws, but the moment you claim they cut off the heads of every non-Muslim they see, the discussion is over.” Hardly an unusual tone of tweet amongst radical groups. But the bait was irresistible. Even though they weren’t actually addressed in this discussion, the State Department, via Think Again Turn Away, replied: “#Isis tortures, crucifies & shoots some- Isis also gives ultimatums to Christians: convert, pay or die- Some flaws u say?”

A complex bit of cultural diplomacy there. Did it win over the Jihadi elements in the Middle East? Sadly not; in fact Amreeki Witness was apparently thrilled to be not only noticed by the U.S. Government but also given a stage on which to launch his radical views, and responded with a long series of rebuttals. Think Again Turn Away followed suit, responding, “#Isis confiscated food, houses, stole millions from banks & has only brought suffering and death to innocents- Join reality!”

Is an online forum really an appropriate place to discuss the complex and combustible geopolitics of prisoner detainment, war and military casualties? Especially with a bunch of relatively unhinged jihadist supporters? Or is it – as Rita Katz argued in *Time* magazine in her analysis of the discussions – more like a bitchy forum for “arguing over who has killed more people while exchanging sarcastic quips”? Perhaps this form of Twitter statesmanship was just another echo chamber. The U.S. State Department might like to think it was talking to America in changing views, but America’s not all that interested in listening (to date Think Again Turn Away has circa 22,000 followers – less than a successful local rock band). The people who *were* interested in listening to what America thinks of extremists, needless to say, were extremists.

“When State Department makes a series of tweets about the horrors of 9/11 and attacking those that committed it,” as Katz puts it, “it also tweets directly to an AQ [Al Qaeda] leader, providing legitimization to the account of the same people who committed the attacks.” Once official channels are dropped, once protocols developed over centuries of diplomacy are relinquished, all sorts of messes and misfires result. What good can it do the anti-Isis cause to have the hate-filled tweets of extremists essentially broadcast to thousands of people by a

government department? What sort of message can it send that the government department is even prepared to talk to them?

In the real world there *are* levers to stem the flow of extremist sentiment – banning notorious mosques or rallies for the far right, even prosecuting those who preach hate. Online attempts to suppress meanwhile often lead to what’s been called the “whackamole” effect – clamp down here, and it all too easily resurfaces elsewhere (a new Twitter account, perhaps, on an unregulated and uncensored network like Diaspora, or even on Dark Net). Following Twitter’s Isis cull of later 2014, when the company closed many accounts that supported the group, there was a surge of users migrating to encrypted networks; the most extreme “leaders” of online propaganda simply blogged from safety, disseminating their ideas to more moderates still allowed on Twitter, who simply passed on their links. People who plan the eventual destruction of western civilization are rarely all that fazed by a password change.

There are other concerns; one security expert raised the point that some of these accounts are under investigation by the state, and simply closing them indiscriminately affects delicate ongoing cases that might prevent future attacks. But what’s perhaps more disquieting still is the idea that even if we can close accounts, this simply makes their speech more powerful. Isis experts like J.M. Berger have observed that while the closing of pro-Isis accounts did actually have an effect, this also has the effect of making the network of Isis supporters more insular, with users following each other more and becoming less and less exposed to outside influences. “While it is harder to enter the network in the first place and to stay there as an active user,” as Berger puts it on *CNN*, “it is possible that this echo-chamber effect might lead new users to radicalize more swiftly and more intensely.”

These are the tricky facts of the modern world: depopulate the group and its ideas might actually become more powerful. Every act has its unintentional echo, every move has its mirror, and whatever you do may just become putty in the hands of an enemy. As Ted Poe pointed out on *CNN*, it’s astonishing to think that those who behead and burn others alive are able to use the companies of the “enemy” – in this case the West – to further their cause. This then is one consequence of the democratizing, universally inclusive power of social media. As he remarks: “American newspapers would have never allowed the Nazis to place an ad for recruitment during World War II.”

The darkest echo of all

The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Zizek once remarked “The true triumph is not victory over the enemy; it occurs when the enemy itself starts to use your

language, so that your ideas form the foundation of an entire field.” Much has been made of the way that Isis have demonstrated a new level of media savvy for a terror group, borrowing and appropriating from the western culture they seek to destroy. But Isis have taken such appropriation to new levels – and turned it into an act of ventriloquism. Isis don’t just seek to ape and mock the West. They seek to make the infidel speak through their own mouthpiece.

It’s worth bearing this in mind when we consider the media output of modern terror. Before Isis existed Al-Qaeda had already set up a glossy English-language magazine – *Inspire*, a bizarre concoction of inspiring jihadist fables, *Forbes* style profiles of wealthy capitalists, assassination field tactics, and high definition photography, which apparently dished out bomb-making recipes for airplanes in their issue on Christmas Eve 2014 – something the tabloidy end of the New York media dutifully leapt all over (thus presumably fulfilling the writers’ intentions). As with the similar glossy magazine that Isis developed, one gets the feeling that this is written less for the jihadists themselves than for a Western readership – a sort of “anti-audience” waiting to be terrified, and a Western media waiting to help them. There’s no pretence about this transaction. In their page “Inspire Reactions: government & media responses” *Inspire* actually prints what’s said about the magazine in the Western press (the online *Telegraph*, for example, is quoted as saying “Slickly produced and chilling in its content, the magazine not only hails the work of the lone wolf, but also provides the recipe for another bomb which, it claims, will be undetectable at many airports.” This is a magazine clearly created in the expectation of the reaction it will provoke.

Isis later produced their own magazine, the *Islamic State News*, which aimed to reveal a gentler side to their brand. “Trade flourishes under the rule of the Islamic State” trumpets a headline above pictures of fresh fruit and busy street market sellers. Elsewhere: “The aid office in Wilayat Halab visits a refugee camp near Jarablus” and “The Islamic State distributes flour, fish and other forms of aid to Ahlus-Sunnah families in Ewwesat.” The caring sharing stuff only goes so far, however. “To repent,” a title announces, beside a shot of a civilian warmly clasping an IS soldier on the shoulder, “or not.” Beneath it is a photo of bloodied corpses being shoveled into a grave. In early 2015 the group released a new video, one which differed from the brutal, clipped executions it had specialized in up to now. The video showed a British newscaster walking around the Isis-captured Iraqi city of Mosul, taking in its street markets, visiting the institutions of daily life – a hospital, a police station. “The media likes to paint a picture of life in the Islamic State as depressed, people walking around as subjugated citizens in chains, beaten down by strict, totalitarian rule,” he tells the camera. “But really, apart from some rather chilly but very sunny December weather, life here in Mosul is business as usual.”

Nothing unusual about that perhaps. Reports from the Middle East by foreign correspondents have been a feature of broadcast news since its inception. But this was no ordinary newscaster. This was in fact a captured hostage, 43-year old John Cantlie, who had been forced to present this broadcast under duress. He is, in effect, speaking with a gun to his head.

And this was no one-off. In fact this was the eighth propaganda video released with Cantlie as “presenter”. The hostage had been held captive for more than two years by the group; previous instalments had seen him deliver his message wearing an orange jumpsuit. In November 2014 Cantlie admitted during the broadcast that he’d accepted his fate was “overwhelmingly likely” to be the same as other captives. Here, in effect, was a “newscaster” giving an appraisal of their own survival odds – odds of the chance they might be picked off by their own TV station.

What does it mean when a “news” broadcast is made using a Western spokesperson as a globe puppet? When the episodes themselves are convincingly laid out and produced, referencing credible sources like the *New York Times*, with phrases like “What is this latest, ill-advised foray really supposed to achieve?” Most of the media attention over Isis focused on the slickness of their media campaign – their game-influenced graphics, action film aesthetics. But that was just the flashy icing on the cake. The *real* masterstroke was this ghastly, elaborate act of ventriloquism – to make your enemy’s mouthpiece your own, climb inside their world, to reflect their symbols from within.

Some commentators have likened Isis campaigns to the U.S. war propaganda of Frank Capra, who was commissioned in 1941 to make a series of propaganda films for the war effort. Instead of trying to argue with Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph Of The Will* – a staggering showcase of film-making craft and Nazi military might – Capra turned the enemies’ weapons against them to make a seven-film documentary series, *Why We Fight*, which gamely repurposed footage from *Triumph Of The Will* and other German propaganda to show American soldiers what they were up against. “Let their own films kill them,” Capra said. “Let the enemy prove to our soldiers the enormity of his cause – and the justness of ours.” Cantlie’s broadcasts end with a news-like sign-off: “Join me for the next program,” while the beheading videos similarly concluded with a sneak preview of the next victim, a cliffhanger technique long perfected by TV and here re-employed for the worst reality show in history. It’s a question that goes beyond simply creating a level of professionalism: we can only conclude that someone is thinking hard about entertainment values. Or ratings. As put Steve Rose put it, if it weren’t for Cantlie’s orange, Guantanamo-style shirt, this could almost be *Newsnight*.

This is perhaps the darkest echo of all – to twist and reflect a culture, to turn the everyday into the chilling, to assimilate the language of contemporary media and spit them back out again. Isis borrow from the symbols of western culture for their propaganda videos; western counter-propaganda videos borrow from the language of Isis. Their executed hostages are garbed in orange jumpsuits to echo Guantanamo; they film camera angles from aerial drones in a pointed reminder of the remote attacks on Middle Eastern soil; they tweet a picture of first lady Michelle Obama holding a sign that initially showed the hashtag #bringbackourgirls altered in Photoshop to say #bringbackourhumvee, a reminder of the American-supplied Humvees captured by Isis. This is a war that's as much about capturing the space of ideas as it is about capturing physical territory.

And the most terrifying thing is that for all their cruelty they seem to be making disquieting headway. Never mind the viral spiral of social media – the traditional media has shown themselves far from immune from their cinematic charms. Wring their hands in horror as they might, there's a salacious hunger to the way the news outlets we read have devoured and relayed the imagery of Islamic State since 2014 even while pretending to abhor it (no doubt to the delight of the people who produced this stuff). Few platforms or publications have shown themselves impervious to the sheer aesthetic thrill of Isis, to their bloody, horrific – but compellingly photogenic – deeds. (An online article in the *Independent* describing the aftermath of the Foley video also came complete with a visually compelling ISIS slideshow). And why would they, when this is an extremist group that comes pre-branded and tightly visually co-ordinated, not simply the object of study for journalists but a package ready to slip inside a broadcast or a cool looking slideshow?

No wonder then that the media that seeks to report Isis is often disturbingly visually indistinguishable from Isis itself. "The official Isis operation released photos of them filming – and it's all on equipment that we use at Vice," admitted *VICE* journalist Aris Roussinos, who reports extensively on both jihadists and their online activity. *VICE News* scored a coup with their *vérité* videos of life on the ground inside an Isis camp – but perhaps equally disquieting is how far *VICE's* edgy aesthetic matches that of the terrorists, who, as As Rafia Zakaria pointed out in *Al Jazeera*, take "visual cues from suavely produced online publications such as *VICE* and *Adbusters*". Isis have gone to lengths to perfect a spiky military aesthetic by means of small high-definition video cameras, like those adorned on soldiers' helmets in Afghanistan – in exactly the same way that modern war movies and video game footage utilizes the same kind of GoPro technology. If they were painting from the same palette, then who was using who? The symbols of khaki, camouflage and jerky combat footage were co-opted long ago by marketers and lifestyle magazines; now they're co-opted again by extremists who are filmed by those same lifestyle magazines. Was the *VICE*

training camp video really a disinterested documentary – or, in its unintentional way, a kind of stealth advertisement?

In the 2014 feeds from the British schoolboys loose in Syria, perhaps the strangest impression of all was the obsession with gangsta bling – so jarring because it seems so at odds with the spiritualism of the Jihadi cause. But perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised. The references Isis draw from are not so very different from those of, say, gangsta rappers; both are in the business of selling a violent message to the young for some kind of gain; both are trying to recruit fans; both peddle the language of ultraviolence via the glamour of money. Culture has a habit of being copied and pasted quicker than we expect. Shop around online and you can already buy “Jihadi Chic” T-shirts.

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Dying to die for a cause

The echoes and the reflections of the social web, of course, aren't just an opportunity for spreading radicalizing propaganda – they're an unparalleled chance to enact that radicalization itself. “Radicalisation becomes possible when people get secluded in small networks of like-minded friends – the average size is eight – that cleave off from mainstream society,” as Jonathan Leader Maynard put it in the *Independent* in 2015. When an individual's social network gets shut off from broader society, it can consequently twist into an extremist echo chamber, “draping an aura of plausibility and common sense over even those ideas that are morally reprehensible and utterly disconnected from reality.” There's a long history of radicals being converted in such tiny micro-communities, from the 9/11 pilots to the 2004 Madrid bombers or earlier violent extremists such as the Weather Underground or the Red Army Faction. The difference that social media makes is that those communities no longer have to be created and contained physically; they can just be shaped on the web. It's so much more efficient that way.

To illustrate the contrast, consider the case of Patty Hearst, the granddaughter of publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst. Patty was a pretty, well-scrubbed teenager living with her fiancé in Berkeley, California studying history of art when she was abducted by a left-wing terrorist group known as the Symbionese Liberation Army, who were fond of violence, kidnapping and bank robberies. After months of brainwashing, imprisonment and alleged rape, Hearst astonished the world not by renouncing her captors but by joining them in their crimes (the effect became known as the Stockholm Syndrome after the Swedish

bank where hostages taken during a robbery ended up defending their captors). Now consider someone like Colleen Rose, the middle-aged white American woman who called herself “Jihad Jane” after she was radicalized by Al-Qaeda in March 2009. A somewhat confused and troubled person, Rose’s indoctrination had begun with a real-life meeting (a one-night-stand with an extremist), but it had continued swiftly and easily online. Converting was easy – she didn’t even have to visit a mosque. All she had to do was recite the Shahada, a pledge to accept Allah as her only God and the Prophet Mohammad as his messenger. In other words, LaRose converted to Islam via instant messenger.

Rose was caught by the F.B.I. before she could complete the mission assigned to her – an assassination – and later sentenced to ten years. But her story is, nonetheless, an object lesson in the ease of this kind of indoctrination: a Patty Hearst from the internet age. It took the Symbionese Liberation army the effort of a kidnapping to convert Patty Hearst, with weeks and months of subsequent brainwashing, threats, abuse and ritualized violence. All it took the Al Qaeda recruits who converted LaRose was a bit of emailing.

“Imagine you’re a Muslim female youth,” writes the former U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities Farah Pandith. “Like any young person, you’re trying to figure out who you are, you’re feeling alienated from your parents, your teachers, and others in your local community, and you’re confused about how to reconcile your religion and modern life in a post-9/11 world. Now imagine you’re confronted with answers to your questions that seem to speak confidently about religious obligation, motherhood and family; that give your life a sense of purpose; and that invite you to contribute to a cause. All of a sudden,” Pandith points out, “the manifesto and the narrative around it don’t seem so bizarre after all.”

The Weather Underground, the Black Panthers, the Red Army Faction – all small, sealed communities that developed during a time when it wasn’t an easy way to make communications “scale”. Back then the only way to reach the hearts and minds of millions of people was mass-media, which no hard-line extremist could get close to. But fast-forward to today, and violent extremist messages suddenly have a whole host of new, private channels to reach their targets. They can be narrowcast rather than broadcast, confined only to the people they’re intended for. User-generated sites like Ask.fm and JustPaste.it – often registered in other countries – make perfect platforms, as do encrypted networks like Diaspora or the self-destructing messages of SnapChat. The social web is tailor-made for optimizing communication; extremists are some of the best optimizers out there.

The terrifying moral of both Hearst’s and Rose’s stories – stories of an otherwise normal citizen finding meaning in violent extremism – is that the extremist may be closer to us than we think. The bearded, backpack toting Muslim cited by the

likes of Donald Trump aren't the only ones getting radicalized; investigations after the Paris attacks revealed that some of the attackers were far from that of the bearded male fanatic but rather came from all walks of life, included women and white people among their company, as well as people rumored to run bars, do drugs and sleep around promiscuously, possibly with the same sex. The anthropologist Scott Atran studied extremists in Barcelona and found that in late 2015, 5 of 11 captured Isis sympathizers who planned to blow up parts of the city were recent atheist or Christian converts. "Young people whose grandparents were Stone Age animists in Sulawesi, far removed from the Arab world, told me they dream of fighting in Iraq or Palestine in defense of Islam," he said. Isis draw support from both Muslims and former atheists; their message of an Islamic Caliphate stirs the passions of scores of immigrants caught between cultures, who feel neither one thing nor another, who dream of the dignity of a homeland of their own. A poll taken around the time of the attacks found that Isis had the approval of a quarter of the youth in France.

This is the dark side of globalization – the need, as one commentator put it, to find a firm identity in a flattened world where vertical lines of communication between the generations are replaced by horizontal peer-to-peer attachments that can span the globe. While the internet may supposedly be a global community, it can reach out to individuals in ways that are worryingly local, pressured and insular. "The internet acts as an 'echo chamber' for extremist beliefs," concluded a study by the RAND corporation which examined 15 case samples, and "may provide a greater opportunity than offline interactions to confirm existing beliefs." This is the echo chamber that, as Jamie Bartlett put it in *The Dark Net*, "allows hundreds of small, often closed communities and individuals to surround themselves with information and people that corroborate their world view" – that allows mass-murderer Anders Breivik to convince himself Norway was on the brink of destruction from waves of advancing Muslims and Communists, or that extremists amongst the membership of the BNP, EDL, UKIP or any other far right party could believe UK whites are now in a minority. And once converted, the opportunities to convert others are greater than ever. Before his death in 2011 Andre Breivik advised others like him to "Create a nice website, a blog and establish a nice looking Facebook page".

For an isolated adolescent or troubled adult the thought that you could overcome all this by some kind of martyrdom, *become* someone – the hero of an international movement – can seem pretty attractive. Were I from a less settled background myself, reaching my late teens just as Isis were working their way social media, would I have been completely impervious myself? I was a lonely and confused teen: might I not at least have thought about it?

Video coming soon

I began this chapter by recounting that cliffhanger message, the “hook” that occurs on the end of many of Isis’ execution videos, a message to look out for more. There’s no telling when the next video or the next attack might come – whether hostages are already being groomed to star in it, guns to their heads, rote-learning groveling messages of hate to western leaders; or a kid in a bedroom somewhere is scrolling through their phone or tablet, filled with appealing images of guns and bling and slurs on the *kuffar*; or a passenger getting on a plane at this moment headed to another major city with plans of devastation in mind, having converted to the cause via an email account. At the time of writing the world is still disseminating the latest Isis execution – the one with the child, the one where they murder five people in cold blood. Security services around the world have done their job tracing the executioner, the new Jihadi John, the gravel-voiced face of evil haunting the western world. According to the latest information he’s thought to be an east-Londoner whose main income outside of Jihad was selling bouncy castles. It’s frightening just how mundane terror looks to us these days. Stay tuned for the next episode.

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Click here for world peace

How kitten pictures can lead to missile strikes

It was a child. Face down, washed up on the beach, shoes cutely pressed into the sand. Just one of many refugees who had fled from Syria – the waves of migrants squeezed into boats, pressed onto land. He died just as others had died – continue to die, in fact, every day, in their flight from wartorn places like Iraq or Fallujah, from poverty deserts like those of sub-Saharan Africa, from authoritarian regimes like those that crumbled or flourished in the wake of the Arab Spring. There was sadly little that was exceptional about the death of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, who didn't stand a chance when the boat he was being taken on overturned in the dead of night, half an hour after it set off from the holiday resort of Bodrum in Turkey. The young boy was just one of almost 3,000 migrants who have already died this year in the Mediterranean.

There was sadly little that was exceptional about the death of this child, but the photo of his washed-up corpse definitely was. There was no doubting its cuddly appeal. There was something about the way that Turkish policeman – a giant, comparatively – cradled the little boy in his arms. A picture of pointless loss. A world gone wrong. Aylan Kurdi's photo quickly began to go viral. The picture began to appear beneath the hashtag #kiyiyavuraninsanlik ("Humanity washed up ashore"). Within 24 hours it had been mentioned 200,000 times. "Just pause 4 a moment and imagine this was your child, drowned trying to flee Syria war for safety of EU," tweeted Peter Bouckaert, Emergency Director at Human Rights Watch as he shared the image of the boy.

Mainstream outlets began to print the photo of Aylan. Others refused to reprint the photo and instead laid into the others for sharing it. The discussion as to whether news outlets should print the photo led to more articles in the mainstream media, and more discussion on Twitter and elsewhere. The discussion as to whether news outlets should print the photo led more people to look at the photo. "genuinely devastated and heartbroken looking at those

pictures,” user Andrew Meehan tweeted. “Have we really lost our way as society that much?”

“Without words”, lamented one commenter; “Heartbroken ❤️”, cried another. Hundreds Of Brits pledged To Offer Their Homes To Syrians. Someone else uploaded a YouTube link to the theme song from *Donny Darko*.

This is a story we’re so familiar with by now that it’s become stitched into the fabric of early twenty first century life: an image of suffering / war / devastation / poverty / animal rights abuse is shared and tweeted to the point where it’s propelled to the pages of national media, whereupon it’s retweeted and reshared even more by readers, while pundits and politicians seize their chance to fill the column inches and airwaves commenting on the said image. What happened next, however, was more unusual. Pictures began to appear. They were hand drawn and whimsical. They were cartoons and fuzzy sketches. A child lying face down but transported magically to a safe cot. A sketchy cartoon infant with angel wings. A series of sleeping children tucked into the surf on the beach, folding the waves over themselves like a blanket...

The drowned child Aylan Kurdi, in other words, had become a meme.

Web-combing aggregator sites like BuzzFeed and Bored Panda leapt all over them, hoovering them up and reprinting them for the entertainment of the smartphone wielding masses. “17 Heartbreaking Cartoons From Artists All Over The World Mourning The Drowned Syrian Boy,” ran the headline for a BuzzFeed post. Bored Panda ran a collection of cartoons that attracted 220k views. “:(so sad!!!” commented user Susy Ortiz on the comments thread. “This photo has been haunting me ever since it first went online,” said someone called Maiki. “Try as much as I can, I can't get it out of my head. I have a photo of my 1 and a half year old daughter lying in bed in the exact position as this poor boy.”

Angel, sandcastle, sleeping beauty – there was certainly no lack of creativity in the representations of this unfortunate boy. Here was little Aylan as a water spirit, reaching up to push a paper boat along the waves (presumably a representation of the one that killed his family). Here he was, laid in the lap of a guardian angel, there placed magically in the centre of the United Nations debating chamber before the eyes of a roomful of indifferent politicians. Here was the drowned boy on a beach with sea monsters watching from the ocean. Tears ran down the cute sea monsters’ eyes.

What are the ethics of a set of cartoons which seek to use the death of a real child – one with living relatives in Canada – as a manifesto? Is it in poor taste to be “Recycled in Peace” in this fashion? Is there really nothing exploitative about an image of Aylan rising into heaven along with the caption: “I hope humanity finds a cure for visas”? Let’s just shut off the sluice-gate of sentimentalism for a second

and remind ourselves what happened: due to an appalling set of geopolitical circumstances, involving dictatorship, terrorism and civil war, a child dies fleeing to another country. Not only is their image grabbed and kicked around as a football for political motivations of all stripes but this dead child of political refugees becomes the plaything for digitally enfranchised middle classes, for the wannabe graphic designers and artists and cartoonists of the web.

Perhaps these tributes were a way of coming to terms with the grief. Certainly there was more than a whiff of wish-fulfillment in them – cute sleeping children, the angelic Aylan transported to a bed, restored to his proper status as a child. To an extent the cartoons were a way of rewriting history, what-ifs that were ways of coming to terms with what really did happen; there's even a strange echo of Victorian fantasia about them, twenty first century reworkings of supernatural child-sprites like the *Water Babies* or *Peter Pan*. Some had an overtly political dimension, laying him directly over a map where barbed wire represented the wall that confronts all economic migrants such as Aylan. One artist even adapted a famous Banksy picture to include Aylan, juxtaposing his life with that of other children. There are worse purposes a photo can be put to than fermenting change in favour of the rights of migrants.

But to see the sharing of this photo as singularly disinterested, a simple act of activist altruism, would be naïve. Mainstream media makes no secret of the fact that it's ultimately driven by page-views – as well as sales, subscriptions and other forms of commercial revenue. They may cry their civic duty from the rooftops, but a photo of a cute looking drowned child makes for very good readership figures. That much is commonly assumed. But what of these artist reworkings, what of the cartoons and the altered versions? Just because these cartoons arose spontaneously on the web outside the purview of mainstream media, does it make their contribution automatically selfless? Perhaps we should be more questioning of the motives behind someone who creates cute visual appropriations of dead children and the sites that reprint them. Consider the Aylan drawings: the cartoonists get thousands and thousands of views. BuzzFeed and Bored Panda thousands and thousands of views. There's ad revenue there.

Scour the BuzzFeed listicle and you'll see something cropping up around the pictures, something that's become familiar in the sidelines of almost any digital image: hashtags. Originally a grassroots trick for organizing thought and debate within the Twitter communities, hashtags, as the commercial world discovered long ago, are perhaps the key to social media marketing – the fulcrum of self-promotion in a world that hinges around searchability and shareability. Is it too much to suggest that there might have been two genuine opposing – but related – motives for these artists? That the image of a drowned child might serve *partly* as a therapeutic valve and spur for action, but might also serve as a means for web-artists and digital cartoonists to promote themselves? As a kind of showreel,

an artistic C.V.? Take the one with a life-ring in the shape of a heart and the message “Don’t let compassion drown”. It may have attracted a lot of page views. It may have got a lot of comments and nods of support. But it was also accompanied by #Syria #refugee #KiyiyaVuranInsanlik #instapoem #instapoetry #igpoetry #igpoem #shortpoem #poetry #poem #poet #doodle #drawing #illustration #illustrator #instaart #sketchbook #copic #ink #penandink #poetryisnotdead #sketch #wordporn #poetrycommunity #comics #poetsofinstagram #moleskine #writersofinstagram #vsco #sketch #poetryisnotdead #igpoetry #instapoetry #ink #poem #kiyiyavuraninsanlik #doodle #poetry #poetrycommunity #instaart #writersofinstagram #poet #poetsofinstagram #moleskine #sketchbook #copic #illustration #syria #vsco #instapoem #illustrator #comics #refugee #wordporn #igpoem #penandink #drawing #shortpoem...

Dead children and career promotion

In his 2009 book *Free: the Future of a Radical Price*, the techno-pundit Chris Anderson lays out the blueprint for the economy emerging as the social web matured: a grand project of altruism where artists, musicians and photographers happily uploaded their work for free, to be enthusiastically shared and enjoyed, chopped and 'shopped, remixed and respliced. The sharing tools of social media would create a new kind of place, one that had previously existed in history – one freed from the iron laws of commerce, from the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. On the face of it Anderson’s dream would largely seem to have been realized. A million illegal streaming sites make it possible to watch your favorite TV shows for free wherever you are; music, photos and poems are shared for free everywhere online from Facebook to Flickr. But is there a darker side to this merry altruistic feast? What if, as the writer Astra Taylor suggests, this free-for-all actually did the opposite of all those good intentions – what if by sucking the money out of culture, by knocking down the paywalls that used to fund journalism, photography and film, it actually made us more willing than ever before to market ourselves at any cost?

Social media for the population at large may boil down largely to socializing. But to a generation of artists, promoters, writers and broadcasters, it also means something more – an opportunity to make one’s name, and potentially one’s fortune, in the world. And the drive for self-promotion means that even the most conscientious of us no longer always know if we’re acting in our own interests or those of the greater good. And perhaps it’s actually neither, exactly, but some ill-defined mix of the two? When we tweet about a charity initiative or an online campaign we may be promoting a cause, but we may also gain followers if that charity or campaign retweets it. When an artist does a cartoon based on a dead

boy in the full belief that it will help the cause of refugees, that artist may well do it out of good faith; but she or he also benefits when the cartoon goes viral. Without us necessarily consciously *seeking* self-promotion, the heated attention economy we live in – with its elided barriers between private and public, work and play – makes marketing ourselves a part of everything we do.

Accordingly, few of us who would suspect that any kind of altruistic campaigns is entirely untainted by ego or self-interest – not in a world where people photograph themselves giving to the homeless and post the results on Facebook, or upload Tumblr posts about animals they've fed, or @-mention the Twitter handles of good causes in the hope of a retweet. At the most extreme end, the narcissistic side of viral altruism can feel downright ugly. Take 2015's "#DontJudgeChallenge", a fad amongst teens and early twenties which attracted scores of posts on Twitter and Instagram. To take part users record themselves wearing "uglyface" – in this case a monobrow, some fake spots and messy hair – then, following a hand transition, reveal themselves without said decorations and pout at the camera like a diva. Not ugly! See? Not ugly at *all*.

Many have reason to pout; there were no theoretical barriers to entry for this hashtag, but a good many of the videos were taken by some extremely good looking people (at least once they've swiped the screen) – the kind of people who are rarely, we can assume, judged for their physical attractiveness. Aside from how absurd they look (is anyone seriously fooled that these felt-tipped monobrows or crayoned lips are part of a real face?) this is "ugliness" of the Ugly Betty variety – the kind of play-ugly that people with photogenic looks think it's fun to assume, at least for a few seconds. Instead of emphasizing a message of "don't judge a book by its cover" the challenge actually puts a cruelly singular emphasis on someone's looks, while casting some extremely worrying judgements over what constitutes ugly. What's the message? That anyone who wears glasses or has less than perfect skin or frequently disastrous hair is ugly?

#DontJudgeChallenge is indicative of a whole lot more than just one meme. It's an example of a certain kind of web culture at its worst - a smug, "clicktivist" culture that presumes complex social problems can be smoothed over with a cute selfie, that assumes a mask of social concern while using the opportunity as an exercise in blatant narcissism. Are these beautiful kids really uploading their videos because they care about body prejudice? Viral challenges like this can yield some good opportunities for publicity; it's plausible to imagine some of these kids getting modeling contracts out of this kind of exposure. Where better for scouts to comb than a hashtag thread of confidently good-looking people?

How to take the perfect no makeup selfie

The #DontJudgeChallenge may lie at the extreme end of the spectrum, but the tendency towards narcissism effects even seemingly selfless attempts at improving the world. Look at the “#NoMakeupSelfie” craze of 2014, which raised £8 million for Cancer Research UK. After the 81-year-old actress Kim Novak took the stage at the Oscars bearing the legacy of too much surgery – or “looking like she’d had so much work done that she couldn’t move her face”, as one writer put it –author Laura Lippman tweeted a picture of herself *au naturel* in solidarity with the actress, arguing that if women saw pictures of natural women online they’d feel less pressure to get work done. That sparked a chain of celebrities posting no makeup selfies of themselves (“Full of healing power. #iLoveWater #WorldWaterday”) tweeted Gwyneth Paltrow on March 22 2014.)

For reasons perhaps difficult to understand, that somehow became a campaign to raise awareness for cancer. Women all across the U.K. began taking no makeup selfies in a campaign to raise money for cancer research – nominating one another to post a selfie on Facebook and then text a number to donate \$5 to cancer research. Soon afterwards the trend spread to the U.S., with American donations are going to the American Cancer Society. All of which begs the question: how do selfies without makeup and cancer connect? Such is the mysterious, inscrutable logic of social media altruism. As Eliana Dockterman put it in *Time*, the pairing of selfies with cancer awareness “seems to imply that taking a selfie without makeup compares in bravery in some way to battling cancer.” (“It doesn’t,” she adds). As with many such causes, the original cause was soon lost in the hype. One woman commented on the *Globe and Mail’s* Facebook page that 90 per cent of the No Makeup Selfie posts on her news feed didn’t even mention the word cancer. Worse, thousands of people who participated in the original #NoMakeupSelfie campaign ended up donating to the wrong charity: as the BBC’s technology section reported, many accidentally sent money to Unicef instead of Cancer Research UK by texting “DONATE” rather than “BEAT.” As if that wasn’t enough, some were the victim of further confusion when their phone autocorrected “BEAT” to “BEAR” – which means a number of people accidentally enquired about adopting a polar bear from the World Wildlife Fund.

Mistakes like that are nothing new of course. Nor are they exclusive to social media. What *is* distinctive, however, is the bandwagon effect of the sharing economy – the way that memes can become photo-ops, that reblogging a cancer awareness post can also win you attention if you’re feeling a bit ignored that day. This isn’t to denigrate the intentions behind these campaigns, nor their eventual results. #NoMakeupSelfie did indeed raise £8 million for Cancer Research UK; it likely raised a lot of much-needed awareness of the disease. But like any meme it attracted other intentions as well, ones that were not isolated but rather part and parcel of the dynamics of these kind of movements. On those couple of days in

the spring of 2014, hardly had the craze begun trending than a range of websites appeared advising girls on “how to take the perfect no makeup selfie”.

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Isis is of course an extreme kind of example – perhaps the most extreme of all – but even outside of international terrorism, there are all sorts of undercurrents hiding beneath a well-meaning meme. In 2015 a medical student, Joyce Torre Franca, posted a photo to Facebook of a nine-year-old homeless Filipino orphan doing his homework on an outdoor table. The photo went viral and within a short space of time donations were flowing in to help the boy. All well and good; there’s no denying that this kind of sharing can be very good for Cinderella-tales of lucky individuals. But while our digital tools can help to highlight lone cases of poverty – as long as they’re touching and photogenic enough – what if there’s a side-effect to such photos? There’s only so much goodwill (and money) to go around; if people are donating to Kickstarter projects to crowdfund an orphan’s education – one of the orphans lucky enough to appear in a viral photo that is – then presumably that means there’s a little bit less going on less cute causes, like serious NGO or non-profit charity work.

The juggernaut potential of viral media campaigns like this one can have consequences far beyond what we anticipate. Like many “inspiring” photos and slogans, Facebook fairytales like that of the homeless Filipino orphan make great stories that handily appease our conscience – we lift the one kid out of poverty without worrying too much about the structural factors that put them there in the first place. But we should be aware amidst all our shares and retweets that others are looking to get an angle on all this, that these kind of feelgood stories are very useful to certain people and certain ideologies. These stories tend to offer a Cinderella message of individual redemption against the odds – one where self-reliance, hard work and faith can raise one’s status – which chimes nicely with some uncomfortably neoliberal dogma. If an orphaned kid can do it, why can’t you? No wonder that not long after the Filipino child photo went viral, it appeared on an inspirational postcard with the caption: “If it is important to you, you will find a way. If not, you’ll find an excuse.”

The long arm of Instagram

That messages of hope and salvation might be co-opted by rightist messages of self-reliance will surprise nobody. But what if there were more than just the interests of a few newspapers or religious groups behind all this? What if Cute

was co-opted not just by a few powerful people but by the state security forces themselves?

In the summer of 2015 something unprecedented happened on the streets of Kiev. Ukrainian police – famous for propping up the corrupt president Viktor Yanukovich in violent clashes leaving hundreds of protestors dead – underwent a makeover. Older officers were sacked and scores of young people were enlisted, many of them women. On the face of it, few would argue with clearing up a corrupt institution with a fresh injection of new blood. But these new officers weren't just young. Many of them, to judge by the photos, were also extremely good looking.

Good teeth, handsome frames, photogenic smiles – scan the photos and you might get the impression you were looking at a brochure from a medium-level TV casting agency rather than the armed face of law enforcement. It might seem a rather strange proposition for a police force – after all, a pair of dreamy eyes isn't the most pressing requirement if you're pinioning an axe-murderer to the ground or cuffing a prostitute.

But perhaps the new government knows more than it let on. The good looking cops were a massive hit on the streets. Within days there was a "selfie storm" of civilians posing with officers and posting their photos up on social media, some of which were scooped up by local news sites. The hashtag #KyivPolice saw thousands of uses on Twitter.

"A feast for the eyes. All the traffic was staring at and waving to #kyivpolice, and we almost missed the green lights," gushed local journalist Oksana Denysova; "The new police force has replaced the old one which was based on the Soviet-style police system and was infamous for bribery," enthused *Ukraine Today*.

Needless to say, businesses saw a chance to cash in on the newfound goodwill. A popular coffee shop even offered free hot drinks to police officers via a Facebook post. It was Liked more than 5,000 times. According to the BBC the Ukrainian actor Antin Mukharskiy shared a story about a group of "traditional policemen" who were shouting and cursing outside his window. "A patrol arrived in three minutes and traditional policemen started to disperse like elementary school students," he said. "When my wife thanked (the new officers) from the balcony, they replied: 'From now on, we will always take care of you.'"

Within a few days more than 15,000 people had already signed up to the force's new Instagram account.

It may well be that these young cops are a huge improvement on their forebears, and an influx of women would certainly be a welcome step in countries where grizzled patriarchy has permeated many aspects of the administrative structure.

But it's also worth asking a few questions about the decision to include them. Are these young cops really going to stamp out decades of entrenched corruption and brutality, or are they more of a photo-op, a bit of eye candy to catch the public mood? In the days of "Soviet Realism" paintings and films would depict handsome young men and women bravely paving the way toward a better world; then we called it propaganda, now we might call it public relations, but it's still a form of appeasement – relationship management between rulers and ruled. A country which was still cleaning the blood of protestors from its squares in the 2010s, that underwent all the convulsions of Soviet and post-Soviet rule, might ask itself whether it's *really* that easy for the ruling classes to change their character. Or else, if you will, it might all just be a pretty makeover.

This is not to suggest that there's always a clear link between the interests of the powerful and some facet of Cute that catches the public gaze. Perhaps it's not as simple as that; perhaps these things are all part of a complex mix, sometimes intersecting in ways that prove fortuitous to the status quo. In the Winter of late 2012 a tourist snapped a photo of a New York police officer kneeling down in Times Square to present a homeless man with a gift. The resulting grainy snap depicts the two of them in a Biblical tableau: the cop's head bowed in contemplative sympathy, the rough sleeper penitent, sorrowful. The deserving beggar eyes up his present – a pair of expensive new boots.

The picture went viral. More than 1.6 million views ensued within a matter of days. The policeman, Lawrence Deprimo, was lauded on TV shows for his gesture. What could better capture the public mood as thoughts turned to Christmas, to Christian charity, to homeless food drives and soup kitchens and the New Year, than a small but demonstrative act of kindness? What could be better feelgood material than proof that the city of New York cared so much for the fallen that it would march out and buy a homeless man new shoes?

Stories like this one have become so common that they feel almost daily now. Some inspirational act, some humane gesture, is spread via social media and captures the hearts and minds of a nation. We might call them Facebook fairytales – pleasing moral homilies for the age of the Like or Share button.

But like fairytales, such "news" stories run into problems when they hit the messy fabric of reality. In the case of the homeless New Yorker, the photo's popularity inspired the *New York Times* to track down the man, who turned out to be military veteran Jeffrey Hillman. The boots had disappeared – he was scared he might be killed for them, and they were too valuable to keep on the street. Interviews revealed him to be ambivalent about the photo. "I was put on YouTube, I was put on everything without permission." he told reporters. "What do I get?"

His image had indeed flown around the world, a touching human interest story that might be shared in London or Bangalore – but Jeffrey Hillman was still there on the streets.

Or was he? As more press followed, complications to the original story began to emerge. The *New York Daily News* claimed that he might not actually be homeless. Speakers surfaced who claimed that he'd refused the help of the social services. "The Daily News discovered Hillman had a loving, supportive family in Nazareth, Pa.," it observed disapprovingly, "another sign that there is no easy fix for his predicament."

The fairytale had crashed. Instead of a feelgood push to help the poor, we were getting an undeserving beggar and a tone of media moralizing that verged on victim-blaming. The story bore all the hallmarks of a modern morality tale – sentimental moment, viral video, charity fund set up within days – but with no clear beneficiary of all the attention. Did all the press the picture created really help people to get to grips with the complex issue of homelessness? Did sharing it around the world's social networks actually benefit anyone? Or was it rather an example of something that's become all too common: reduce a serious issue to a cute meme – one that leaves the powers that be looking rather good, incidentally – by sharing it a million times around the planet in lieu of actually doing anything?

Photos that reach their way into the hearts and minds of people are a powerful thing. The story of the Filipino orphan joins others – "a limbless man surfing, a cancer survivor climbing some of the world's highest peaks or a homeless woman making it all the way to Harvard", as the *Guardian* put it. There's nothing new about inspiring, motivating messages, but we should treat them with proper diligence and beware of falling into simplistic assumptions. They're not necessarily "democratic". They're not necessarily apolitical or impartial. They're not, most importantly, necessarily even "true". Take the tale of the cop comforting the homeless person. Is it not a little convenient for this photo to suddenly emerge with its picture-perfect representation of the police after years of negative publicity for the NYPD? Is it normal procedure for a policeman to buy shoes for a beggar – and even if it is, why did he happen to be so perfectly framed for a passersby's camera?

There's no proof that this photo was staged, and there's no reason to pick it out amongst all the others as evidence of anything. But it's a good idea to at least raise doubt on such photos, to treat them with the same scrutiny and skepticism as we would treat the mainstream media rather than blindly assuming that simply because they emerge from "the crowd" they must be genuine. In the depths of Winter it's not hard to see why New Yorkers might want to believe their city has some kind of compassion towards its homeless – but wouldn't it be

easy for some bright spark to exploit that, to create and fuel a social media photo-op, so that in the end the population does its propaganda for it?

It's unfair to restrict such analysis to troubled faraway regimes of course. Police forces everywhere now maintain a social media presence on Twitter, Facebook and sometimes others. An analysis of the Facebook page for my city's force reveals a series of updates and announcements concerning ongoing investigations. It can make for surreal reading ("On arrival, a woman was found deceased in the back garden; 12 people Like this"). Much of this is only acting as a souped-up bulletin board, of course, but the arrival of your local law enforcement division onto networking sites associated with keeping up with your family and friends is nonetheless a strange proposition. What does it mean that the public have "Liked" a particular investigation – they're glad the police are doing it, or they approve of their methods? Presumably someone within the public liaison department of police forces is keeping an eye on these metrics; should the London Met, for example, investigate more burglaries and less sexual assaults because they seem to do better on Facebook?

We can't know the answer to any of these questions, because police forces are by their nature opaque institutions. The "conversation" that social media claims to promote is, when it comes to state agencies, largely one-way – so that our Likes and comments might be tallied by the police or the N.S.A., our names noted down (why not?), while we remain oblivious to what – or who – is behind the status updates.

These are some of the troubling issues that are raised when an (armed) force inserts itself into your timeline alongside friends taking selfies in a bar or Instagramming their breakfast (Perhaps we shouldn't complain about the "Like" button; apparently several alternatives were mooted by the company prior to the button's introduction such as "Cool!" and "Awesome!"; at least people aren't going onto their local police's Facebook page to show how Awesome they think their murder investigations are). Social media is fast breaking down the walls that have traditionally separated work and play, office and home, public and private – but there's no established code of ethics for all this, nothing to stop employers patrolling your private photos or stop the army posting PR-op photos to show how "fun" they are. Already cases are mounting of divorce lawyers combing Facebook for drunken pictures taken at clubs and parties (want custody of your child? That snap of you with a large vodka isn't going to look good for the Jury).

Perhaps we should be aware that Cute is just another tool, an aesthetic that can be manipulated and re-deployed – that the innocent retweeting of a kitten photo may play into the aims of a propaganda campaign, that the cuddly language of social media can be co-opted by everyone from self-reliance ideologists to

terrorist groups. What else does an Isis chef discussing shawarmas on Twitter do but humanize the process of terror, give a cuddly face to jihad? What does Syrian president Bashar Al-Assad's Instagram account do but exploit the language of cute to make despotism seem more humane? As Emily Greenhouse put it in the *New Yorker*, “we follow Taylor Swift even though we wouldn't admit it ... what does it mean to follow a man strongly suggested to be a war criminal, to have a virtual shrine to a dictators' glory that can fit in our pockets?”

This is not, of course, to suggest that much of the groundswells around important causes are seeking to trivialize the issues they seek to publicize. When the Aylan picture appeared activists used it to promote the cause of refugees – tags like “where children die in the world” and “Arab Conscience” began trending reminding the world of its dereliction of duty regarding those forced to migrate. Cute can be a powerful weapon, one that can actually improve lives – like that of the Syrian man who gained five minutes of international charitable fame when an image went viral of him selling pens to try and raise money for his children. Clutching a fan of cheap biros in one outstretched hand and supporting a little girl on his shoulder with the other, single father Abdul Halim Attar was snapped in Beirut and later tracked down when an Indiegogo fundraising campaign raised more than £100,000 for him under the hashtag #BuyPens. “One day I woke up to go to work; suddenly hundreds of people were coming up to me, trying to talk to me, and I didn't understand why,” he told reporters. A salutary example perhaps – though it should perhaps also leave us wondering about the plight of all the other millions of poverty-stricken people who weren't lucky enough to make into Facebook. Should they be ignored because they weren't photogenic enough to go viral? Because nobody took a cute photo of them or their social media marketing didn't cut it? There are hundreds of thousands of people displaced by the conflict in Syria, hundreds of thousands of refugees with no home, no security, little hope. Their stories are broadcast daily even as borders close around them. Does it really require an “awww”-reaction photo to warrant emergency action?

The individual decision to share a jokey Facebook status or Favorite a picture of a dead child may be innocent enough, but it can play into something much more sinister, something beyond our own control. The photo of the dead Syrian boy did indeed lead to calls for political action to petitions to lessen the plight of the migrants. But it led to other forms of political activity too – some that might seem rather at odds with the humane messages of the campaign. Many of us will remember the “bomb for peace” rhetoric of the 2003 Iraq invasion, the way that the language of humanitarian pacifism was reappropriated by the Bush and Blair administrations to lend a humane face to military occupation (an occupation largely fought in the name of imperial expansion and oil security). The same newspapers owned by conglomerates like Rupert Murdoch that so readily took up the Aylan Kurdi story may have had motives of their own. Soon after the photos and cartoons emerged, the *Sun* – one of Newscorp's flagship platforms –

responded with a rather different campaign, one which presumably cut less sway amongst the armies of liberal Facebookers. On the 6th of September, two days after the photo of Aylan went viral, it led with a headline citing the popular support garnered from an “exclusive” poll. “Bomb Syria now,” the headline ran, “for Aylan.” Cute photos can lead to missile strikes.

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Propaganda via YouTube

How to destabilize elected governments on social media

*“Congrats, Egypt! This is the historical moment we have been longing to witness.”
(15,190 Likes)*

- *Facebook feed of Wael Ghonim, 2011*

I am told these protesters are students. They looked well off and far from emaciated and destitute. Not the indignant proletariat ready to cast off their chains.

- *Lee Mackenzie, writer, on the protests in Venezuela, 2014*

In her own words, Ellie Mae O’Hagan had never intended to become an activist. A moment idly scrolling through Twitter alerted her to one of the occupations that were springing up the length of the land through the cold Coalition winter of late 2010. This one was an activist takeover of Vodafone’s flagship store as a protest against the company’s tax avoidance, and it inspired her to move to London to meet with the organizers. What followed was the establishment of the direct action network UK Uncut, which went on to inspire more than 800 protests across the country (and was – she believes – one of the reasons Starbucks felt compelled to pay £20m in tax to the Treasury.) UK Uncut was the reason O’Hagan found herself occupying the department store Fortnum & Mason with 145 other people in early 2011.

“There were people with their kids milling round,” she tells me by phone in her chatty, nonchalant style, making it clear that her activist days are long behind her (she’s a *Guardian* columnist now). “The atmosphere was really relaxed, there were customers still at the checkout buying stuff, oblivious to us. People were reading, knitting. I was learning how to do origami.”

The philosophy of UK Uncut was very much steeped in the traditions of non-violent resistance. Their occupations were careful never to threaten anybody, impede anybody or hurt them. Certainly there was no desire to live down to the stereotype that generally gets attached to protestors of any kind – to be the dirty, uncouth, violent, drunken anarchists that the media are generally keen to portray. Stoop to that, and they lost the moral high ground. Their power, such as it was, lay in good behavior.

So it was with some surprise they learned that that was exactly what was being said on the outside.

“They were talking about us like we were this anarchist mob rioting inside,” she tells me, describing the shock that she and her fellow protestors felt at hearing rumours about the way the protest was being described – even by supposedly objective news institutions like the BBC. One of the differences between a twenty-first century sit-in and a twentieth century one is that your confinement is only physical; news of the outside world still flows fast to your fingertips. Scanning Twitter, watching what they could get of the TV reports, they were seeing themselves reflected back – in uncomfortably feral form.

But what *was* it like on the inside?

She thinks for a moment. “Someone knocked choc bunnies over and the activists tidied it up,” she muses. “People were very considerate.” She remembers talking to a cop about Match of the Day.

To counter the news, O’Hagan began tweeting pictures of the protesters who sat around her – the same protestors who were reading, knitting, chatting to staff. Before long she began to receive messages on her phone. The messages came from people thanking her for providing them with the “real” news. She sat back, satisfied that she’d done a good job. The broadcast media and press in Britain have a lot to gain by presenting protest as riot and anarchy – from the right-wing prerogatives of Sky and the Murdoch papers to the BBC itself, which is, for all its attempts at neutrality, ultimately an organ of the state. What could be a better triumph for citizen democracy than correcting the mainstream media with these grassroots tools? If social media could correct the biases of the traditional media then the future of dissent would look very different indeed.

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Cool kids and bad governments

I'm looking at a photo. It's a shot of a young woman stretched out supine, her hair lolling back, curly flame-coloured hair falling to the ground. She's being carried in the arms of a handsome dark-skinned youth who himself is balancing precariously on the back of a motorbike, speeding away down the street. The girl's eyes gaze up lifelessly. She's dead.

"Opposition supporter Genesis Carmona is evacuated on a motorcycle after being shot in the head during a protest against Nicolas Maduro's government," the text below comments dryly. "She died shortly after."

Scroll down. Another photo, this time a young man, handsome, perhaps twenty or twenty one. He's kneeling down before a line of riot police. They watch him, impassive, barely more than kids themselves in their grey uniforms and helmets. One of them bends over, shouting down at the boy. He shows no animosity back: instead he stretches out his hand to present them with something: a cleft of white flowers.

The BuzzFeed listicle "29 heartbreaking images from the protests in Venezuela" circulated at the time of the 2014 protests in Carracas is full of images like these. Documenting the civil unrest that developed as protestors called for greater security, greater financial stability and finally for "la salida" (exit) of President Maduro, they form a kind of textbook for emotive twenty first century revolution imagery. Here's an agile protestor, clambering up over a phalanx of riot cops whose perspex shields form a ceiling. Here's a bunch of young activists holding up their arms in happy acceptance as police vans subject them to water cannon. Here's a young woman holding up a sign: *More love, less bullets*. This is a language of peaceful civil disobedience that stretches back to Ghandi and beyond. No amount of physical violence can reclaim the moral high ground from that.

29 heartbreaking images was shared by left-leaning progressives worldwide; in total it's been viewed to date over a half a million times. We can only conclude that it informed and confirmed quite a lot of the way people ended up seeing the Venezuelan protests, namely the ones who never got the chance to go there – a kind of unofficial visual guide. It might seem to be relatively zeitgeisty and programmed towards the contemporary button-clicking youth, but its visual language actually harks back to another age entirely. Look at the earnest expressions on the protestors; look at the symbolic flower; look at the signs they're holding up ("peace with justice"; "peace"; "who has the guns"?) This is a visual vocabulary we all know instinctively already: beatniks vs bureaucrats, war vs peace, bombs vs flowers. It's the language of the 1960s.

No wonder that the post was shared with such alacrity. Politics may have changed, but these themes always make a good story and a good photo – or a good SEO-optimized hub of aggregated content, if you prefer. Look at all the buttons it presses, the narratives it taps into. Rebels vs. authority works in any

setting and any era. Brave and photogenic protestors employing all the tools of Ghandi's non-violent-resistance rising up against a repressive regime: that's great, viral stuff. And who knows if it didn't have some kind of effect on the way we saw it back home? Feelgood stuff like this can swing the general mood in powerful ways – not just the bloggers in their bedrooms, but in serious news institutions. When opposition activists posted tweets claiming pro-government gangs were being let loose on protestors, uniting beneath the hashtag #SOSVenezuela, the *Guardian* cited them in its coverage. This is the point of citizen media: to bring about citizen democracy.

It was only as the dust settles that one or two of the people who ended up sharing this material might have asked themselves exactly *what* the students in Venezuela were protesting. We might wonder if some of them let their eyes flicker up from their screens and paused briefly to wonder, who *was* this opposition, exactly...? But such thoughts were probably easy to dismiss. After all, who cares about worrying about all that sort of stuff when the visuals are so good.

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There is a different story to what happened in Venezuela. It's one that's harder to find, particularly in America and in the western media in general. Admittedly it doesn't fit quite as comfortably with the photos and the flowers; it's a lot less feelgood and zeitgeisty. To be quite honest it's a lot less *fun*. Nobody's sharing inspiring photo collages of it – or if they are, they're probably not racking up many hits.

To tell *that* story, we have to rewind all the way back to the early 2000s and the moment the opposition pushed for the removal of Hugo Chávez.

As an oil-rich state with heavy tendencies towards socialism, Venezuela has been a obvious thorn in America's national interests since the election of Chavez in the late '90s. Chávez, perhaps Latin America's most infamous leftist president of modern times, may have been a symbol of militant independence for many, but his defiant tactics failed to please the U.S. government and its allies within the country. The result was a reign marked by turmoil. 2002 saw a failed coup against Chávez, 2003 a widespread private sector lock-out, 2004 a recall referendum arranged against against him organized by the "civil society" organisation, Súmate. To ascertain just how far Súmate reflected the widespread views of Venezuelans, we should remind ourselves that it received funding from

the “National Endowment for Democracy” in Washington; its leader was given personal support by President Bush.

Licking their wounds in the wake of several attempts to oust Chávez, US-based lobbies seeking to stem the advance of Chávez’s socialism decided to ditch the homegrown “civil society” as a vehicle for regime change. As Julia Buxton, a lecturer and expert in Latin American studies, recounts it, Venezuelan students in private sector universities were to become the new vanguard of “democracy promotion”.

Thus in 2008 the neoliberal Cato Institute awarded the \$500,000 Milton Friedman Prize for “Advancing Liberty” to a student leader, Yon Goicoechea, for his role in mobilising protests. Meanwhile a sizeable chunk of the \$45 million the US channels to Venezuelan opposition groups each year was redirected to “youth outreach”. Properly funded, well-heeled and media-savvy, Venezuela’s opposition-aligned *Juventud Activa Venezuela Unida (JAVU)* – “Venezuelan Active Youth United” – became energetic and mobilized. All that remained was to unite the students with some of the more radical elements of the opposition alliance. So while JAVU might have *appeared* to be a kind of grassroots uprising so beloved of those who write about protests, they should be seen as a firmly middle class protest, with many of their members and backers drawn from the country’s elite. This alternative story can be glimpsed in a *Guardian* piece which – perhaps in attrition for so blithely presenting the opposition’s point of view – canvassed the opinions of Venezuelans on the ground who were less easily swayed by all the talk of protest and revolution. “We would like the opposition to accept that Nicolás Maduro won in fair elections in April last year,” one blogger wrote. “We would also like the opposition leaders to call the youth and anyone involved in violent actions to stop.” Others point out that scarcity and security problems are problems endemic to the political system inherited by Maduro – hardly a reason to oust him. “It is the perfect situation for radicals and guns,” another speaker added. “Then protests can take place in any street, blocking them, taking this ‘fight’ next to houses and residential buildings, at day and night, without any permission, burning anything that is available in the streets, sometimes also cars, and they think that have the right to do this, that they have the truth, and that they are the majority.”

Other accounts raise suggestions that a private sector in cahoots with the opposition might be responsible for some of the shortages by illegally stockpiling; another talks of living in a neighbourhood controlled by the opposition which had barricaded itself off from the city and steadfastly refused to let the state Guardia take the rubbish – all tactics designed to foment unrest. “I am told these protesters are students,” a western writer called Lee Mackenzie reported. “They looked well off and far from emaciated and destitute. Not the indignant proletariat ready to cast off their chains.” A letter signed by a selection

of politicians, peace campaigners and activists like John Pilger confirmed the same sentiments. “This is not the first time that the sections of the opposition have sought to oust the elected government by unconstitutional means, having lost at the ballot box.”

It’s true that Maduro’s government was heavy-handed in its treatment of the protests; it’s true that they arrested and fired on protesters or failed to protect them from armed pro-government collectives, a fact that might owe something to the grip the military has over the power structure in that country there (though the West is only too happy to look the other way when it’s a Saudi dictatorship doing precisely the same thing). But the frame is cracking a little; the brave students battling repressive regime are already melting away. What seemed to be so clear cut from the Buzzfeed article – a case of them and us, the forces of democracy pitched against the forces of dictatorship – is starting to look like something rather different. What it *actually* looks like is a cleverly-staged attempt by the United States to destabilize a democratically elected government.

“Despite claims that social media 'democratises' the media, it is clear that in Venezuela it has had the opposite effect,” wrote Julia Buxton in 2014, “exacerbating the trend towards disinformation and misrepresentation, with overseas media groups and bloggers reproducing – without verification – opposition claims and images of student injuries allegedly caused by police brutality and attacks by government supporters.” All opposition activists have to do is tweet about getting beaten up, and mainstream media outlets as august as the *Guardian* reproduce them; no more substantiations seem to be needed. Why bother to substantiate, after all, when’s all so clear cut? These tweets are as close to the action as you could get; they come from the students, the youth, the activists, the protestors. They come from the good guys. They’re from the front line – unmediated snippets of the action, as they watch their friends arrested and gassed and shot and locked up, as someone whips out their phone and takes photos that are instantly uploaded and that may well end up on a post like the *Buzzfeed* one somewhere, pausing only among the smoke and violence to adjust the lens flare.

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“It was only a long time afterwards that I started thinking about it,” O’Hagan tells me, as we get deeper into our phone interview. “Just how easy it had been back there in the department store. I mean, I was telling the truth. We *weren’t* rioting...”

Her voice has that ring of the conscientious activist: always debating, weighing up, assessing her own decisions.

“...But what if we had been? All I had to do was upload a photo that made it look like we weren’t. There could have been fights breaking out right beside me but I’d just snap someone who was sitting down.”

I nod. I’ve read her voice these thoughts before: the *Guardian* article she wrote that led me to her and to Buxton, where she first gave rise to some of these ideas.

I clear my throat. “But there wasn’t?”

“Of course not. There were people *knitting*. But I guess what struck me... If it was that easy – well, then, what’s to stop other people doing precisely that?”

“Using social media to lie? Or at least to misdirect?”

“Everyone believes you when it’s on Twitter or Instagram. It just feels more real.”

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It wasn’t hard to get something like the Venezuelan protests to spread on the web.

All the classic ingredients were there: the photogenic young rebels; the massed and helmeted forces of darkness (like Storm Troopers); the touching moments of détente, the flowers, the deaths, the motorbike chases. We look at photos like these and we *know* who are the good guys. It doesn’t matter about facts, context. Our heads might want to weigh up the background, but our hearts have already picked winners and losers; we already know who we’re rooting for. That’s how a group with right wing backing from a country keen on toppling socialism in Latin America can relax in the knowledge that the images of their protest will travel around the world, disseminated to activists among pro-democracy and Green Movements worldwide, many of whom will cheerfully retweet them while their own press – sensing click-bait in all the popular sentiment – enthusiastically republish their photos and claims.

And it worked. At least for students across the other side of the Gulf of Mexico... “Sending my love all the way from Seattle. Venezuela I support you! I want justice for your country. heart emoticon xoxoxo,” wrote Evalyn Amore, Kentlake High School in the comments thread. “Seems people all over the world are having enough,” wrote Ira Rebel. Sarah McNeely of Ohio commented, “My heart goes out to all the protesters in Venezuela. Know that there are many Americans here in

the USA that are praying for your safety and that you get the peace you are fighting for! heart emoticon.”

I don't mean in any way to blame the people spreading these images. As the team at *Buzzfeed* seem to be aware, these are incredibly powerful archetypes that play on quite deep and unconscious ideas and feelings. Who can look at a picture of brave and embattled youth facing a wall of helmeted and armed police and root for them in some way? Who can look at that scene and not instinctively want to see them as the good guys? The semiology of protest, revolution and non-violent resistance are deeply imprinted on our psyche; since the 1960s they've been absorbed into the marketing mainstream, fed back to us in edgy Nike adverts, guerilla campaigns, T-shirts. And since 2011 when Occupy and Tahrir Square exploded they've been part of our international news reports too. Just a decade ago I would have thrilled at that BuzzFeed article and shared it without a second thought.

Perhaps it's because buzzfeed has a kind of authenticity that mainstream media lack. Some have suggested they have a Baudrillardian, “hyper-real” quality that seems somehow more authentic than reality itself. As O'Hagan wrote in the *Guardian*, “Platforms like BuzzFeed have become modern-day news outlets ... They seem more anti-establishment, more democratic, zeitgeisty and – with their messy, colloquial format – somehow more honest than traditional media.” No wonder politicized groups of all stripes are flocking to use them – and no wonder that people on the ground are so willing to share them. The once vociferous private sector media that could traditionally be relied upon in Venezuela to attract international attention is strangely quiet these days; why bother to maintain the pretence of an “independent” press when the world no longer even cares if you're independent or not? Why even bother with the old forms of paid-for propaganda when free models are available, when just a few tweets will do?

But nothing ever survives a journey through the legacy/social media echo chamber completely intact. A Green Movement activist in Iran circulated images of police beating students to her thousands of followers with the tag line “pray for Venezuela's students”; the images were picked up by democracy movements around the world. Nothing wrong with that, you might say. Well, no – except that the images show Egyptian rather than Venezuelan police beating the demonstrators. (Which becomes even more troubling when we consider how the images were republished by the Spanish newspaper *ABC*.) Other photos and videos of police suppressing demonstrators and carrying out arrests also spread around the world wide web's wires. Sadly for people who care about these things – and is there anybody left who does? – the police weren't Venezuelan. They were actually drawn from as far as Chile, Argentina and Bulgaria. That's a long way for even a regime *that* brutal to travel.

Who were the people helpfully “expanding” the stock of police-brutality imagery? Was it the protestors themselves, the students facing the violence? That’s quite plausible of course. Or it may – perhaps more frighteningly – have actually been people with no malign objectives, no wider understanding of what they were doing, who just stumbled on the photos and thought they’d add some more to the thread (so many of them! So easy to find, so easy to spread! Just type “police brutality” into Google Images and look at all the hits...!) It may have been people, in other words, who thought that by assembling images from elsewhere they were doing the protestors a favour.

This might not sound particularly significant, but it’s a process we should pay more attention to as this way of doing things develops. We all know that the internet is a giant copy machine – that it facilitates linking and downloading at no apparent cost. Even just opening a website is essentially reproducing the information stored elsewhere. It makes the work of reproduction cheaper and faster than ever before. But the result of all this ease is that it’s not just a means of reproduction but something we might call “deproduction” – a kind of information degradation where the technical means for making the copy are perfect, but the ease of doing so, and of passing information down along large numbers of people, mean that things get lost or added to, the context swallowed up, and almost random additions that have nothing to do with the original become part of it. In the case of these photos, it’s a sort of visual equivalent to the way a rumour gets embellished, added to, toned up for dramatic effect. As a decade of sharing sites birthed in the heyday of Web 2.0 attest to, people love creative assemblage; and after all who cares where the images come from if by sharing them you’re essentially doing something good, drawing attention to the plight of an oppressed, brave, (photogenic) people? The images of the cops were almost thoughtlessly circulated as if they were assaults in Venezuela; one widely reproduced image shows Venezuela’s Policia Metropolitana corraling student protestors. The Policia Metropolitana was disbanded in 2011.

Share this and everything crumbles

There’s an odd theme emerging from all this: an idea that political engagement comes mainly from simply sharing something – a meme, a photo, an article – that backs up your point of view. It’s a form of “placard” politics that dates back way before the internet (what *is* protest, after all, if not a symbolic show of some kind?) but there’s a strangely emotive nature to much of this clicking. Take the photos of British parliamentary sessions were shared in order to make a point about MPs’ attendance. One photo showed an empty chamber for bills concerning social welfare and the vulnerable; the other showed it packed to the brim when it was MPs’ own expenses or pay that was being discussed. It was

emotive stuff indeed; few could look at a photo like that and not feel some kind of surge of anger at the indifference of the political classes.

A shame, then, that when a journalist with the *Spectator* got to work studying them, they realized some of them weren't actually from the dates they said they were from. Some of them were a few weeks or months; one was actually from a decade ago. (The House of Commons doesn't change much). That might not sound so important until you remember that different dates mean completely different sessions; the full houses that seemed to have turned out for reasons of self-interest were actually debating completely different things. Politically indifferent Britain's politicians may be, but these photos didn't prove it; they were, however you spin it, a lie. A similar "context collapse" occurred in May 2015, when left-wing social media began circulating a photo of champagne crates delivered to Downing Street, the home of the newly reelected, pro-austerity Conservative government. Popular anger against the Prime Minister was stirred up further. One can only delicately remind the people protesting that the photo was from 2004, and that the champagne was actually for New Labour.

Why are we so ready to believe these photo memes? To believe in them or take interest in them, say, beyond the heed we might pay to, say, statistics? Statisticians the length of the land know the truth distortions possible with careful wielding of the numbers – "there's lies, damned lies, and statistics" as the maxim goes – but at this stage we're less eagle-eyed when it comes to the photos and memes we freely disseminate. Take the image of the backbench debate in which a Labour MP called for a review into the impact of welfare reforms. It is, true to the picture, poorly attended. But it was poorly attended for a reason. At the moment the picture was taken it had been going on for a while; a screen grab taken at the start would have shown a more packed chamber. As Isabel Hardman, the journalist who dug around these photos points out, MPs often pop in and out of debates as they have other business going on at the same time. "They may be in a select committee, meeting constituents, taking part in a Westminster Hall debate, running an all-party parliamentary group meeting, briefing journalists, plotting a rebellion with colleagues or working in their office," she observes. In other words, they might just – amongst other things – be doing their jobs. Would we prefer they put all business aside just so they look good for the photo?

Now that we expect the direct relay tools of television and Twitter to cover everything, one might argue that the result is a kind of over-exposure which sometimes threatens the value of what's being shared. In the UK, where debates are televised (for anybody who can bear to actually sit through them) it's easy to stumble via your remote on BBC Parliament and see a handful of sleepy MPs sitting in the Chamber apparently debating, say, welfare reform for the disabled. As *Spectator* journalist Isabel Hardman pointed out, the immediate impression is

that politicians are indifferent about such a serious subject – but this might be an Opposition Day debate that makes no difference to the way the government runs its affairs or sets policy; the picture alone, shorn of context, tells us nothing. But while they might be valueless as a source of news, such photos can wield a damaging influence in undermining politicians and discrediting politics itself. The result, of course, is that the people most dissatisfied with the world vote less and less, or vote for fringe parties with no real hope of election. All of which makes it easier for the powers to be – the right wing, with their ties to industry and oligarchy – to retain power. What feels like speaking truth to power is more likely to result in preserving that power.

Perhaps there's something about a digital photograph itself – associated faintly with cameraphones, the spontaneous, the casual – that has an innately “truthy” quality to it. The youthful medium challenges and triumphs over dusty, fusty words, just as protestor topples dictator, the internet topples print (in fact, as we all know, it's photos rather than words that told some of the most powerful lies since the invention of modern propaganda.) The twentieth century had to adapt to the touched up photo; we need to get savvier to the “crime of context” – however it might be committed.

None of this is to deride the general population for the very real and justifiable frustration they might feel at a political system which has been shown time and time again to ignore popular sentiment while MPs make sure their own are taken care of. No doubt politicians are in some measure to blame for the fact that these memes are shared so uncritically as they are. But do photos like this really help? Parliament is a complex thing, and understanding the *ways* in which power might be being abused and the needy ignored takes time and effort. So much easier, surely, to just click Like on a meme that finds you through Facebook.

It's ironic that we combat our distrust of slippery politicians by blithely spreading lies – suspecting everything that a politician says while absorbing and retweeting a meme without batting an eyelid. And there's a deeper implication of all this, too. The years leading up to the 2015 UK General Election, when these memes were catching on, were years marked by a strong vein of apolitical sentiment in the young – sentiments stirred up and capitalized on by fashionable anti-establishment figures like Russell Brand, who flagrantly bypassed the “lies” of the media by running his own widely watched show on YouTube where he savaged the newspapers. Following numerous let-downs – Iraq, the expenses scandal, the eagerness to look the other way when it came to tax abusers – it became fashionable to maintain a kind of aggressive skepticism towards the political class. Apoliticism's nothing new, but look how much more fun it is now in the age of smartphones: you could enjoy memes like this, stream Brand's “Trews” on YouTube, retweet to your heart's content and all the time be satisfied you weren't falling for “their” lies. Apoliticism can be a fun party as long as it

lasts. In this case it lasted until May 2015, when after all the partying the Conservatives swept back to power eagerly promising the most brutal austerity program in living memory.

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Buzzfeed, Twitter, Kim Kardashian: the froth of pop culture seems jarring when it's placed in the context of neoliberal reactionaries or religious genocide. But should we really be surprised? Is it not inevitable that the pillars of the fluffy, smiley, sharable internet economy and the icons of reality show bling should be co-opted for the purposes of dark propaganda, given the power over hearts and minds they wield? BuzzFeed and the like may be chiefly associated with throwaway listicles about Katy Perry but they're also new forms of soft power persuasion, something like Voice of America or Radio Free Europe were in their day. If one wanted to look for it, there's signs of another agenda at work in all the talk of smartphone protest and hashtactivism. Take the Egyptian part of the Arab Spring tale in 2011, which was covered breathlessly by some in the western media as a story of revolution-via-Twitter. The internet may indeed have been essential in toppling General Mubarak, but it can't have been coincidental that it was mainly western companies and western tools that these protestors were using. Every endorsement of the Egyptian revolution? Every inspiring photo or celebratory tweet? Also an endorsement, however indirect, of Silicon Valley. This alignment of revolutionary and corporate interests is palpable in a feel-good TEDesque memoir of the coup from 2012, called *Revolution 2.0*, written by the man whose Facebook page helped to spark the revolt, enthusing that "the power of the people is greater than the people in power".

Wael Ghonim certainly isn't short of enthusiasm. "No one was the hero, because everyone was the hero," trills the back dust cover. He tells us that the internet is "the key vehicle for bringing forth the spark of change" and again that "The internet was going to change politics in Egypt". He recounts the way he initiated various aspects of what might be called "wiki-revolution" or "wiki-democracy" as the build-up to the revolution gathered – using Facebook as a focus group to gauge public opinion, creating online polls to guide the decision-making process for the early Silent Stand protests. *Revolution 2.0* actually tells the story of the uprising via Facebook posts and unequivocally stresses the "2.0" in the revolutionary process, emphasizing the kind of leaderless, horizontal power structure the internet allows as a model for protest – and it's hard not to be a little seduced at this pleasing narrative. But perhaps we should also bear in mind the fact that Ghonim was also a programmer for Google ("voted the world's best employer" he reminds us at one point) and that his promotion of the January 25th

Revolution and the fall of Mubarak comes with a certain amount of inevitable pro-corporate baggage. On the one hand it's a stirring account of speaking truth to power; on the other it's a unabashed 225 page advert for Facebook.

What's interesting to ponder, though, is that the two things are by no means necessarily contradictory. The infrastructure of social networks and mobile sharing *does* provide new opportunities for dissent – but they also help to sell smartphones and Facebook advertising (and in a metaphorical sense, they “sell” Silicon Valley as a force for liberation). So Mark Zuckerberg can roll out his plan to beam the internet to Africa from space by framing it in the utopian language of linking the human race and fostering grassroots connections between isolated people, without mentioning too much about the price (the service will be charged) and the geo-corporate advantages to a company like Facebook of owning the vast emerging market of Africa as it gradually comes online. Personal and political liberation can sit all-too-comfortably hand in hand with corporate growth; in fact, as a leading example of a potentially lucrative new market in “start-up/revolution” memoir, *Revolution 2.0* often reads less like an exciting account of toppling a dictator and more like a boardroom feedback session (“my quarterly performance reports at Google always stated that I needed to improve my work-life balance” he reveals thrillingly at one point) in a nice exposure of the alignment between propagating democracy and corporate propaganda. Now that everyone has iPhones that they raise up to film the police at protests, those protests – whatever their greater cause – also serve as an unwitting advert for Apple. The sector with the biggest paygaps on earth, Silicon Valley, gets credence and a reputation boost for spreading grassroots democracy by toppling dictators (when they're not working with them). Where does it end? With protests against Google's tax dodging being uploaded to the Google-owned YouTube? Pickets of Apple stores being tweeted about on iPhones? The networked world swiftly removes the boundaries between seeking the growth of a social movement and seeking the growth of your own reputation. Ghonim may present himself as the selfless architect of a grassroots mass uprising (“Everyone is a leader”, the dust jacket trills) but he's also aware of how his social media rebellion benefits his own growing fame – “The number of followers on my personal Twitter account had skyrocketed to over 30,000 from just 4,000 before the revolution”. His final Facebook post after Mubarak steps down – “Congrats, Egypt!” – gets 15,190 Likes: a truly viral approach to political transition. *Fait accompli* for democracy? Well, perhaps. It's certainly a coup for Facebook.

There's a strange tendency among intelligent thinkers to assume that just because a protest is organized on social media – ostensibly a horizontal, leaderless medium – that it will inevitably display the same kind of leaderless nature once it gets underway. The normally skeptical Paul Mason gives Twitter a free pass in his protestor's call-to-arms *Why It's (Still) Kicking Off Everywhere*, claiming that Twitter's democratic filtering means only the best posts are

promoted by means of retweets – a true democracy of expression that allows protests to assemble themselves in thrillingly anti-hierarchical ways. But since when did a retweet count automatically guarantee quality? Racist slurs by far right groups also get a lot of retweets from their followers – as do tweets from David Cameron, Isis leaders, men’s rights activists and (perhaps for different reasons) fascist dictators. Why are we so keen to see the internet as a place that’s ideologically neutral when – like any platform used by human beings – it’s driven by human biases, motives and agendas? An Iranian Facebook page translating as “My Stealthy Freedom” had western lifestyle media commentators breathlessly singing its praises as a forum where women could snap and upload themselves without head dress. “Women in Iran are rebelling against compulsory hijab by exposing their hair in beautiful and brave pics,” the UK’s *METRO* newspaper trilled, among other lifestyle pages that have covered the movement. And indeed My Stealthy Freedom – something that could never exist outside of an online platform in Iran – does represent an amazing emancipation for some young women in Iran.

But perhaps it comes with other baggage too. Study the photos and what strikes you is just how *western* they all look – attractive young women with hair blowing in the wind snapping selfies, hanging out of cars, having fun with their girlfriends: like a marketing campaign for a youth-targeted clothing brand or an ad for tampons. Words like “courageous” and “empowering” crop up a lot; the emphasis is on freeing the “real me”. Several photos actually depict the women casting aside their veils in a form of direct liberation. It certainly looks good (many of those pictured are actually actresses and models, slightly undermining the rhetoric of grassroots participation) and it’s an undoubted success: the page has garnered nearly a million Likes worldwide at the time of writing. There’s no reason why Iranian women shouldn’t snap themselves grinning on a picnic, but it is interesting to note how closely a Facebook page like My Stealthy Freedom is aligned to western interests – promoting a bogeyman picture of oppressive Iran on the one hand, and the liberating power of western-style photoshoots, flowing hair and selfies-via-smartphone on the other. Western tools – smartphones! Silicon valley! – are a Trojan for bringing democracy to places like Iran (never mind that those handsets may well be manufactured in Asia from materials mined in Africa; never mind that Facebook has itself been accused of various kinds of censorship and collaborating with autocratic regimes around the world) in a way that fits in nicely with the diplomatic interests of Britain and America. Funnily enough it’s a lot harder to find a My Stealthy Freedom equivalent for Saudi Arabia.

When we see forums like the above, when we see photos of protests and revolutions, we should stop ourselves from automatically endorsing them at face value and instead ask ourselves who stands to gain from them. The Iranian example encapsulates the way that social media – given a little signal-boost from

traditional media – can play into a convenient narrative that’s very helpful to western political and military-industrial interests. Such a narrative has been called a kind of “iPod diplomacy”; and such a term isn’t merely metaphorical. When student protests rocked Tehran in 2010, the State Department actually took it upon themselves to request Twitter to suspend scheduled maintenance of its Web site because the Administration didn’t want such a critical organizing tool interrupted at the height of the demonstrations. “Without Twitter,” as Mark Pfeifle, a former national-security adviser, later put it, “the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy.” (He also called for Twitter to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize).

This, then, is the legacy of media via meme – populist platforms like YouTube and BuzzFeed are no more ideologically neutral than TV, radio or newsprint were before them. Search for “Venezuela” on YouTube and you’ll be presented with a dazzling array of slick, handsomely produced mini-films telling the story of the “rebel” cause to English-speaking outsiders. Deftly weaving street footage with earnest narration (dubbed into English for maximum international impact) and packed with images of dead or beaten protestors, such videos – with their funding from groups like CATO and shadowy U.S. foreign departments – serve as a stealth propaganda that’s perfectly adapted to the age of online sharing. In the “free” world the clunky traditional battering ram of persuasion via mass media is far behind us; we’re too savvy for that these days. But YouTube – the universally accessible international medium we tend to associate with cat videos or pop promos – is a different story. How can a few videos about Venezuela be an ideological program when we’re picking out the videos ourselves to watch? Can such films really be the product of militant C.I.A.-funded anti-democracy programs when occur on our screens alongside the next Taylor Swift video? Can propaganda begin with an advert for Pringles?

Perhaps it’s no wonder then that on the 7th Dec 2015, Venezuela's opposition finally won control of the National Assembly by a landslide, trouncing the ruling party and altering the balance of power in the country as 17 years of socialist rule came crashing noisily to an end. YouTube clips can be powerful tools indeed.

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A million Likes doesn't make it true

How truth evaporates in a single click

It was kind of like Orson Welles' War of the Worlds, but instead of using radio we used Instagram.

- Tomas Pena, *BBC Trending*

In March 2014 Kim Kardashian sent out a tweet.

“Please let's not let history repeat itself!!!!!! Let's get this trending!!!!
#SaveKessab #ArmenianGenocide.”

This might, on the face of it, have seemed a little unexpected. The *Meet the Kardashians* star is certainly better known for belfies and beauty tweets than she is for her interventions in remote countries. In this case however she wasn't alone in taking a break in her important schedule to join the horrified ranks of celebrities such as Blink 182 drummer Travis Barker and political figures like Adam Schiff in getting worked up about That Thing Happening Somewhere.

Kardashian's family originally hailed from near Armenia, and so it's perhaps no surprise that she felt some affinity with the Armenian inhabitants of the scenic town of Kessab. Nestled up in the remote hills of Latakia province in Syria, away from the bloodshed, away from the cities and the street-fighting, the tiny town is famous for its beauty.

That was, of course, till Islamist rebels captured the town. Kessab at once found itself dragged into the terrible civil war dividing the country. Genocide ensued and the town's 2,5000-strong population of ethnic Armenian Christians fled.

Kardashian is famous – or infamous – for using her celebrity status to support some rather whacky causes (she's praised the “amazing hospitality” of Sheikh Khalifa and the “Kingdom of Bahrain” on Twitter in the past, though possibly only as a result for her support for a local Millions of Milkshakes restaurant chain in that country) but in this case few could challenge her decision to drum up some support for this cause amongst her 20.4 million followers. Especially as photos emerged of the devastation – a slain woman with a cross in her mouth, a decapitated child, a Christian church in ruins – which began trending and saw

international outrage grow. What better use could there be for celebrity power, after all, if not to draw attention to genocide and persecution? Her tweets were followed by waves of retweets; more people began talking about ethnic Armenians. A hashtag #SaveKessab emerged and a “Save Kessab” Facebook page appears alongside the ruined church saying: “Hate Crimes, and the world is silent.” Geopolitics might not have changed, but at least Kardashian had put Kessab on the map. Perhaps we *could* use Twitter to sort out the world after all.

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The Kardashian tweets were an example of what’s sometimes called “hashtactivism” – a breed of internet based activism that attempts to change the world for the better from the other end of a Share, Like or Retweet button. It’s a rare week that passes now when the news doesn’t feature at least one major digital campaign, a socially motivated hashtag gaining huge support; our email inboxes regularly groan beneath the weight of online petitions from the likes of Avaaz, Change.org or 38 Degrees. “Anyone can be a digital humanitarian, absolutely no experience necessary; all you need is a big heart and access to the internet,” claimed Patrick Meier recently in *Digital Humanitarians: How Big Data is Changing the Face of Humanitarian Response*. Technology, he suggests, “can amplify our humanity”; tech commentator Mark Pesce declared a few years ago that sharing tools are bringing forth a “hyper-empowered democracy”. *The Guardian* recently hailed the popular hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as nothing less than the birth of a new civil rights movement.

There’s no doubt that much of this excitement is well-placed; social media has given many people, particularly the disenfranchised, a voice they never had before and a place to unite without repercussions. But could there be another side to hashtactivism, too? Might it lead to clicktivism and lazy armchair activism? Or worse, might all its proponents actually be partly right – it is a powerful force for effecting change – but that the change might not be the one we actually wanted?

We might begin by having another look at Kim Kardashian’s attempt to rid Syria of religious genocide. Take that image of a slain woman with a cross in her mouth, for example. What could be more outrageous; what could be more barbaric, more deeply offensive toward a Christian, particularly one with Armenian heritage. No wonder Twitter blazed with righteous anger.

But that photo didn't come from Kessab. It didn't even come from anywhere in the Latakia province. The photo came from the 2005 Canadian horror movie *Inner Depravity*.

Or how about that church? True, it *was* a church, and true, it had been ruined – but this was from a completely different province in Syria, St. Mary's Greek Catholic Church in Yabrud. The decapitated child too was nothing to do with Kessab. The Lebanon-based Daily Star newspaper published an article around the time of these events titled "Kasab vs. #Kessab, and propaganda on Syria's coast," in which it concluded that, "Horrific to look at, the photos suffer from the fact that not a single one is connected to events in Kasab in late March 2014."

So far it all sounds like a familiar story – the internet gets it wrong about something, rumours circulate, celebrities jump in and the whole thing becomes the Most Important Thing Everyone's Talking About for two days until it gets quietly forgotten. There's certainly nothing new about famous singers jumping all over a particular cause or suddenly claiming spiritual kinship with places most of us would struggle to place on a map.

But could these stolen photos – yet another "context collapse", as we've explored in other chapters – be something a little darker than the usual internet crossed wires? And where did all these photos actually arise from?

Perhaps we get a little closer to the truth when we remember that Kessab was part of a stronghold for supporters of Damascus-based dictator Bashar al-Assad. The insurgents who captured it may well have driven out ethnic Armenians, but they were also attacking pro-government forces. Isn't it an interesting coincidence, then, that all these images of rebels engaging in barbarous and bloodthirsty genocide suddenly appear?

"Obviously Kessab is a hot topic for Assad to use because there is the Armenian minority there," Ghassan Ibrahim, the Editor in Chief of Global Arab Network, suggested in an interview with Al Arabiya News. "We have seen a lot of fabricated material on social media to support his case." As *Time* magazine reported, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an anti-government monitoring organization who have reported casualties throughout the conflict, could find no trace of dead civilians or any photographic or video proof of destroyed churches – while most Christians, according to residents, fled well before the fighting started. A rebel videographer narrated and uploaded a video tour of the city's perfectly intact churches as part of a counter-propaganda effort. "The celebrities who live abroad do not know the reality and they are just send some fake photos on social media and try to convince them that that's what's happening," he said.

We see therefore how the well meaning tweets of a global celebrity and the dutiful retweets of their adoring masses might be utilized as part of an ingenious stealth operation, dark propaganda to support the Assad regime – plant the seed of suggestion and then let one of the Gods of Twitter do the rest. What, after all, is Kessab really to Kim Kardashian but yet another hashtag, another diversion in the biggest and most important reality show of all, the geopolitical stage? The shares, the retweets, the hashtags – perhaps all of it probably came closer to helping a dictator than it did to protecting the fate of an embattled people. Welcome to a very twenty first century version of a smear campaign – one where local politics in the Middle East is decided by stolen photos, selfie-stick celebrities in L.A. and millions of westerners on social media. One nil to Assad. None of it could have happened without Twitter.

This is not to throw cold water on all the wonderful things that politics-via-hashtag is currently achieving. It's merely to introduce a note of caution into the mix, a reminder that all wars of ideas and all kinds of media – even the social kind – ultimately benefit somebody. Not long after Kardashian began her tweets *MTV Lebanon* reported that the “genocide” photos were being openly disseminated by the Syrian regime.

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The example of Kessab gets to the heart of much of what we read and see in the digital age. We all know that a Facebook campaign, a viral meme or a tweet we see – drawn as it is from the unregulated world of citizen media – may well be complete hokum. But most of us still assume a divide between the world of citizen media and the “real” media – an assumption that the newspaper articles we read online, often from prestigious outlets, are removed from a Kim Kardashian tweet or something we see on Facebook. In fact the relationship is much closer than we might imagine.

In late 2015 I found myself getting drawn into the murky world of internet “truth” with a blog I wrote for the *Huffington Post*. Meryl Streep had just starred in the film *Suffragette* and allowed herself to get photographed by *Time Out* in a T-shirt bearing the slogan “I’d rather be a rebel than a slave”. An immediate outcry spread all over the internet. Thousands of people, Afro-Americans among them, were tweeting their horror. I got interested enough to write a quick post about it.

The only trouble was, once I looked I couldn’t find any evidence of a mass outcry at all.

What I *did* find was a series of articles by popular online outlets like the *Daily Beast*, *Vulture*, *Vox* and *Buzzfeed* reporting on the existence of the outcry as if it were established fact. The actual evidence of the outcry was confined to a small selection of tweets taken from pissed off people on the internet – many of which were copied and republished by the other outlets. If more existed nobody had bothered to dig them out; my own searches just turned up the articles repeating that there was an outcry.

Since there's always going to be a bunch of people pissed off about anything, this hardly constituted an outcry. "A small bunch of people post angry tweets about Meryl Streep" might have made a more accurate headline. But here I was, about to pen a blog for the famous *Huffington Post* about the subject. Should I just follow everyone else's lead and write an article about something that – by all good journalistic standards – didn't really appear to exist?

In the end I published the article with a strong caveat at the beginning voicing my doubts as to the scale of this "outcry". But this was just a little blog in my own time; I didn't have an editor breathing down my neck; I had no official deadline. Had I been a staffer churning out several articles a day I doubt there would have been time for any doubts.

Welcome to the growing world of outrage journalism – not merely a genre of news gathering but arguably an entire industry in itself. This is what happens. A "journalist" – or rather an underpaid intern at a new media company, which these days is often taken to be the same thing – combs Twitter all day for stories that look salacious. They spot something that seems a bit controversial (in other words, something that more than 10 people are tweeting about). They think of a headline that identifies it as a "thing". They turn out a hastily written "article" – which is actually really a series of annotated tweets taken from the internet with brief commentary around it – and publish it quick.

Now it's out there. It's still mid-morning, and another tweet-mining "journalist" on the hunt for something to fill their daily quota sees their piece. They quickly rehash it, Google a bit, add a bit more, and publish it with a slightly different title – all within the time it takes them to drink a cup of instant coffee. Other platforms begin to notice. One or two of them also put out similar pieces. The "thing" is now definitely a thing. People from slightly bigger outlets – newspapers, platforms with national or international reach – do a quick article to cover the outrage. Others start to do think pieces about what the outrage means. A dribble of rightwing bloggers and free speech advocates write furious screeds in Reddit about how the outrage over the choice of someone's T-shirt personally threatens their sense of freedom. Someone responds to *them*. Sniffy critics like me get hold of it and do meta-blogs commenting on the outrage over the outrage. And so on.

On the face of it, this is just another example of the internet's infinite capacity for self-reflexion – a planet sized echo chamber where the news industry ends up eating itself. But there are consequences to outrage journalism. A story like the Streep T-shirt and the mass “outrage” it supposedly generated paints a certain picture of black America: one where online armies of furious blacks rage to tear down any celebrity for something as innocuous as a fashion choice. When we admit that such “outrage” might actually be restricted to a pocket of unrelated tweeters who wouldn't fill a train carriage we're forced to admit that the nuances of race are a little more complex – but then that wouldn't get the clicks.

All of this has a long history of course. Newsmakers have always had the power to reshape reality by the way they report on it. You may have heard the phrase “growing media storm” for example. When the press, radio or TV reports that there's a “growing media storm” about a particular live issue this may bring to mind images of armies of reporters camped out on lawns, flashbulbs popping, roundtables convened on talkshows. In truth what a growing media storm *really* means, often, is that a cameraman arrives at a news scene to find that two other stations have also sent their cameraman. Since nothing may be happening, the journalist then shapes that fact *into* the story; they report it as a “growing media storm” – which of course attracts more cameramen to the scene. In other words, they help to make the thing into a thing.

This is all part of “churnalism”, a phrase used to evoke the often misleading and exploitative ecosystem of mainstream media, with its voracious appetite for content leading to half-truths and wire copy simply republished as news. In his 2008 book *Flat Earth News* British journalist Nick Davies estimates that only a fraction (perhaps as low as 12%) of the stories we read actually come from reporters; most were stitched together out of press releases, PR materials or wire copy. But the internet has exploded in size and power since then. Not only have almost all the traditional newspapers and magazines gone fully online, but a whole and eye-wateringly vast landscape of digital platforms – from souped up blogs to entire digital newspapers with reams of rich content – has appeared to complement them, racking up hundreds of millions of views on a daily basis. What feeds it all? Content, of course – and on an hourly rather than a daily basis.

Is it any wonder then that online media starts to feel like a giant echo chamber, scratching around Twitter and the blogosphere for anything that looks vaguely exciting or controversial, before writing it up and moving onto the next thing? News staffers are routinely given deadlines now that would sound impossible or insane to the journalists of twenty years ago. The *Huffington Post* reckons to publish over twelve hundred items per day – not including blog posts – over three times the output of the *New York Times*, till now the largest newsroom in America. *Forbes* media analyst Jeff Bercovici estimated that a *HuffPo* staffer is expected to produce ten times the amount of content than that of a journalist of

the pre-digital age – and all to deadlines that disappear within hours, with every click measured, tracked, calculated and assessed by the people crunchers who have the power to renew staff contracts. After the sale of *HuffPo* to AOL, staffers were expected to double their yield to ten items per day. It's difficult to imagine Woodward and Bernstein cultivating the Watergate scoop under such conditions.

Is it any wonder that increasing numbers of “articles” are really nothing more than annotated tweets or descriptions of YouTube comments – or, more and more, excuses for tacky slideshows of the “25 dogs that look cool in sunshades” variety (popular because each photo counts as a separate page view, boosting advertising revenue)? Is it any wonder that the online “publishing” industry is really more of a *republishing* industry – mirroring and rehashing the output of other similar platforms within hours of it becoming available, telling us more about the rest of the online media than it does about the world itself? And of course, a parched landscape of news reporting and fact checking is one where manipulations can thrive.

Take what happened in 2010 over the BP oil spill. Had you searched for “oil spill” in the wake of the crisis, the first result your screen would have returned would have been a link to BP's home page (decorated in reassuring green) detailing the brave, selfless attempts to clean up the spill the company was making, all phrased in the inspiring community spirit of an NGO. Why was this the first result? Because enough people had searched for it? Well, no – actually BP had spent huge amounts of money buying up terms from Google and Yahoo like “oil spill” to ensure their results were top, spending an estimated 10,000 dollars a day to maintain its position, on top of other advertising, as a part of their huge PR campaign. BP Plc may have largely failed in its attempts to control the worst oil spill in U.S. history, but its PR clean-up operation was unparalleled.

According to Reuters, BP said it simply wanted to help people who were trying to find information on the BP website to access it more readily – not that it was trying to draw away hits from other sites (the very idea!) “We know people are looking for those terms on our website and we're just trying to make it easier for them to get directly to those terms,” the spokesman told Reuters. How thoughtful. This, of course, came in tandem with a heavy advertising campaign across traditional media together with journalists employed to show the “positive” side of the oil spill – short reports heavily promoted on YouTube and across the web.

The BP oil spill may seem outlandish, but in fact this kind of “astroturfing” – conjuring up a fake, “grassroots” campaign that creates the impression that large numbers of people are demanding or opposing particular policies – is widespread. Groups like the “Alliance of Australian Retailers” which sprang up in

the wake of government plans to introduce plain packaging for cigarettes. Claiming to represent small retailers such as the owners of local corner stores or newsagents, it quoted concerned shopkeeper on its site with lines like, “My parents help me to run the store. They are old and have trouble with their eyesight and they are having real difficulties reading the small text and not having any colours to help them quickly identify brands.” What the AAR *didn't* say on their website was that they were funded and set up by big tobacco companies. Similarly, having witnessed a fall in soda consumption – down 25 percent from its peak in the 1990s – the soft drink industry (“Big Soda”) is looking for a way to fight back. And how better to do that than to use the “science” to illustrate that there isn’t really a problem at all? So Coca Cola decided to get proactive – donating more than \$1 million to fund the creation of a group called the “Global Energy Balance Network”, an organization that “allows scientists to talk to each other, debate issues around the science of energy balance,” according to its James Hill, a professor of pediatrics and medicine at the University of Colorado at Denver, who founded the group. According to the *New York Times*, Hill was keen to stress two things. Firstly, Coca-Cola has no control over how its donation is used; and secondly, GEBN doesn’t actually conduct academic research itself, but merely “provides a way for scientists to discuss and debate.”

Now *that's* the kind of science you need – the kind with no actual science in it. The result was Twitter and Facebook accounts that promoted an interesting idea about obesity: that it wasn’t so much the result of diet but rather “energy balance” – that is, rather than cutting down on soft drinks, people should simply take more exercise. On its Facebook page – since taken down – GEBN offered weight management tips such as: “Standing during the day and sitting less can help you get healthier,” “Dancing is a great way to get moving,” and “Don’t demonize process[ed] food!” The “objective” scientists it was working with to produce all this objective, pro-Coke science began to blur the lines between advertisements and genuine advice: several health and fitness experts in the pay of Coca Cola wrote online posts with tips on healthy habits where each one suggested a mini-soda as a snack idea. One dietitian wrote five such posts in less than a year. (Needless to say, GEBN “somehow” neglected to mention Coke’s involvement in the organization’s creation, surprising given that it was Coca Cola who had actually registered the gebn.org domain for the organization).

The fact is, people believe much more in something they see on the web than something they see advertised on TV. On TV or in print we’re generally informed that something is commercially driven. On the web, however, everything feels more “real”, more vernacular and “authentic”. It’s not, of course – but that deception is rich and fertile territory for someone to exploit.

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You look at that photo of her and she looks blond and perfect and amazing... Clean... Like a snapshot in a film.

Essena O'Neill was an Australian teenager with everything going for her. She had a happy homelife, she was extremely pretty, and she was already a success at 18 years old – having been posting snaps of herself on Instagram she'd become “Insta-famous”, with over half a million followers and fans who were watching her every move with adoration. In short, O'Neill was pretty much the epitome of what a young person dreams to be.

Then in late 2015, O'Neill did something nobody expected her to do. She stopped posting the Instagram photos everybody liked. The bikini shots, the sexy mirror selfies – everything ground to a halt.

Instead she released a video to the world.

“Companies will email you with dotpoints of what you say. Of times of the day you should post,” she tells the camera on the YouTube clip, in a near-tearful confession on the amount of control she was subjected to by the brands that sponsored her YouTube channel. “With what you should do in the photo. With how you should hold the product or where you should have it in the background.”

Many of her followers – a large proportion of whom are likely to have been children, given her age – might have been completely unaware that what they assumed were “natural” and “authentic” photos of their idol (and hey, where better to find the natural and the authentic than Instagram?) were actually the product of tightly calibrated marketing input from a team of brands and advertising agencies. She earned well from such stealth product placement (“\$2000AUD a post EASY”) but at the cost of control from the sponsors and a loss of personal integrity. “See how relatable my captions were – stomach sucked in, strategic pose, pushed up boobs,” she said about a photo of her wearing a bikini. (The photo had been previously captioned “Things are getting pretty wild at my house. Maths B and English in the sun”).

Just as she had spent years building up her huge Instagram following, O'Neill now took it upon herself to begin dismantling it – to reveal the artificial work going on behind the image, not only deleting photos from her account but recaptioning them too. One picture of her aged 15 includes a 2,800 word caption describing the lengths her sister had gone to in order to take the photograph.

“This photo would have taken at least 30 minutes of shooting to find the right white background, to check my posing, to yell some more at my sister for not ‘doing it how I wanted’,” she reveals. “The whole process of photo-taking back then was for one purpose: to get likes.”

ONE OF HER RE-EDITS: “EXAMS ARE OVER! Happy happy gurr! When your caption acts to distract the viewer from a very much posed bikini shot of a paid brand. Totally fooled them.”

“Any girl with a lot of followers promoting a bikini is paid, I would say 99% of the time.”

In a 22-minute vlog posted to YouTube, titled “HOW PEOPLE MAKE 1000’s ON SOCIAL MEDIA” she asked, “Why would you tell your followers that you’re paid a lot to promote what you promote? Why would you tell your followers that you literally just do shoots every day to take pictures for Instagram?”

Okay, so there’s perhaps something a bit overblown about her confession – you can’t help but feel some of this is down to the evangelical spirit of the teenager. But O’Neill’s *mea culpa* is important nonetheless. It lays bare, like nothing else has before, the new reality of advertising and the co-optation of citizen media; how as Carolle Cadwalladr puts it, “while most of us over the age of 11 know what an advert looks like, on Instagram, the fastest-growing social network in the world, the fastest-growing demographic is children and young teenagers.” As she points out, adverts on Instagram don’t look like adverts – they look like people. Citizen media in all its pimply, low-fi glory is the perfect place to co-opt and exploit for profit, precisely because nobody really expects you to.

This, in other words, is perhaps the most lucrative platform for stealth marketing ever seen – a WMD of pester-power to be aimed at one of the most eager-to-spend demographics on the planet. Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Snapchat are all legitimate targets, with Instagram being especially good for fashion and youth. Back in the 1990s Naomi Klein documented the rise of “human billboards”, where people – particularly teens, popular in subcultures like skating or surfing or nu-metal – would be approached by brands or agencies to wear their stuff in return for free gigs, tickets or other niceties that circumvented child labour laws. Such guerrilla marketing has been a fact of life for decades now. But going out to skate parks and dealing with pimply teens was always hard work and expensive. What better solution, then, than if you could reach not a few hundred teens but a few *hundred thousand* of them, and all with just a bit of emailing, and all for just a few hundred dollars – because this 18 year old or 19 year old is always going to be glad of the attention.

The invisible money spent on “invisible advertising” is growing fast, though by its nature difficult to put an exact figure on. In early 2015 the 23-year-old fashion

blogger and Instagrammer Danielle Bernstein – creator of the *We Wore What* website with 1.3 million followers – revealed that she gets paid up to \$15,000 by brands for a single Instagram post. Sponsored posts included a Lancôme foundation and Virgin Hotels, featuring herself and Richard Branson at the opening of his new hotel in Chicago. “It’s more than I could have ever imagined as a 22 year old,” she admits. With around a million followers Bernstein’s nowhere near the big leagues, but there’s an attractive sliding scale at work here: even with just a couple of hundred thousand followers bloggers can make between \$500 and \$5,000 per a post. These stars have large and often very engaged followings in the demographic group that really matters: young, affluent millennials.

And of course, as soon as there’s money to be made, an ecology of middlemen and agencies sprouts up – things like fashion technology company rewardStyle, that “collects commissions from retailers on behalf of bloggers whose pictures induce readers to buy baubles online.” *Texas Monthly* reported that some make up to \$80,000 per month by directing their followers their way; the company apparently drove \$155 million in retail sales in 2013 and even teaches women how to drive their presence further by giving them strategies for effective website design and search engine optimization. It’s not too much to point to a whole emerging wave of “social influencers” as the ad industry’s last hope for reconnecting with the young people abandoning live TV – traditionally the home of the advert – for their devices and in the process creating a new kind of star: an “influencer” who contrasts with the reality-TV celebrities of the last decade. The ecosystem building up around these new social stars include talent agencies who spot the rising stars, sign them up, then help them monetize their audiences of tens or hundreds of thousands, or even millions. As digital strategist Natasha Courtenay-Smith explains it: “What matters most is that this is real and authentic, and you get the feeling you are seeing the person ‘as they are’, warts and all”.

“These content creators are often seen to be more similar, relatable and approachable in the eyes of the target audience than more mainstream A-list celebrities such as David Beckham and Beyoncé,” says Dr Hayley Cocker of Lancaster University Management School – a more attainable version of a the celebrity that makes them a powerful resource for recommending products or brands.

“There are talent agencies popping up to get anyone who has over 100,000 followers on a platform,” says Jason Barrett of agency Social Talent, which manages a range of these creators, and reveals how a range of platforms might be employed for maximum reach: “If they’re going to a shoot or getting ready to do a YouTube film that they’ve been preparing, they’ll talk about it on Snapchat before it happens. It’s a much more intimate sort of platform, and that’s how

people are using it and how they think of it: almost like sending a text message to a friend.” Such is the power of the influencers that many of them are beginning to wonder why they’re even bothering to be the poster-boy or poster-girl for other peoples’ products at all; some are tiptoeing into launching their own products, rather than simply promote those of companies – companies like makeup-delivery Ipsy which funders stumbled over themselves for a piece of to the tune of \$100m, while vlogger “PewDiePie” released a mobile game that topped the app-store charts.

Perhaps it’s more useful to think of some of the more successful vloggers not as “channels” but rather as ongoing, curated commercial breaks – a perfect illustration of the way that the internet has blended commerce and socialising. Anyone stuck watching commercial TV before the advent of TIVO-style fast forward knows the irritation of having a show interrupted every quarter of an hour by “the commercials”. But today’s young may be the guinea pigs for something worse: a world where there is no longer a meaningful distinction between social and commercial life, where a 15-year old girl is legitimate vehicle for a stealth marketing project. As O’Neill put it herself, “I had the dream life. I had messages of big brands, sponsorships on my hands.”

“Social media is a business,” she says in the video. “If you don’t think it’s a business, you’re deluding yourself.”

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There was a predictable backlash against O’Neill’s *mea culpa*. “You can’t use social media to speak out against social media,” one vlogger replied, echoing a general theme among those who criticized her – that O’Neill was merely using the platform of a social media boycott as a stunt, to draw attention, to cement a future career via her new personal website. “Your message gets a little murky when you lose all your sponsorships to kind of make a point,” said one vlogger, “but then ask your viewers – that you got off social media – to pay your rent.”

“Essena O’Neill is a FAKE!” another user titled her rant.

That an attack on the mechanics of social media might anger some of those who use social media habitually, even professionally, is no surprise. What was more interesting (and more worrying?) was not in fact the backlash but those people who agreed with her. Rather than sparking an outrage, O’Neill’s video was more notable for eliciting admiration. Several magazines, blogs and news sites published articles with titles like “what brands can learn from Essena O’Neill’s outburst.” Instead of challenging the logic of invisible promotion and paid-for

Instagramming, O'Neill merely seemed to have inspired the invisible promoters to raise their game, get more sophisticated and learn from their game. "Be transparent," wrote Lauren Mitchell in *Marketing Magazine* in a piece entitled "What brands should learn from former Instagram model Essena O'Neill's public 'breakdown'". "The reality TV generation expects some rawness, less polish, honesty with product placement, transparency about financial incentives – to paraphrase Tumblr, we need to see the receipts." Meanwhile on the social web itself O'Neill seemed to have inspired a wave of people who were following her example. "Admitting My 'Fake' Selfies on Instagram - Essena Oneil, We All Do it!" urged a vlogger called izzy .davis. "People Come Clean About Their 'Perfect' Instagram Moments" was a video released by BuzzFeed's Yellow channel that earned them a million views. A new hashtag sprang up in response to O'Neill's claims, #ifsocialmediawerehonest, where the thread filled with people rushing in to pull the curtain back on their staged and 'shopped Instagram moments.

"I wasn't going to post this because of the cut on my lip but then I remembered @BuzzFeed #IfSocialMediaWereHonest," one user enthused.

"#IfSocialMediaWereHonest not everyone has a hourglass figure. It's normal not to be stereotypical," tweeted another.

It seems a laudable triumph – to encourage a sense of honesty about the way we use. But as I surfed the videos, a flicker of hope that perhaps people were really embracing some kind of honesty over the subject, were genuinely attempting to expose the machinery behind their Instagram fame, began to fade away. As I watched all the videos of people doing *their* social media *mea culpas*, it occurred to me, was this simply another way to jump on a popular bandwagon, a new way to get followers? Some of these "confessions" seemed remarkably self promotion; in more than one case the user hadn't even bothered to comment anything about the subject in question but had just pasted in more links and hashtags to themselves ("#bblogger #beautyblogger #indianbeautyblog #skincare #SkincareBloggers #ifsocialmediawerehonest..." But hey, why not? Hadn't reality TV done precisely the same, that is, made huge stars out of people since the Millenium by dressing them down as ordinary people, by pretending to expose the cogs grinding behind the image? How could you blame these kids for chipping in on a hashtag this way when it was just another way to get clicks – and, as we all know, clicks are now the only thing that matter?

"I think her behind the image thing is really cool," said one vlogger with many thousands of followers. "Big up."

He added, "All I can say is, it would have been even more popular if she did it on YouTube."

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It's easy to see these things as absolute and set in stone, but actually the world is changing. The citizen review industry – realising that the power of their business model is undermined by the doubts such manipulations sew – is keen to combat such practices. Yelp have cracked down several times over the past few years with sting operations on review fraud, naming and shaming offenders in 2012, and censoring the spam in recent controversies such as Walter Palmer. Amazon recently sued 1,000 people over fake reviews, in an attempt to crack down on the burgeoning practice of commissioning of paid, fake reviews that masquerade as testimonials from ordinary people in one of the most aggressive attempts yet by a major U.S. e-commerce company to fight back.

Data mining expert Bing Liu of the University of Illinois has estimated that one-third of all consumer reviews on the Internet are fake. Review fraud is easy to understand. For small businesses, it can be more economical to pay for positive reviews than to buy advertising. Gartner Research estimated that a half-star increase in a restaurant's online rating can increase the likelihood of securing a booking by 15 to 20 percent. For a restaurateur, paying \$250 for 50 positive reviews online in the hopes of raising that rating may well be worthwhile. Sites like Amazon, Yelp and TripAdvisor employ computer algorithms and teams of investigators who scour reviews in order to delete suspicious entries (“In the first half of 2015 alone we took action against 29 different optimization companies around the world to put a stop to their activity,” said TripAdvisor spokesman Kevin Carter) but as with any other practice, those determined will beat the bots; if a bunch of people are clever enough to create a false SEO company, they're probably savvy enough to start avoiding algorithms.

But it's not just in the commercial sector that astroturfing changes our opinions. The more serious implications is the political sphere. As George Monbiot pointed out a few years ago, the anonymity of the web gives companies and governments fertile opportunities to deceive the public – especially when the interests of those companies or governments come into *conflict* with the interests of the public. When hacker Aaron Barr infiltrated the security firm HBGary in retaliation for the suppression of Wikileaks in 2011, some of the emails they leaked showed a frightening level of planning on the part of governments to cement this deception. Among the revelations: that companies are employing “persona management software” to multiply the efforts of each astroturfer and create the impression of a mass grassroots movement for something which may actually be a small number of spammers. The software creates all the online furniture of a real person – name, email account, web page and social media profiles – giving the impression of an authentic person and making it hard to tell the difference

between a such bots and real commentators. To create the impression that the account holders are real, they can be programmed to periodically post links to other material on the web. This alone may not be so dangerous – by now most of us are fairly savvy at detecting inhuman presence on the internet – but what’s more insidious is the way mechanical elements can be blended with organic ones. Scores of bot accounts can be automatically created, and then – at the moment when they’re needed – brought out like undercover costumes for human astroturfers. The humans are then assigned a “pre-aged” account to create a back story and give the impression that they’ve been busily tweeting and linking for months. As Monbiot puts it, “No one would suspect that they came onto the scene for the first time a moment ago, for the sole purpose of attacking an article on climate science or arguing against new controls on salt in junk food.”

And it goes beyond creating a general impression. By slyly manipulating social media, astroturfers can even make it appear as if one of these fake personae was at a conference and even introduce himself/herself to key individuals. Not unsurprisingly, the US Air Force was soon tendering for companies to supply it with some of this tasty persona management software – namely in order to conjure up “10 personas per user, replete with background, history, supporting details, and cyber presences that are technically, culturally and geographically consistent ... Personas must be able to appear to originate in nearly any part of the world and can interact through conventional online services and social media platforms.” Randomly selected IP addresses would be used to get online, changed every day in order to cover up the existence of the operation, and also employ a method of traffic blending to lend “powerful deniability.” Different astroturfers would be able to hop in and out of one persona as required. When then-US Texan Senator Lloyd Bentsen coined the term “astroturfing” in 1985 to describe the “mountain of cards and letters” sent to his office to promote insurance industry interests, it’s difficult to imagine he could have foreseen this.

It’s difficult to know how prevalent astroturfing actually is, but there are certainly plenty of signs of it at work. Compare the comments thread for an online article about an issue in which there’s little money at stake – where discussion tends to be more civilised – than that around an issue where there’s large money involved, such as national health, tax avoidance or climate change, public health and corporate tax avoidance which, as Monbiot points out, display breathtaking levels of abuse and disruption. Having actually attempted to reply to some of the abuse, Monbiot encountered a depressing insight into this kind of information war: “instead of contesting the issues I raise,” he writes, “many of those who disagree bombard me with infantile abuse, or just keep repeating a fiction, however often you discredit it.” Needless to say, intelligent discussion in such a climate is rendered almost impossible – one of the reasons many of us prefer to keep away from forums. This, of course, is the point: once dialogue is

impossible constructive action becomes harder. As elsewhere in the echo chamber, the signal drowns out the noise.

The 2010 film *(Astro)Turf Wars* features a training session by a rightwing libertarian group called American Majority, where the trainer instructs Tea Party members: “Here's what I do. I get on Amazon; I type in 'Liberal books'. I go through and I say 'one star, one star, one star'.”

“When you type in 'Movies on healthcare', I don't want Michael Moore's to come up, so I always give it bad ratings,” he goes on. “I spend about 30 minutes a day, just click, click, click, click ... If there's a place to comment, a place to rate, a place to share information, you have to do it. That's how you control the online dialogue and give our ideas a fighting chance.”

Perform a search for Martin Luther King and the site martinlutherking.org is likely to be in the top 5 or 10 results. Nothing wrong with that on the face of it – it's probably the most popular site on the subject after the Wikipedia page, and that, after all, is how search engines are supposed to work – a democracy of clicks where the most viewed and most linked-to rise to the top. We can assume then that martinlutherking.org is probably just the best written and most researched site on the topic of the black leader. Right?

In a perfect world perhaps. In fact martinlutherking.org is created and hosted by Stormfront, the white supremacist organization, and serves as a subtle character assassination of the black icon – just one example of a cleverly covert vehicle for hate promoted by those paragons of transparency, Google. (Just look at the title that appears on the search results: “Martin Luther King Jr. - A True Historical Examination ... A valuable resource for teachers and students alike.”) Extremist material cloaking itself in the guise of an objective newspaper / learning resource is nothing new, of course, but in the last century it's unlikely that any such venture would get widespread distribution. By fragmenting and personalizing the channels, by turning distribution into a click race, the Internet age can promote a white supremacist website to number two position for the armies of people searching for a famous black leader – and help pass it off as a “valuable resource for teachers and students.”

Would Stormfront's newsletter have been included among the periodicals in a public or academic library? I doubt it. While freedom of speech has always been legally protected, the channels of distribution in twentieth century civil society effectively reduced the reach of extremism. But since martinlutherking.org got the most passionate clicks and the most links it made it to the coveted Google top 5. And since Google acts as the central bugle for the echo chamber – alongside Facebook's algorithms, it effectively determines which things echo the loudest and bounce the most – the effect is to pass off racially motivated slander as fact.

To take an analogue equivalent from the last century, it's as if you made *The Bell Curve* required reading for high school students.

Take any politically loaded topic and you'll find polemic masquerading as objective reporting. Perform a similar search for abortion advice and something like afterabortion.org may well appear on your screen, a respectable looking site managed by the "Elliot Institute" that turns out to be full of suspiciously pro-Life propaganda. Pro-life rhetoric preceded the web, of course, but it cost money and time in the print age to produce media and influence public opinion; in the digital era it's frighteningly cheap and fast to buy web space or start blogs in order to shape the public debate. Sure, the more discerning among us will not be taken in by afterabortion.org or martinlutherking.org. But what if we don't have time or educational background to be discerning? What if we're in a rush, or our beliefs are heading that way and those sites provide some satisfying confirmation of what we were inclined to believe? Or what if we happen to be a confused teenage girl in a Bible Belt state who happens to find herself pregnant? However transparent it may be, the subtle but insidious effect of all this freely available "information" – much of it placed high on our Google searches – is incalculable. How many young women have had their opinions moulded by straying onto sites like afterabortion.org? (Not to mention teachers, nurses, midwives, social workers, politicians, the police...)

Or consider the modern journalist or content writer, often creaking beneath a tight deadline and a heavy output quota. What could be better than afterabortion.org or something like it for providing a bit of easy copy? Who cares all that much about accuracy, when your own output is likely to circulate for about five minutes and then be quickly forgotten?

Powerful as offline and online news might be in shaping our knowledge, it's only part of the story. If we're talking about opportunities for misinformation we can't ignore the role of peer reviews and ratings – what might be called the revolution in "citizen knowledge" that's swept our world since the dawn of the Millenium. Sure, it's easy to dismiss peer reviews for being silly, crass and badly written – but they're hugely powerful in shaping our opinion. According to online travel industry adviser [EyeforTravel](http://EyeforTravel.com), up to 88% of travellers check user reviews before booking a hotel. In fact these kinds of user-review sites are the second-most trusted source of information for consumers around the world, beating editorial content, ads and marketing (the only thing that's considered more reliable are personal recommendations from friends). Consider the sum total of all the products, hotels, services, businesses being assessed and written about, commented on and reviewed, night and day, all over the world, and you start to get a sense of the scale. It's not fanciful to call the process perhaps the biggest experiment in opinion manipulation in human history.

And, of course, it's the social web that made this all possible. It's the social web that continues to keep the echoes bouncing – and anyone who manages to disguise themselves as the “voice of the citizen” is set to wield a great deal of power indeed.

Take the Wikipedia payola scandal that broke in 2015. On 31st August the editors of the English language Wikipedia announced that they had discovered and banned 381 user accounts for “undisclosed paid advocacy.” They also banned a number of articles, which “were generally promotional in nature, and often included biased or skewed information, unattributed material, and potential copyright violations” according to a post by Wikimedia. According to one of the editors involved, the perpetrators – Wikipedians who had created “sockpuppet”, or fake, accounts, would contact the subjects of articles they were drafting — a band, a wedding photography service, several Bitcoin casinos – and offer to get the article published for a fee. After collecting the fee and publishing the article, Risker says, the fraudulent accounts would then contact the subject again and offer to “protect the article from vandalism and prevent its deletion” – in other words, what amounts to a classic protection and extortion racket. Even without the question of money, Wikipedia can have a dangerous influence on the state of public knowledge. Some of the media may even lift whole sections from Wikipedia (while a lot of academics these days are justifiably scared that their students may be copying from the site, the truth is that it's not just the students doing it – the *Oxford Textbook of Zoonoses*, published by the academic press *Oxford University Press*, bore remarkable similarities to the Wikipedia entry on the same subject). Or they might just take them from content mills like eHow. When the only objective is clicks and shares, who cares?

The real danger of citizen media is not just that so much of it is bullshit, but that it erodes the very idea of truth, the notion that something can even try to be objective or factual. Take the endless memes, macros and photos that flood the internet with their headlines to “guide” our interpretation. “Media-via-meme” assumes some kind of extra power in pictures, assumes that they can deliver truths which the conventional media overlooks. Once we've seen a beaten student, a crate of champagne or a drowned child, why bother to investigate further? Our heart “knows” even if our head's not sure; and heads don't need consulting too much when the only task that's required of us is clicking a Share or Like button. Now that we the audience are curating the news on the fly, perhaps we need to acknowledge that the old-fashioned regulated world of broadcast may be giving way to a new form of “storyfied” narrative, spun by ourselves, where truth is less important than “truthiness”, facts less important than feeling. Feelings, after all, trump facts when they have the power of large numbers behind them.

In that case the targets are wealthy, powerful people – but what if they weren't? What if the targets were a beleaguered group like Hamas, and someone disseminated a smear photo, say, to suggest they were conducting a mass wedding of underage girls? Well, we don't need to speculate. This happened several years ago, and it proves an instructive example: a genuine photo of a mass wedding conducted by Hamas which shows young girls in bridal gear is spread via email, suggesting that the young girls are themselves the brides. No proof is given (the girls were actually just relatives of the brides) but then none is needed for smear and insinuation. After all, who could a militant Islamic group like Hamas really appeal to for their damaged reputation? The Internet?

Or what if the target was a Christian charity like the Salvation Army, and a photo of two volunteers smiling in front of a sign that read "doing the most good" was doctored to read "gays not allowed" – thus fuelling a poisonous climate of mistrust and hatred. Christianity, charity and homosexuality is a controversial subject, certainly, but is this the way to discuss it? And what does Photoshopping hate speech onto a cardboard sign really add to the debate?

Worse still, the targets might be a minority fighting to preserve its dignity – like that of the U.S. black community at a time of the Ferguson riots. A photo of a Ferguson protest was taken of three black protesters with a sign reading "No mother should have to fear for her son's life every time he leaves home; the sign was later altered to read "no mother should have to fear for her son's life every time he robs a store" and uploaded to the photo-sharing site Imgur. When the user who posted it, Bdawgid, eventually admitted to manipulating the image, their words are telling:

Yes, I shopped this. It captured mine, and many others, *frustration with this whole situation*. [my italics].

Who needs more than feelings, when feelings travel so far and so fast? In the age of media-via-Facebook we're used to socially-mediated "news" as a show of personal solidarity. But what if the people distorting the truth are not supporters of an oppressed community but rather their oppressors? What if the very authenticity of "citizen" media is co-opted, exploited in the cause against citizens themselves? The urge to "break" stories has been passed from official media – with its codes and restrictions – to an unregulated citizenry, who are so desperate to break *something* that old-fashioned boundaries of taste and authenticity are seen as irrelevant. As Claire Cohen writes in the *Telegraph*, #Breaking is one of the most used hashtags on Twitter – it was used almost half a million times in the month surrounding the Queen's death tweet alone. New

streaming apps like Meerkat and Periscope are flooding the web with thousands of hours of footage of *stuff happening* – but where’s the commentary, the analysis, the context? When an explosion occurred in lower Manhattan in early 2015 ordinary people enthusiastically raised their smartphones and began to stream, prompting some in the tech press to proclaim a “revolution”; the revolutionary footage resulted in decontextualised shots of a burning building with live-tweeted speculation from viewers, who seemed to know more than the reporter. We’re all obsessed with being newscasters; at the same time, however, we seem increasingly unsure what the news actually is.

The result can be catastrophic for the ordinary person, for public figures, even for the political process. On the 15th of June 2015, presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton made a visit to a brewery in New Hampshire. The event, as far as she was concerned, was uneventful – talking with locals, hosting a little meet and greet, no major slip-ups. So she was a little surprised at what happened next.

“Watch what happens when a @HillaryClinton supporter asks her to sign something”, frothed the tagline to the vine. The vine – a format made for sharing on social media with a clip no more than a few seconds long – showed a woman approaching the Presidential hopeful and being requested to join the queue. Conservative media leapt all over it. “Every once in a while, Her Majesty must put the rabble back where they belong”; trumpeted *the Daily Caller*. “Hillary to Supporter: ‘Go to the End of the Line’,” echoed the *Weekly Standard*. A *Fox News* talk radio host suggested to viewers that Clinton would never tell the rich and powerful to get to the back of the line. The video’s placement on the Drudge Report under the headline “She snaps at adoring voter” earned it 4 million loops.

Does it even matter that none of the headlines were true? As David Weigel points out in his article for *Bloomberg* entitled “Never trust a vine”, the voter wasn’t told to go to “the back” of the line; she was rather instructed to go to the end of the procession – the part where Clinton was actually doing the signing. No matter – the damage was done. Reputational destruction doesn’t need facts, just innuendo. There’s long been a debate about the power of the press to tarnish reputations – how a single (often unfounded) story can destroy a reputation, end a career, break up a marriage. But even with the worst of the tabloids press, the traditional media of print and broadcast were limited by two factors. Firstly, the victims could sue (this often being the only thing that curtailed the salacious appetites of editors and bosses). Second, there was always some sort of corrections page. Citizen media is, in information terms, a rogue state – a set of claims without a complaints policy; however demotic it might be, you’ll have to travel a long way around the internet before you discover a place for issuing apologies.

But Vinegate is interesting for another reason. It's an example of a kind of lie that's ever easier to tell in our age: not a lie of falsification, but a lie of context, one based on a savage misreading of the source material. Watch the full video (a full 17 minutes) just a few seconds beyond where the vine ends, and you hear Clinton's handlers promising to "take care" of the voter. Watch it for a full few minutes more and you hear her give the voter the signature they wanted. "Clinton performs standard crowd management procedures at a public event"; somehow that headline seems a lot less interesting.

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The truth is what you want it to be

Ever since it came about the internet has been a place for fantasy and make-believe. Though it's possible to see vested interests – personal gain, political attack, monetization – in much of this, perhaps weirdest and most interesting of all is the number of hoaxes that are purely the result of personal fantasy, with no motive other than creating a kind of alternative universe. Following Hurricane Sandy in 2012 the internet filled with astonishing images of the destruction – an unearthed shipwreck on the Fire Island seashore, the Statue of Liberty battered by gales, even a shark swimming through the streets of New Jersey – which had of course nothing whatsoever to do with the hurricane. As myth-busting website *Snopes* pointed out, many of them didn't even attempt a pretence of reality; they were simply digitally created fabrications dreamt up on Photoshop. Others were photographs of similar phenomena taken at different times or in other places – and a good proportion were, of course, simply movie scenes reproduced out of context. Should we see these as "lies" or rather as the collective fantasising of the hive mind, perhaps – evocations of the sublime in the tradition of fantasy art or the ruin imagery of Blake or Joseph Gandy? There now exists a whole layer of online life that deals not with reality at all but rather with fantasy versions of it, from obvious examples like gaming forums of fanfic universes to platforms that fool us all. The website *Aisteach.org*, the "avant garde archive of Ireland", offers a fascinating little-read history of the country, from Irish minstrels to border town occultists with referenced sources, footnotes, extensive academic resources. Many an academic or historian has whiled away an hour or two browsing here.

The only caveat – is it a caveat? – is that all of it, every last link and article, is completely made up. "I wanted to research one of the articles about The Aleatoric Revisionist Balladeers Collective," the Phd student who'd told me about the website said. "It sounded really interesting. After a bit of Googling I realised they didn't actually exist outside of the website."

In this landscape the Chinese whispers of the internet can thrive as they ever have before. Take the “Gay Girl in Damascus” incident, which was recently the subject of a major documentary, and which showed how old and new media work in symbiosis, the one feeding off the other. In early 2011, at the height of confusion and excitement around the Arab Spring, news outlets around the world were seeking sources on the ground to provide them with a window into what was really going on in the Middle East. One local blog was gaining an international reputation. Gay Girl in Damascus detailed the life of 25-year-old Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari, a half-Syrian, half American lesbian living in Damascus. It’s not hard to see why Amina’s blog was gaining such attention – colorful, dramatic, it was great ground-level eyewitness stuff. “What a time to be in Syria! What a time to be an Arab! What a time to be alive!” she enthused amidst the growing anti-government protests. She gave media interviews, corresponded with Western bloggers. So well informed about LGBT debates in the Middle East was Amina that one of her posts was republished by a well-established lesbian website in Lebanon. When she was kidnapped by armed men believed to be members of President Assad's Baath party the story was reported by the BBC and the *Guardian*.

It was only then that things became a little more complicated. The *Guardian* got a call from an administrator at the Royal College of Physicians claiming that the photo was of her. Was it just a pro-Assad attempt to undermine Amina? They uploaded another – that, too, turned out to be snatched. After wrangling with the Press Complaints Commission all photos were hurriedly removed.

Had anyone, they started to wonder, actually spoken to Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari?

The truth finally emerged six days later, after both professional journalists and fellow lesbian bloggers like Paula Brooks worked at “doxxing” Amin. It turned out Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari was not Syrian. Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari was not lesbian. Somewhat improbably, Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari was not even a woman. Amina Abdallah Arraf al-Omari was actually a bearded, middle-aged American PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. How on earth had he fooled not just the blogosphere but respected news institutions?

The answer to that lies in part with a failure of sourcing standards from the editors involved. But was there another dimension too? Was part of the reason Gay Girl in Damascus hoodwinked some of the toughest news people in the world because it fitted a sexy narrative about the voice of the “ordinary” person? The Arab Spring wasn’t known as the “Twitter revolution” for nothing – here, finally, was the realization of citizen media to fulfill its role as the voice of the people. Amina was the Cool Kid With a Smartphone the world had been waiting for – Western and liberal in a part of the world we like to think still stones

women; gay in the face of brutal and repressive patriarchy; a photogenic activist liberated by social media (courtesy of the tools of Silicon Valley of course) to rise up and realize democracy. She dared to criticize President Bashar al-Assad. She was the Western wet dream of “iPod diplomacy”, technology deployed as a Western trojan horse to bring about democracy in the Middle East. And she was a Hell of a lot more entertaining than most blogs. Even the real ones.

"While the narrative voice may have been fictional, the facts on this blog are true and not misleading as to the situation on the ground," apologised the author Tom MacMaster in his *mea culpa*, spinning an interesting idea about the role of the writer in the age of online anonymity – that it doesn't actually matter if the author is sitting in Damascus or Edinburgh as long as the story's good. The world wasn't so easily persuaded. "One day if I'm kidnapped by my government, many readers won't care because I could turn out to be another Amina," one Lebanese blogger wrote, while the editor of the Gay Middle East blog, Daniel Nassar, said: "Because of you, Mr MacMaster, a lot of the real activists in the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender] community became under the spotlight of the authorities in Syria. You took away my voice, Mr MacMaster, and the voices of many people who I know." Suddenly this Cool Kid With a Smartphone didn't look quite so cool any more.

How many more MacMasters are there out there? International news depends on a network of often anonymous sources, increasingly hidden behind aliases or Dark Net connections. If a male American can fool the world so openly, it's likely that a significant proportion of the sources who fuel the news we read – with a lot more layers to hide behind – are fictitious. And it doesn't just apply to international news. The journalists lucky enough to still have a job have seen their budgets and time margins squeezed beyond recognition; the result is that interviews are increasingly done electronically (to judge by a lot of what gets published, simply reprinting the edited highlights of a Twitter feed is deemed enough). Email, social media messaging are all wonderful cloaks for fictitious people – and made-up people can fuel made-up stories. Consider the turn of events that followed MacMaster's outing. As prestigious news outlets wiped journalistic egg off their face and wondered why they'd let an unsubstantiated blogger shape their Middle East coverage, the story took another turn. The Washington Post revealed that “Paula Brooks”, the respected lesbian blogger who'd had a part in outing MacMaster, wasn't what she claimed to be either. In fact Paula Brooks turned out to be Bill Graber, a 58-year old American construction worker and former air force pilot. As Noreena Hertz points out in her book *Eyes Wide Open*, the two had happily interacted as young lesbian women for years without suspecting the mutual fraud; repeating falsehoods, living their fictional identities, fooling the wider world. At this point the reader might justifiably be expecting me to reveal that I'm a bearded middle-aged

American masquerading as a young lesbian blogger. I'm not – but then how do *you* know that?

The cases are growing of elaborate, multi-faceted hoaxes involving fake online identities. In 2015 a “terrorist” troll took on multiple identities, often radically clashing – such as Isis jihadist, white supremacist and Jewish lawyer at one and the same time. 20 year-old Joshua Goldberg specialised in spreading hatred online, but he did it from wildly contrasting angles – a feminist on the online platform *Daily Kos*; a radical free-speech advocate on Q&A site Ask.fm, a white supremacist on the race-hate site Daily Stormer, and even – according to some accusations – the man behind a *Times of Israel* blog post that called Palestinians “subhuman.” The reclusive 20-year-old who lived at home with his parents tweeted prolifically, and was so successful at fooling the world that he was even retweeted by one of the pro-Isis gunmen who attacked a “Draw Muhammad” event in Texas. As he boasted as Australi Witness, “All who defame the Prophet (PBUH) must be crushed.” Goldberg’s trolling turned serious when he was arrested Thursday by the FBI in a sting operation – on the grounds that he instructed a would-be terrorist how to build a bomb meant for a 9/11 anniversary in Kansas City. During his time trolling, Goldberg built dozens or even hundreds of fake identities – identities that would sometimes even fight amongst themselves.

Why did he do it? Clearly Goldberg – who was diagnosed with mental illness following his arrest – was far from normal in his use of the anonymity of online (the place where “no one knows you’re a dog”). But this is very much also a story of our time. It’s difficult to see how in any age before this one person could so convincingly fool so much of the world, how they could create so many personae that rang so true, that seemed to take on such a life of their own. Think of all the Facebook friends or Twitter acquaintances you’ve made over the years: do you really know *all* of them? Are you absolutely sure that they *all* exist? We live a time when the scope for the creation of personal fantasias has reached epic proportions, and the scope for imaginative deception is beginning to inform the real world as much as the real world informs it.

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I happened to buy buying a takeaway once when the kid serving – twenty, twenty one – showed me a video on his phone. The clip featured a diabolical new contraption invented in the U.S. that would quickly and silently decapitate those on Death Row.

“Fucking psychos,” he muttered. “Americans.”

I recognized the logo at the bottom of the clip. It was from the satirical website the *Onion*. The video was a joke. To a certain audience, probably one with a set of broadly liberal and culturally savvy values, it was a witty take-down of right wing attitudes. To another audience – and who knows where a viral clip will end up? – it’s further proof of the tyranny of an Evil Empire. In the echo chamber something may begin as a joke, but because of the contagious nature of social media, the delicate mechanisms that satirical humour relies on – an audience that shares your references, a shared knowledge base – can be easily elided.

Craig Silverman, who launched the debunking platform Emergent.Info to track the spread of rumors online, knows about the thin line between a joke and a destructive rumour. Something will begin life as a joke, get taken out of context, finds itself written up in news stories, and suddenly spreads on Facebook before anyone bothers to verify it (intelligent stories like that of a 50-foot crab or a “pumpkin spice condom” began this way).

But as ever within the echo chamber, few things are entirely accidental. After noticing the viral spread of these jokes, some unscrupulous content creators realised there was money to be made walking the thin line between “satire” and outright lies. The sites they created claim to be humor but are really fake news sites that capitalize on Facebook’s decontextualised news feed to trick people into sharing them. Their staple is fear, panic and prejudice – so things like Ebola and Isis make perfect material. “We’ve seen stories on satire sites — fake news sites — getting tremendous traction because they feed on people’s fears,” Silverman reported to *Verge*. “It’s really becoming an epidemic now.”

Rumour on the internet’s not a new thing (nor off it) but as we move into a world dominated by Facebook as primary news source for hundreds of millions of people, the dynamics of social media add kerosene to the engine. By squeezing news into a newsfeed, Facebook makes stories look pretty similar no matter where they’re coming from; the jokey and overblown tone of much of the rest of the content smooths over the most unbelievable aspects of the stories. And as they panic they share the stories, speeding the rumor onward and – of course – generating ad revenue for the site that all these shares link back to. So far it seems to be working – Quantcast recently showed 2 million unique visitors to a site called the *National Report* (most are not repeat visitors, suggesting that few actually *visited* the site; they just saw the link on Facebook and clicked through).

The result is stories like the quarantine of the small town of Purdon, Texas, after a family of five was diagnosed with Ebola; or that Obama is going to start infecting Christians with the disease as part of a terrifying liberal New World Order; or that a class of kindergartners had been infected by a foreign exchange student; or the news that residents of Hanna, Oklahoma, were to be implanted

with RFID chips as part of an Obamacare pilot program. Going by the headlines, 2015 was a scary year – one where Obama seized over one million acres of federal land or that hand sanitizer was removing male hormones. The fact that there's not even a germ of truth in any of these often deeply nasty and reactionary stories is neither here nor there. The Purdon story looked real enough to share to the 340,000 people who saw it pop up in their news feed; the others all achieved similar exposure. As spammy, banner-ad-festooned “news” sites proliferate – *Big America News*, *Huzlers*, *Celebricity*, *Empire News*, and many more – many have in fact dropped the satire disclaimer or bury it far in the depths of the screen, no longer even maintaining any pretence that they're doing anything other than peddling lies for cash.

In the echo chamber lies don't die in a vacuum but rather propagate uncontrollably – provided they're catchy enough. Were these sites simply spreading a few lies that would be one thing. But it's the effect they have on other media that's more worrying. The supposedly “real” news platform the *Mail Online* is a particularly nasty offender. Because it comes twinned with a real physical newspaper and looks like a real news site written by real journalists, thousands of blogs and aggregators source their stories from it. But the *Mail* have a track record of simply inventing stories or twisting reality out of all known recognition to fabricate their reactionary, shock-value stories. *CBS*, the *Huffington Post*, and even *Time* all reprinted the *Mail's* made-up story about Beijing screening fake sunrises during heavy pollution (the sunrises on a giant screen were in fact part of an ad campaign) while their race-baiting headlines provide the fuel for many a right-wing site, linking to the *Mail* for its sheen of legitimacy.

It's interesting to consider how certain factors native to our age influence all this. Consider the way that Americans are so prone to reprint the “stories” of a British tabloid; consider the way I – as a Brit – was so keen to reprint the Streep story from what I saw emerging on largely American sites. One of the huge achievements of our age is that it collapses distance – so that I, in the UK, can read the *New York Times* as easily as I can read the *Manchester Evening News*. But the flipside of this kind of globalization is that something like the Atlantic can serve as a kind of weird legitimation when it lies between writers; journalists alert to media bullshit in their own country lose their sense of smell when they're able to peer so instantly into another country.

In effect, then, nasty platforms whose business model depends on reactionary lies end up becoming the *de facto* foreign bureaus for all the “journalists” repurposing everybody else's stories on the web. The *Mail* – or any of the other less-than-accurate sites like *Breitbart*, *RT*, *Press TV*, *the National Record* or the *Examiner* – end up acting acts as a wire service to a substantial part of the world's media. How else would highly charged and politicized lies find such

traction? In the wake of Hurricane Sandy, the online activist crew known as the Gay Nigger Association of America (GNAA) began posting images of African Americans pretending to steal as many ludicrous items as they could think of, along with over-the-top comments (“LAST NIGHT EVEN MOMMA GOT OUTTA HER HOUSE TO LOOT ME A NEW SHIRT . . . LUV U MOMMA”; “N-GA I JUS STOLE A CAT OUTTA SUM1S HOUSE GET ON MY LEVEL”; “PICS OF MY BOY DEMARCUS SWIPING THAT TV”) to a feed supposedly belonging to the “Sandy Loot Crew”. The photos, of course, had nothing to do with Hurricane Sandy and many had nothing to do with looting. Although purportedly posted to satirize racist attitudes, the results were predictable; despite the ludicrous inadequacy of the photos, the *Daily Mail* reprinted the story as fact, blaming the #SandyLootCrew for a massive wave of lootings throughout New York (as GNAA president Leon Kaiser suggested, “Anyone who takes ‘N-GA I JUST STOLE A CAT OUTTA SUM1S HOUSE GET ON MY LEVEL’ at face value probably shouldn’t be working in the news industry.”

So what’s intended as careless satire ends up feeding the very prejudice it’s supposed to be satirizing. *The Awl*’s John Herrman calls this the “Borowitz Problem” in reference to *The New Yorker* humor columnist whose pandering fake news, so addictively clickable when it appears on a Facebook feed, often gets shared to the point where it influences public opinion. This kind of deceptive “share-bait”, of course, is no bad thing for a site’s revenue – so that sites like *The Daily Currant*, which pitches its brand of believable-unbelievable stories at just the point where they become great political share-bait – have caught out several other publications aggregating its stories as news.

All of this mostly comes down to money – not the most noble of pursuits, but not the worst either. We should care, though, as yet again what seems to be just the accidental mishaps of the internet age are co-opted in darker interests than merely commercial ones. It’s worth bearing in mind how many of these stories have an explicitly right wing tone – because shock and hate, as research shows, seems to share better. Fail to examine the implications of all this and we head towards a situation where someone like Donald Trump effectively writes the papers. Or perhaps we don’t need to imagine such a situation, because in fact Trump already relies on precisely this kind of truth mismanagement to spread his message. Dispensing with even the most cursory attention to the truth, Trump has become a kind of human version of a fake-news aggregator, making pronouncements that push shock-value to the limits of absurdity – that “thousands and thousands” of New Jersey Muslims cheered at 9/11, that parts of London were “so radicalised” that police were “afraid for their own lives” – while openly admitting that he didn’t care whether the statements were true or not. And why should he care, when truth is only a minor consideration when you’re attracting voters – as against, for example, that spreading these kind of rumours on Facebook and the like can add up to potential votes in the Presidential

election. Some of Trump's lies even illustrate the handy circularity of the internet's echo chamber. In November he came out with the shocking race-baiting fact that 81 percent of murdered white people are killed by black people. No matter that it's an out-and-out lie (the truth is that 84 percent of murdered white people are murdered by other white people, which is, with beautiful Orwellian irony, almost the exact opposite of the claim) Trump didn't come up with this gem on his own. In the tweet where he made the claim Trump cited the "Crime Statistics Bureau—San Francisco", which at least suggests he's attempting to back up his words with something.

Of course the Crime Statistics Bureau of San Francisco doesn't actually exist – it's the creation of a white supremacist on Twitter. But so what? Even when the lie was exposed, Trump didn't take down the tweet, apologize, or even acknowledge it. This is where the real differences between lies in the analogue age and those in the digital one become apparent. Because "dead-tree" publishing was smaller and more tangible, it was also easier to uphold it to minimal standard. Even the worst of the *National Enquirer* or *News of the World* type platforms were subject to *some* regulation – or at the very least some legal recourse if they continued to print lies. On the web, however, who really gives a shit? Does anybody care enough to police the web for every systematic untruth uttered? How would it even be possible to do so? (Not only did Trump say it; it's also fed into the rhetoric of other politicians <http://www.buzzfeed.com/andrewkaczynski/gop-congressman-says-american-jihadis-might-return-to-us-wit#1mceci>)

This is the world we're contemplating – one of half-truths and quasi-rumour, of movie stills masquerading as war footage. But it's important to differentiate this from other, older forms of propaganda. What we're talking about is something we might call "lies of context" – a case not of Photoshopped or doctored photos but of photos purporting to be one thing when they're really another. A crime of pictorial re-appropriation rather than pictorial fraud. Because what's surely worse than a malign authority distorting the truth is a world where there's no fixed purchase on the truth in the first place – or worse, where the truth is simply a free-for-all and people can believe what they want to believe? The legacy of the social revolution is not a citizenry poised to finely comb its newsfeeds for inaccuracy. It's a citizenry that no longer *cares* quite as much whether something's true, or – perhaps worse – assumes that nothing is fully true or fully false any more, that it just *doesn't actually matter* whether it is or not. In his influential book *On Bullshit* the philosopher Harry Frankfurt talked of a third state that lay between truth and falsehood – the world of bullshit and make-believe, a soupy mass of believe-what-you-want where nothing really matters and conspiracy theories are as valuable as properly-researched news. The internet is a place where bullshit and believe-what-you-want are given fantastic new scope to grow and flourish. The pictures of a drowned New York, the Ebola /

Isis outbreaks, Trump's wild claims – they're not merely lies but a step towards a whole *Alice in Wonderland* universe of fantasy and make-believe.

And ultimately, such a universe starts to impinge on the real one. The real danger of citizen knowledge is not that it misleads people – though it certainly does that – but that it leads people to view *all* knowledge as suspect. Customers are turning up at restaurants and telling staff about allergies – then getting ignored by waiters who assume they're cyberchondriacs, paranoid from too many web forums. Some have also died. By placing a near-infinite information flow at the fingertips of the ordinary person, today's web is promoting rumour to fact and devaluing truth. Child "allergies" are being discovered daily by worried parents while Australian research shows that misinformation about HPV vaccines amplified by Twitter is fuelling anti-vaccine opinion in the public. As *Salon's* Farhad Manjoo put it in his book *True Enough*, it's not the proliferation of fake photos that's the issue – it's that "true photos will be ignored as phonies". Take the teenage cancer victim who became convinced she was dying from a rare form of liver cancer after researching past cases online. Despite begging doctors to take her seriously in a series of desperate messages, she was told to "stop Googling" and told she was fine. She died just 16 months later of fibrolamellar hepatocellular carcinoma. A world where no one believes anything any longer can be a dangerous place.

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Tweeting to the converted

Is the web turning us into a planet-sized talking shop?

I don't know about other people, but I don't go to Facebook to get news and political opinions. I use it to see pictures of my parents' vacation or sent out invites to a party.

- Comment on the *Huffington Post* website

I'm astonished how many people on Facebook are experts in military defence but have chosen careers in fields that pay far less.

- Facebook user, on the eve of Britain's bombing of Syria, November 2015

In 2004, a year after the US-led invasion of Iraq, an activist campaign began called Save Darfur. As this was still a time when social media was a fringe pursuit, it utilised the communication strategies that had proved tried-and-tested over decades: postcards, phone-a-thons, sit-ins, rallies, church groups and campus assembly. It did indeed succeed in raising money for the beleaguered city, but Save Darfur itself never got itself noticed by all that many people. How could it? As a million marketers will tell you, the problem with legacy platforms like post and phone is that they rarely “scale”; a mass-mailout may lead to some word-of-mouth, but it's expensive and time-consuming to pass these messages on. There's a reason the word *viral* was never applied to the postal system.

So as the 2000s pressed on, Save Darfur changed its tack. It decided to go fully digital. By 2007 it had become the world's largest Facebook campaign, attracting millions of page views. It released a video game called *Darfur is Dying* to attract kids. Techniques which we now see as utterly bog-standard in the game of non-profit marketing – stats and big data, glossy images, segmented audience targeting – were embraced as never before to make Save Darfur the biggest, baddest Facebook charity campaign out there. It worked; by the late 2000s it was one of the most famous social media campaigns the world had ever seen.

There was only one problem. The vast majority of people who enjoyed the games, Facebook pages and social media marketing failed to do one thing. They neglected to actually donate any money to the cause.

Researchers at the University of California studied the donation and recruitment activity of over one million Save Darfur members from 2007-2010 and concluded that “in the case of the Save Darfur campaign, Facebook conjured an illusion of activism rather than facilitating the real thing”. Of the one million-plus members, they found, 99.76 percent failed to ever donate any money; Save Darfur may have had millions of “supporters”, but 0.24 of even a large number doesn’t actually add up to all that much. After nearly three years of campaigning, the researchers found that Save Darfur had raised around \$100,000, or £59,000.

£59,000 after three years of campaigning. A quarter of the price of a one-bedroom flat in outer London.

Meanwhile, in the real world, the offline Save Darfur campaign raised over \$1million through direct-mail contributions – and that was in 2008 alone.

“The study is an important counter-balance to unbridled enthusiasm for the powers of social media,” one of the researchers told *Wired* in 2014. “There’s no inherent magic. Social media can activate interpersonal ties but won’t necessarily turn ordinary citizens into hyper-activists.” It wasn’t just the lack of donations that cast a pall on all the utopian images of digital activism, where sunny progressives looking for ways to empty their PayPal accounts into distant online campaigns while energetically spreading the word to their friends. While some members did recruit others to the cause, this was the exception rather than the norm; over two thirds of the sample never bothered to reach out and spread the word to anyone, which rather belies the notion of a large and connected audience. No wonder that Kevin Lewis, one of the study’s authors, concluded that Save Darfur appeared to be “more marketing than mobilization”.

In other words, the undisputable fact that social media marketing *could* reach millions of people in a wellspring of grassroots enthusiasm didn’t necessarily mean that they would. In fact the rather obvious counter-effect sprang into action: that the ease of creating campaigns and linking to vast social media audiences would flood the landscape with new entrants, vastly increasing the noise without measurably increasing the actual audience or indeed enthusiasm for the cause.

Above all, it suggested that there might be something a little problematic about attempting to create an entire social movement based on the incredibly weak ties of Facebook. The commitment to Save Darfur for the majority of the members, said Lewis, “might have been only as deep as a click.”

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This chapter is an attempt to unpick that sentence: to explore whether the rise on digital activism really *is* as deep as a click. And if it is, to ask why it remains so popular.

The inspiration for all this was a feeling. It was a feeling that developed gradually, taking shape through the 2000s, the decade the internet went mainstream and spawned new ideas about how to change the world. The zeitgeist swam with new kinds of activism. E-petitions began to fill our inboxes. Online campaigns took shape on the new, giant social networks that were starting to span the earth. Catching the tube in London every morning I'd skim the *Metro* – a poppy, tabloidy British freesheet – and marvel at how much space it devoted to the sundry fads, crazes, protests and organizations taking place online. A bunch of politicized guerilla gardeners. A crazy new craftivism project. A new pop-up stall selling vegan ice cream. Beside the fun, bubbly article there'd always be a photo of the fun, bubbly people behind it. Activism or indie business start-up, the subtext was always the same: *these kids are using social media to get their message out*. Online it was the same story. Barely a day would pass when I wouldn't receive some kind of invitation, petition, solicitation. The activity was starting to spawn a new terminology: "digital activism", "online protest"; or – once Twitter had got going – more specific and evolved kinds of campaigning like "hashtactivism", a way of organizing yourself as a cause beneath a specific phrase rather than a discrete and concrete grouping. People I read and admired – people like Naomi Klein – seemed to think that the future lay with the horizontal and democratic power structures of the internet. It all seemed very, very optimistic.

I couldn't shake the feeling, though. Could all of this just be slightly too good to be true?

In 2013 I would watch a meeting of a leftwing activist group that had gathered in one of Britain's crumbling post-industrial cities. As a sea of those forsaken by Austerity politics gazed back – unemployed and disabled; students on zero hours, stress-worn pensioners – young rising star of the left and *Chavs* author Owen Jones made a stirring speech where he assured us all that the masses wouldn't take it any more, that it was only a matter of time, that the cruelty of the reigning Conservatives would be their own undoing.

"I want everybody," he said, "to get out your phones."

Everybody – or nearly everybody – did so. Then Jones instructed them to turn to the person next to them.

“Film the person standing next to you about why this matters,” he commanded. “Make a little video. Then upload it. Tweet it. Put it on Twitter.”

He smiled with a demagogue’s gesture of hope.

“We’ve got to get the message out there,” he said.

His speech ended with the same rapturous applause that seemed to greet anything Owen Jones said or wrote. As I stepped out of there people were still filming one another on their phones.

What demagoguery, what well-oiled machinery: I had to marvel at the smoothness of it all, at how everyone in the room seemed to agree with such total certainty and with such hope, how the live-tweeting and the smartphones seemed to take that message and amplify it so swiftly and powerfully, disseminate it, broadcast it to those who couldn’t be in the room. This was political engagement of the highest order indeed.

Perhaps that was what bothered me about it. Wasn’t it all just *too* smooth, too well-oiled? Perhaps there was just something a little self-satisfied about the idea that with enough tweeting and YouTube posting the inherent brilliance of these ideas (which of course were only “brilliant” to people on a certain part of the political spectrum) would reveal itself, win more converts to the cause. Was that really a useful political exercise I’d seen – or was it the Left just talking to itself, tweeting to the converted, convincing itself that it was convincing wider society too by bathing itself in the comforting glow of social media?

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If it was, there was certainly good precedent. There are distinct between parts of today’s blogosphere and Twitterati and the birth of the independent press during the Enlightenment – the pamphlets and tracts of publishers like Joseph Johnson, the writings of revolutionary *Philosophes* like Payne, Voltaire or Diderot, who thrilled with a feverish desire to say what couldn’t be said, overcome the censorship of mainstream channels and provide a home for free thinkers. If there’s anybody the social web has traditionally appealed to, it’s those who struggle to find a voice elsewhere – conspiracy theorists and 9/11 activists; far right white power extremists; hardline Dawkinite aethiests and free speech advocates; black, LGBT and trans writers of all stripes and persuasions; jihadi recruiters groups like Isis.

And it gave a home to the modern Left. In Britain, where the Right has traditionally dominated the press via Murdoch and various corporate groups, it’s

not hard to see why something like Twitter – and the blogosphere before it – might evolve to provide a home for progressives. Certainly there were enough progressive arts and comedy bigwigs who imported their followings onto it; progressive commentators and columnists bolstered the attention they received in the mainstream media by tweeting fast and frequently. I began to notice a certain kind of behavior among my mostly left-wing friends on Facebook: only posting worthy, progressive material, stuff that would show them in the best light, distancing themselves from anybody with a differing viewpoint, attacking anybody whose views failed to chime with their own.

This was beginning to feel more like an echo chamber than a discursive forum.

I learnt new terms by reading around. *Virtue signaling*: showing off to your friends just how leafy and progressive your views were. *Purity leftism*: demonstrating via social media how much you hated anything that *wasn't* leafy and progressive. There was a passivity built into all these trends of course – rather than getting off the sofa and trying to change something, this kind of social media activism wasn't really activism at all but rather *reactivism*, a social performance rather than an attempt to change the world. Virtue signaling wasn't a way of attacking the world's horror; it was just a way of washing your own hands of it. And that might go a long way to explaining why something like Save Darfur could gather millions of views and yet garner an embarrassing pittance in donations. It might go a long way to explaining why Facebook teems with campaigns and petitions, only a tiny proportion of which ever catch anybody's attention. The point isn't to change the world: the point is symbolic protest, a means to signal the tenor of your views. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram all make perfect places to practice the virtual version of wearing a political T-shirt: places to practice what might be called “conspicuous compassion”.

The New Labour guru Philip Gould recently drew on data collected from focus groups conducted in 1980s Britain, where women aged 25 to 44 were asked what issues affected them. They named law and order, health, education and variations on the micro-economy – all preoccupations Thatcher's government were campaigning on, while Labour's concerns about nuclear disarmament and the role of minorities came dispiritingly low. Given our choice of government, the Britain of a generation later does not seem to be demonstrably any less right-wing. What *has* changed is peoples' willingness to indicate their political persuasion. Unlike the anonymity of the focus group, social media is a public, performative forum, one where people are judged on the preferences they show. In this environment, shy conservatives retreat into the closet. How many people who secretly support tougher controls on immigration or a crackdown on benefits would actually be prepared to show that? Not among my circles they wouldn't – and I don't believe that my circles are atypical. The result is what *New Statesman* deputy editor Helen Lewis terms the “tyranny of the Like” – a

landscape dominated by the need for constant performance and approval, where only total orthodoxy to the progressive cause is rewarded and any deviation harshly and bitchily punished.

No wonder that everybody ends up believing their friends think as they do. No wonder that this apparent conformity can end up lulling political communities into a dangerous sense of security, entertaining false hopes that help to lead them off the electoral cliff. Prior to the 2015 British General Election, among progressives everyone seemed to support Labour ideas like the mansion tax and taking action against on tax evading non-doms while opposing reducing benefits or the help given to disabled people. But did they actually dare to show that on social media? Or were they the ones changing their avatar to a rainbow flag or sharing links to inspiring stories of brave refugees from Syria? We won't ever know for sure. There is, however, another forum in which millions of British people *did* show their opinions on the relative merits of left-wing and right-wing policies – the ballot box. Buoyed up by the kind of enthusiasm that Owen Jones had shown, the Left in Britain went into the General Election of May 7th 2015 tweeting and posting, uploading and linking in a blaze of hope and enthusiasm, a righteous conviction that *this* time they'd be proved right, *this* time they'd got the message out, *this* time they represented the views of a battered and bruised public. How could it not go this way, after half a decade or more of punishing austerity? How could this *hope* everyone feeling not sway the result?

If nothing else, you had to admire the strength of the optimism. The next day it was announced that the Conservatives had swept back to power and much of the Left had been wiped off the electoral map. What all that hope had *actually* added up to was rather more prosaic: another five years of the Tories.

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“I watch lefty mates declaring they are going to unfollow anyone remotely conservative,” wrote *Guardian* columnist Suzanne Moore in the aftermath of the Election, “and I am dismayed. If you can't even have a conversation with someone who votes differently to you, how do you begin to imagine you might bring them back to your way of thinking?”

Here was the really weird thing: rather than retrenching position, attempting to modify their views or invite discussion across the political divides, the British Left seemed to treat electoral defeat as an opportunity for *more* insular thinking, for retreating back into a comfortable ideological bubble. Young people and idealists of all stripes flocked to join the Labour party in order to get a little-

known MP elected to the office of leader, despite the fact that the real voter base lay to the centre, not the extreme left. “Didn’t we lose the election because we were too left-wing?” I asked a friend.

“It’s about the gesture.”

The bubble was filling with people who found the reality so ugly outside that they only chose to look inwards. All around me were people who read books by Verso (the leftist publisher of choice) or *The New Statesman* (the leftist weekly of choice) or *The Guardian* (the leftist daily of choice) or OpenDemocracy (the leftist donation-funded online platform of choice); all around me were people whose opinions chimed with columns by the likes of Laurie Penny (the leftist young female icon of choice) or contributors like Robert Webb or Charlie Brooker or Marcus Brigstock (the leftist popular comedians of choice); who referred to the ideas of George Monbiot or Naomi Klein (the leftist environmentalists of choice) or Will Self (the leftist novelist of choice)... And so on.

What about the broad church? What about involving all points of view? Wasn’t that supposed to be the wonder of our networked age, that we could easily communicate across the divides – so why did people seem to be entrenching themselves more firmly than they ever had before?

Outside, the ravages of the post-industrial economy still lay, in a city that had once been the cradle of industrialism itself: sprawling estates, jobless queues, poisoned canalsides still awaiting their gentrification. That Winter Owen Jones began a tour of Britain where arena-sized audiences could come and listen to his pronouncements on how with the power of hope they could defeat the Right. Booking lines charged up to £19 a ticket.

The rise of the “lumpen commentariat”

Was there a link between the rise of online social activity and the growth of these political echo chambers? Was such a link even possible to demonstrate? There were certainly some interesting correspondences: the rise of the “No Platform” and “Safe Space” movements across universities in the US and UK – where speakers who failed to conform to liberal orthodoxy were banned or disinvited – seemed to mirror the purity leftism people exhibit so well on Facebook. Why should we be surprised if a generation who’d grown up learning to edit their newsfeed and tweak the kind of opinions they were exposed to should seek to enact the same filters in the real world? Was it not possible that the wider processes of trolling, spamming and banning people we disagreed with was in

some way the result of the entitlement millennials had been taught to feel by infinitely tweakable, infinitely customizable newsfeeds?

Facebook, in other words, was the safest space of all. And if Facebook was so comforting to be on, no wonder the kids wanted to imitate it in real life.

This becomes all the more important when we consider that Facebook itself is a highly curated place. In an example of what might be called “censorship by algorithm”, the sociologist and writer Zeynep Tufekci realized in the midst of the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri, that Facebook seemed to be utterly ignoring what was happening – effectively censoring the news. As she wrote later, “Without Twitter to get around it, Facebook’s news feed might have algorithmically buried the beginning of what has become a nationwide movement focusing on race, poverty and policing.” If this sounds like she was being over-fussy, consider the fact that Facebook is where nearly a third of Americans now get their news. There were armed tanks on the streets of Ferguson. The only thing on Facebook was stuff about the Ice Bucket Challenge.

This might be less scary if more people were aware of the degree to which these platforms are algorithmically curated for them – but a recent study found that 62 percent of the participants in one study had no idea that their Facebook feed was curated. The dream of the hyper-connected world can put the reputations not just of people but entire ethnic groups or disadvantaged communities on the line. The power of Silicon Valley’s biggest firms over our mentality is incalculable, and just because they “crowdsource” our thoughts doesn’t make them necessarily democratic or progressive. Let’s suppose that you belong to an ethnic minority and every search made in your name results in a slew of racist stereotypes – racist stereotypes shaped by the digital footprints of everybody else searching for the same material. How would *that* feel? Well, we don’t need to imagine it; many ethnic minorities already know what it’s like to be on the wrong end of a Google search, the victims of what you might call “algorithmic racism”. Google “Why do black people...?” and the autocomplete feature will helpfully furnish you with suggestions like “have white palms”, “have big noses”, “say aks” (for “ask”) and “like fried chicken” – a clutch of stereotypes with more than a whiff of eugenics about them. Jews get “not eat pork; wear hats; have big noses” while “Why do Asians...?” brought up “have slanty eyes.”

Aren’t these autocorrect suggestions the product of the democratic, connected, peer-to-peer society that’s supposed to be making us all so enlightened? Blame Google for not censoring them more – some do – but autocorrect suggestions are nonetheless ultimately generated from “us”. They’re the echoes that travel across the information economy when humans are linked to the point where everything they type reverberates somehow to influence the thoughts and actions of others. Anthropologists and geographers use a term called “desire lines” to describe the

paths that people create themselves, often deviating from the ones officially laid out for them – the ones that cut across quadrangles, form shortcuts through grassy verges, getting worn down, in time, to become fully-fledged roads in their own right. If the internet has a topography, then it's made from desire lines rather than official roads. But while such imagery suggests a kind of folk democracy – paths created by users help to guide other users down the same paths – we forget how in time the effect can wall people up inside camps of similar opinion, can lead us to stop looking or step off the path most travelled. Autocorrect suggestions like the above are a set of “desire lines of prejudice”, a kind of web that schools us in everybody else's bigotry – not to educated and reasonable adults, perhaps, but how about children? Or those already predisposed to racism or neo-Nazism? Just because we're enfranchised to influence the decisions of total strangers, why do we assume that that alone will rid us of hate and prejudice?

Could the rise in online petitions simply be more of the same – a way to signal our politics, a feelgood exercise in making us feel useful without having to leave our armchairs? All through the 2000s I watched a million feelgood “clicktivist” campaigns take shape. I'd see friends linking to them on Facebook, emailing me about them, breathlessly clicking before moving on to the next. Catching the tube in London every morning through the later 2000s I'd skim the *Metro* – a poppy, tabloidy British freesheet – and watch the sundry fads, crazes, promotions bubbling up to the surface of the cultural zeitgeist. A bunch of politicized guerilla gardeners. A crazy new craftivism project that had an important message about immigration. A new pop-up stall selling vegan ice cream. Activism or indie business start-up, the postscript was always the same: *these kids are using social media to get their message out there*.

I began to read the mood-music behind these stories. The ones using social media to get their message out there, at least as far as this end of the liberal press were concerned, were generally young and energetic (and photogenic). There didn't seem to be many pensioners getting behind Facebook campaigns. You never heard much about far right groups using social media to get their message out there (though they undoubtedly were); there was little about oil giants or Isis or the Israeli Defence Force using social media to get their message out there (they all were, of course, as I explore in other chapters – and often a lot more energetically than the kids with cupcake stalls. It just didn't make for very inspiring copy).

No, this was a story of quiet, praiseworthy revolution – a story of kids empowering themselves and fighting back against stuffy tradition, the disenfranchised finally finding a voice. In practice, of course, much of the digital activism took place within the usual bubbles of smartphone-wielding privilege – the kind of thing it resulted in was much more likely to be a Shoreditch start-up

selling organic ice cream than a successful campaign to alleviate homelessness by marshaling digital audiences. But something troubled me about the rhetoric all the same. Why, I wondered, was it assumed that the only people who could utilize social media to get their message out were young people of the “correct”, liberal outlook? Wasn’t it possible that petitions could be set up in the cause of someone or something far worse?

In late March, 2015, a tank was driven to the offices of Broadcasting House in London. The driver – the Stig, a character from *Top Gear* – bore a petition. The petition came from Change.org and it bore over a million signatures. It had been one of the fastest in the platform’s history. In the year that would see the bombing of Syria, the flood of desperate migrants, the attacks on Paris and the world climate talks, this was the biggest online campaign around on UK soil. It was a petition to forgive a TV producer who’d punched his junior in the face.

Just listen to the sad piano

Reinstate Jeremy Clarkson to *Top Gear*: what a lofty ambition for digital activism. The petition to re-employ a snarling bigot – albeit a bigot who works well on television – was emblematic of a throwaway, “laughtivist” approach that relies much more on stunts and symbolic gestures than it does on effecting actual change. Following the death of Margaret Thatcher in the Spring of 2013 a national petition sprang up to get *Ding Dong! The Witch Is Dead* from *The Wizard of Oz* to the top of the UK charts – a rather grisly epitaph to the country’s first woman Prime Minister, whatever you thought of her politics. One wonders if all the collective money, clicks and time that went into such a campaign had been otherwise diverted into something concerned with reducing inequality rather than joking about it – food drives, soup kitchens, community work – what might have been achieved. Even when the goal is more concrete, crowdfunding often proves more than a little inadequate as a tool to changing the world for a better. A 2015 Indiegogo campaign trying to raise €1.6 billion to bail out Greece (“by the people, for the people”) ended with contributions just shy of the €2 million mark – or, to put it another way, it raised an interesting “0 per cent” of the total needed to make a difference to Greece. (No wonder, when in order to reach the €1.6bn target, he would have needed to raise €200,000 a minute). According to the numbers for the original campaign, 7500 people donated enough to be rewarded with a Greek feta and olive salad and 11,300 donated the €10 needed to be rewarded with a bottle of Ouzo; only seven people gave enough to win a Greek holiday. The 29 year old London hipster behind the campaign said he simply intended to “Bypass the dithering politicians and the people of Europe fund a bailout” by getting the equivalent of everyone in the EU to order a feta and olive

salad for lunch. As he put it, “We get a tasty lunch, Greece gets economic stability.” Who knew economic stability was as simple as a tasty lunch?

Perhaps this is all to miss the point. The e-petition is generally concerned less with action and more with symbolism and gesture. Jokes are weapons to be wielded. When an Iranian cleric asserted that women might be causing earthquakes with their “sinful” dress in 2010, American science undergraduate Jenny McCreight launched a “boobquake” campaign to prove him wrong. Wrong she proved him, but found herself criticized by a variety of feminists who wondered why it was necessary to fight sexism with an online stunt that involved girls stripping off. Following the petition against the UK bombing of Syria – a petition which raised a fraction of the signatures gathered for reinstating Clarkson – another petition demanding the BBC remove the controversial heavyweight champion Tyson Fury’s name from the BBC Sports Personality of the Year vote began to climb skyward. Were Clarkson and Fury *really* more important than the invasion of a foreign country? Or perhaps these campaigns simply displayed the same blind obsession with pop culture, TV and celebrity as the internet itself (compare how many online petitions there are to bring back a sitcom or punish a celebrity for saying something offensive to, say, improving water aid for Africa).

Pranking and joking is innate to the grain of the internet, it seems, which is why it’s often rolled out to attack serious issues (such as the Pink Chaddi campaign, which encouraged Indian women to mail their underwear to sexist priests). The atmosphere of online stunts have even transformed into an entire genre, with people like Yousef Saleh Erakat – aka “Fousey” – gaining millions of YouTube subscribers with what might be called socially aware pranks or “social experiments”. Over 15 million people have watched his most popular video, the Yoga Pants Prank, where he dressed in tight yoga pants and then attacked passersby for examining his ass (it’s exposing sexism, yeah?) but it’s where Fousey draws on his Palestinian heritage to veigh into commentary on racial divides that things get really interesting. In the “Terrorist Hijabi Experiment” he pretends to harass a woman dressed in a hijab on the street while yelling absurdly contrived and badly acted racist abuse at her (“Why are you wearing that? Go home, you terrorist. You’re in our country”).

Needless to say countless people walk past. So there you go: people are Islamophobic, racist and nasty. It’s official! If you needed any more convincing, listen to the melancholy piano cords that play over the piece.

Except that nobody but a 9 year old child could actually believe that this video “proved” anything. How long did the actors stand there? What was the editing process? How do we know that they showed everybody who intervened? In other words, a social “experiment” isn’t an experiment at all unless it comes with

all the appropriate context – control groups, sample size, frequency findings, and so on – that actually support a conclusion. Here we just get a heavily edited four minute video that proves nothing. Let’s consider for a moment the reasons people might walk past. True, they may be Islamophobic. *Or* – more likely? – they might be scared of a young male with obvious aggression problems; they might not have actually heard or understood what was going on; they might not speak English. Or, perhaps most importantly of all, *they may just suspect that a rather wooden young woman in headdress and a rather wooden young man “harassing her” were just part of a stunt* (God knows, there are enough such YouTube videos and smartphones to make this a common occurrence by now in some cities). But in the age of YouTube no such considerations are important; everyone’s clearly Islamophobic because they walked past a badly-acted street stunt. As Fousey himself whispers to the camera, “This one speaks for itself”.

None of this is to argue that Islamophobia isn’t alive and well on the streets of the US, but it’s hard to see how an absurd street stunt is the best way to discuss such a serious issue. In fact there’s a severe danger with these kind of social experiments that rather than exposing prejudice they merely exploit it and even trivialize it. Take the famous “10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman” video, which featured an attractive young woman walking through New York ignoring the catcalls directed at her. With 41 million views at the time of writing, it’s among the most famous of such stunts, and sparked a wave of admiration among the online press. “Ten hours of walking around New York City, 100 catcalls and one huge problem,” the *Huffington Post* headline ran in its account of the stunt, in an article which attracted 13 thousand Likes on YouTube. “I felt like no one had ever really shown what it's like to experience street harassment, more or less,” the maker told their reporters. “No one has -- from a third-party perspective, on the outside looking in -- been able to step back and look at it and watch it happen in front of them.”

Who could argue with such noble intentions? But as with all the other social “experiments”, dig a little deeper and it seems 10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman is not quite as noble and unbiased as it purports to be. For a start, this is far from the usual walk. For one thing, the actress filmed held two microphones in her hands; she was also fronted by the director, Rob Bliss, who walked in front of her with a GoPro camera to his back with a chest strap. Did this itself catch any attention? We have no way of knowing. Again, as with the other “experiments”, we only have the film-makers’ word that it really was ten hours, that this all happened on the same day, and so on. Perhaps this doesn’t matter in its capacity as a Public Service Announcement – the spirit in which it was apparently made – but it renders the whole thing completely invalid as research, of actually proving or demonstrating something about the world. Every social scientist knows the problems of examining “reality” – of determining laws and trends in the same way as we can test, for example, whether water boils at 100 degrees. There’s no

lab conditions in the real world – no perfect, uncontaminated control group. But at least the professionals *try*; at least the structures of social research established over half a century make their best attempt to represent a complex world. In contrast the walking video gave us a director wearing “a yellow backpack, sunglasses and earbuds to look unassuming while walking five to 10 feet ahead of Roberts, who held two microphones in her hands”. Guy with a GoPro followed by girl with a mike: why on earth do we assume that that’s going to produce a “normal” reaction?

Street harassment is a serious thing – serious enough that it needs to be treated seriously. Dig beneath the citizen-media kudos of 10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman, and – like many such viral stunts – the whole thing starts to look a lot less natural and a lot more like a calculated enterprise. We should also remember that for all its street credentials, this wasn’t the byproduct of a couple of everyday people who decided to pick up a camera. Director Rob Bliss makes viral videos for a living (he runs a company called Rob Bliss Creative); the young woman – also his girlfriend – was no girl off the street but actually the actress Shoshana B. Roberts. If this all sounds irrelevant, it’s worth noting the next stage of the tale. Following the runaway viral success of the video, some rather troubling concerns emerged when people began to question why most of the men harassing Roberts were non-white. As the black feminist writer Roxane Gay wondered on Twitter, “didn’t walk through any white neighborhoods?” Bliss responded by claiming much of the footage showing white men making comments was ruined by noise pollution – he admitted that many of the ‘fair amount of white guys’ who had made comments had been edited out of the final clip. “We didn’t always capture the audio or video well – there’s a siren that kills the scene, or someone walks in front of the camera, so we had to work with what we had,” he said. “Cities are noisy, and full of people that walk in front of the camera, you know? By chance, this is how it looked and it didn’t end up being the perfect representation of everything that happened.”

Hmm. Interestingly, Bliss had been called out for race blindness in his work before; in a promotional video he’d had to promote Grand Rapids, Michigan, he was criticized for making a city with huge numbers of minorities look like it had “been reincarnated from those peppy family-style 1970s musical acts from Disney World or Knott’s Berry Farm,” in the words of a local blogger. Could a video aimed at exposing prejudice itself be prejudiced?

10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman serves as a useful reminder of how the limitations of this kind of online activism can at best be deceptive and at worse be dangerous. Not long after the video spread, anti-street harassment group Hollaback! reported that Roberts was facing harassment online in the form of rape threats, accusations of racism and suggestions she should have ‘smiled back’ – a rather sobering consequence to the act of exposing exactly this kind of

activism. But even apart from all this, how exactly is a video like this supposed to help? By reminding us that street harassment exists? That's something that at least half the human population already understands – it's debatable whether a voyeuristic and highly staged viral video is the best way to explore it. An uncomfortably salacious undercurrent ran through the copycat videos that sprang up in the wake of its success – videos like "Girl Walks Around NYC With No Pants!" (5 million hits) – involving naked women painting their bodies with jeans spray or "10 Hours of Walking in London as a Porn Star" (500,000 hits) by a woman calling herself SaraJayTV ("don't forget to Like, Comment & Fav the video"). You have to wonder when exposure of female harassment leads to women dressing as porn stars what you're accomplishing exactly. I can easily imagine men watching these videos for sexual thrills.

It's not hard to see how these kind of videos might serve a social purpose despite their dubious origins – the ones where actors pose as corner-tramps seem to genuinely seem to expose cruelty and indifference to the homeless for example. But the whole thing is so mired in the limitations of their own making that it's hard to see what they actually prove. In perhaps the most preposterous example of all a prankster wraps a "dog" – actually an unconvincing fake toy – in black sacking and then proceeds to punch and kick it while shouting things like, "Bad dog! Nobody's going to help you dog!" while playing a recording of dog howls. Uninterested in intervening with someone who appears to be mentally deranged beating up an inanimate toy, most passers-by predictably ignore him.

So there: people don't care about animal cruelty! Who? These people! Look! Under normal circumstances a clip as risible wouldn't even merit comment. But *Abusing A Fake Dog In Public* has so far racked up 3.5million hits; the people who ignored the joker – a bunch of women here, a couple of young guys in T-shirts there – are now exposed to armies of people who may or may not believe they're indifferent to animals (and can there be a greater crime on the internet?) Welcome to YouTube's kangaroo court: guilty until the internet forgets about you. When one man in the video examines the "dog", gives it a kick, and then nonchalantly walks on when the lifeless toy fails to respond – in what looks to a disinterested observer as a pointed unmasking of the stunt – he sealed his fate. "I swear to fucking god people are the worst like whY WOULD YOU HELP BEAT UP THE DOG DO YOU HAVE ANY DECENCY WHATSOEVER YOU SHOULD BE IN THAT DAMN GARBAGE BAG AND YOU SHOULD BE KICKED AND ABUSED like what are you doing with your life," one person said in the Comments section. "I hope that last guy burns in hell," added another. And a third: "This is why I hate humans." Pretty stern punishment for simply happening to walk along a street.

As with much internet activism, the twin strains of bullying and narcissism run deeply through these videos. Here's a "social experiment" – a Chinese whisper, like a meme or a macro – that "proves" Islamophobia and that will undoubtedly

affect the opinions of millions. Here's a video about street harassment. Watch it now. Share it with your friends. Watch those view counts climb into the millions. Large view counts earn advertising royalties not just for YouTube but for the people they share them with. In this kind of infotainment the infotainers actually get the best of worst – they get the kudos that comes with exposing prejudice while getting the money as well. YouTube just looks after everybody.

The American Idol model of politics

If this kind of “campaigning” was restricted to the crass environs of YouTube it might be easier to take. But even when the objective is ostensibly political e-campaigning can't help lapsing into the offensively trivial. During Obama's first term his administration attempted to crowdsource the views of the populace via a program called Questions for Change, a good idea on the face of it – the late 2000s were marked by cataclysmic economic collapse as well as issues around drone warfare abroad and numerous internal problems over welfare, work and health. So what was the result? A discussion of Obamacare? A referendum on curbing Wall Street's animal spirits? Actually no – one of the most voted for propositions was one entitled “Advise the TSA administration to save their Explosives Detecting Puppy Program”. There's also something oddly conservative about much of the digital activism movement, something that can feel rather ironic given the names of major platforms like Change.org (having had Change.org's petitions arriving in my inbox for years, I'm always surprised at how many of the titles feature the words “save” or “preserve”; one can only get the impression that the primary point of Change.org is to keep things mostly the same). Perhaps this has a lot to do with the way that online activism is structured. As the activist Micah White, writing about the history of digital activism, has pointed out, the gradual shift from real-world campaigning to a virtual version that began in the 1990s was more than a technological change. Outfits like Avaaz, 38 Degrees and Change.org offer a genuinely new “crowdsourced” mode of activism – one where petitions arise not from distant and dusty committees but rather from the people themselves. On the face of it, that seems fair enough – why *should* an activism platform reflect anything other than the immediate concerns of its users? – but it's actually much more of a profound change than it suggests. The switch to clicktivism is not a modification of the non-profit sector as much as a radical overhaul along pro-business, neoliberal lines.

Like party politics, the real justification for a professional, discrete non-profit campaigning sector is that they bring specialist knowledge to a complex problem – that they have a good idea what's needed where, how, when, why, and so on.

The average person doesn't have this knowledge. Is it any wonder, then, that when the average person is asked to come up with petitions that we end up with puppies and cute, easily resolvable petitions with widespread pop culture appeal? That the cream of online campaigning results not in attempts to address the fiendishly complex of international fishing quotas but the rather more poppy and fun "End trips to Seaworld"? That rather than getting petitions to address issues of sexual violence and marital abuse – not easy to express in a click – we get "Get Bill Cosby arrested"? That in place of an attempt to address the distressingly widespread prejudice and Islamophobia that fuelled Donald Trump's words, something which might require discussion and mediation, we simply get a petition to stop Trump entering Britain – a smug and show-off comment on the politics of immigration but little else?

The crowdsourced petition has other implications beyond the fact that it tends to result in light and breezy subjects. As White suggests, it also subtly introduces the logic of the marketplace into an area that had traditionally been seen as sacrosanct from it. In place of an older model where, for example, Oxfam might release a petition and solicit signatures (presumably having thought out beforehand whether such a petition was needed, appropriate and feasible) we get a shouting match between a huge surplus of petitions vying for attention like start-ups on a Kickstarter website. Is it any wonder then that the ones with most mass appeal, the jokey and funny ones, are the ones that tend to rise to the top? And since the entire model is based on competitive attention seeking, marketing continues to justify and facilitate every link in the chain. Clicktivist platforms utilise sophisticated email marketing software that boasts of "opens, clicks, actions, sign-ups, unsubscribes, bounces and referrals, in total and by source"; they use the same of kind of tracking and cookies strategies that activists bemoan so vocally in the corporate sector; they accept, in White's words, "that the tactics of advertising and market research used to sell toilet paper can also build social movements."

It's certainly quite a transition – from the belief in the power of ideas, or the "poetry of deeds", to enact social change, to a supermarket of causes where subject lines are A/B tested and messages pre-vetted online to highlight the ones with the widest appeal. One consequence of course is to reduce activism to metrics; campaigns have to compete in something measurable – numbers reached, petitions clicked on – in a rather debatable assumption that these numbers represent some kind of political engagement. The sites use such techniques in a rather hollow and desperate attempt to brand themselves. Avaaz boasts of over 42 million members worldwide. Change.org claims nearly 130 million people "taking action". 38 Degrees boasts of 38,267,752 "actions taken" and nearly 6,000 actual campaigns. They're all impressive figures, but what do they actually mean? What kind of "members" are we talking about? My parents were members of powerful lobbying groups like CND and Greenpeace; I

remember the letters and pamphlets that would arise in the post in return for their annual fees. To be a member of a digital activism platform by contrast you merely need to receive free emails, which, let's face it, most of us generally ignore.

The result is inflated participation rates in return for asking less and less (or often nothing at all) of their members – a degradation of activism into a series of petition drives that capitalise on current events". I'm a "member" of Avaaz and I've looked at, I think, two campaigns the entire time; I suspect many other people simply filtered them long ago so that their emails would go straight to the junk folder, suggesting that many of these "members" are no longer even aware they are one. The economies of scale that e-petitions leverage rest on a massive long tail of recipients, only a fraction of whom actually open the campaign emails. The insider truth is that the vast majority, between 80% to 90%, of so-called members rarely even open campaign emails. Recent research from Oxford University showed that 99.9% of UK e-petitions failed to reach the 100,000 signatures needed to trigger the prospect of a Commons debate, largely because without immediate take-up they suffered from precipitous attention decay – doomed, instead, to become "digital dust". Perhaps this shouldn't be surprising given how little effort 'signing up to' (or rather clicking on) an e-petition requires. But since the pre-selection process is based on this kind of non-committal clicking, we have to wonder how passionately the recipients actually feel about the causes on offer. Are complex and fringe voices losing out to market-tested platitudes, to the 'cute kitten' model of internet attention economics?

These problems go straight to the heart of neoliberal models and the web itself – its obsession with competition, with mass engagement at the expense of weak or no participation, with using staggering numbers to justify anything. When we exchange the substance of activism for "reformist platitudes that do well in market tests", we risk not simply creating meaningless petitions that achieve nothing but weakening the act of petitioning itself, risk reducing political engagement (at a time when issues are more pressing than in living memory) to the act of clicking a few links. If there was ever a salutary warning against conflating membership rates with changing the world for the better, it has to be TckTckTck, an organisation to battle climate change which apparently has 17 million members and is widely hailed as an innovator of digital activism. Wipe away the greenwash, however, and you realize TckTckTck is actually is a project of Havas Worldwide, the world's sixth-largest advertising company – and one of the key drivers for the unsustainable overconsumption that's helping to drive climate change in the first place. Few of us would approve of a dentist that sold boiled sweets, but beneath the feelgood banner of non-profit clicktivism, it's sometimes hard to tell.

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Whatever theorists may think of it, hashtactivism appears to go from strength to strength. Beyoncé released a video called *I Was Here* for World Humanitarian Day and racked up 17 million views; back in 2012 the *Invisible Children* campaign attempted to remove child-enslaver Joseph Kony by getting millions of people to share a video about him. “Anyone can be a digital humanitarian, absolutely no experience necessary; all you need is a big heart and access to the internet,” claimed Patrick Meier recently in *Digital Humanitarians: How Big Data is Changing the Face of Humanitarian Response*. Technology, he suggests, “can amplify our humanity”; tech commentator Mark Pesce declared a few years ago that sharing tools are bringing forth a “hyper-empowered democracy”. It’s a rare week that passes now when the news doesn’t feature at least one major digital campaign, a socially motivated hashtag gaining huge support; our email inboxes regularly groan beneath the weight of online petitions from the likes of Avaaz, Change.org or 38 Degrees. #bringbackourgirls may have failed to return the kidnapped Nigerian schoolgirls, but it got selfie retweets from Michelle Obama. In digital campaigning terms it couldn’t have been more of a success.

Perhaps all this is to hold hashtactivism up to unfair standards, however. If we judge it by political results, true, it’s patchy in the extreme (digital non-profit platforms will claim a number of “wins” on behalf of their campaigners, but most of the time this is impossible to prove – how do we know it was the petition itself that swayed a vote or influenced a corporation?) But as digital activism evolves more and more into amorphous hashtag campaigns, it seeks to concern itself less and less with a concrete political result. Rather, activism becomes more about a declaration of identity. Take the #NotInMyName hashtag which sprang up over the decision to bomb Syria in late 2015. Compared with, say, a CND campaign from the ’80s or a Stop the War campaign from the early 2000s, which at least had concrete goals, the hashtag’s title might seem to be little more than token pacifism, a “purity leftism” bid to absolve oneself from the horrors of your country’s bombing campaign. But isn’t this important in itself? Isn’t the opportunity for large numbers of people to voice their dissent – even if that dissent is mostly ignored – nonetheless a worthwhile activity? It’s all very easy for white people of majority colour to dismiss identity politics as fussy game-playing, but identity is far from a game for some. When a man attacked fellow passengers with a machete on the London tube after the Paris attacks – leaving an already embattled Muslim community to fare with the kind of press that might see them attacked, beaten – the Islamic world responded with a hashtag #YoureNotAMuslimBruv. Considering the atmosphere regarding Muslims at the

time gathering beneath a hashtag might presumably be a source of some comfort. Even the much more global hashtag #JeSuisCharlie – a voicing of international solidarity following the murder of several journalists at the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* – arguably provides a necessary and useful voice.

Perhaps the most powerful example of all from recent years comes with #blacklivesmatter, a hashtag deliberately formed by the black community in the wake of the astonishing campaign of police violence and brutality against Afro-Americans which saw numerous unarmed black men shot with no legal comeback for the police. Campaigner Alicia Garza posted a message on Facebook in 2013 – “a love note to black people” – which ended with the words: “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.” A close friend of Garza read the post and began sharing Garza’s words with her friends online, using the hashtag #blacklivesmatter every time she reposted. It quickly became a call for action. Joined by another activist, they began establishing Tumblr and Twitter accounts and asking users to share stories of why #blacklivesmatter. Following further deaths of unarmed black men the hashtag started to appear on mugs, badges and T-shirts. By December it was used in a speech delivered at a human rights gala by none other than Hillary Clinton. TV shows *Law & Order* and *Empire* referred to it. By January 2015 it had become the American Dialect Society’s “word” of the year.

By July 2015 there were 26 Black Lives Matter chapters across the United States. One Facebook post had spawned something that was looking more and more like a civil rights movement.

“Social media’s significance is that it is recognising different incidents that might have gone unnoticed and sewing them together as a coherent whole,” says Ethan Zuckerman, the director of the MIT Center for Civic Media and the author of *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection*. “And that means we’re forced to recognise very serious structural issues.” Civil Rights 2.0 was proving very adept at bringing disparate people together under one banner in a way that, say, the Black Panthers had largely failed to do. When nine people were shot by a suspected white supremacist in a church in Charleston and activist Bree Newsome climbed the flagpole outside the statehouse to remove the Confederate flag, her actions were retweeted under the hashtag #blacklivesmatter (Obama even made reference to the hashtag in his eulogy for the victims). Hashtags were proving fluid in the way that musical genre or online journalism tags had been – a way to organize, whilst not overly dictating that organization. Sometimes they threw up new ones. When the dying gasps of a 43-year-old black man named Eric Garner, placed in a chokehold by a white police officer in Staten Island in 2014, were recorded on mobile and released to the web, the video went viral and “I can’t breathe” became a rallying cry in its own right. Obama praised the basketball player LeBron James for wearing a T-shirt with the words emblazoned across the front. A video of a pool party in McKinney, Texas 2015

where a white police officer threw a 14-year-old black girl to the ground and pulled a gun on two teenage boys went viral when a bystander posted it on YouTube and saw it viewed almost 500,000 times before being picked up by major news channels. Unlike most of the policemen who shot unarmed black boys, this officer was forced to resign.

“Black Twitter” is already recognized as a force in American life; according to a leaked internal memo from the *Los Angeles Times* staff had been appointed to cover not only Black Twitter but also other online communities including “Black Medium” and “Latino Tumblr.” In fact, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, Twitter has been *focusing* on Hispanics, who, as Twitter has been telling potential advertisers, “tweet more often than other users, and activity among them rises when the conversation is about technology.” Twitter even recently hired a multicultural strategist known for her “passion for the Latino market.” Could this really be as good as it sounded?

Black Twitter: when the internet finally got it right?

“Black Twitter is part cultural force, cudgel, entertainment and refuge,” wrote Soraya Nadia McDonald in the *Washington Post* in 2014. “It is its own society within Twitter, replete with inside jokes, slang and rules, centered on the interests of young blacks online — almost a quarter of all black Internet users are on Twitter.”

“To me, Black Twitter is essentially an extension of my black urban experience,” said Michael Arceneaux, author of a list of Black Twitter’s 2013 All-Stars for *Complex Magazine*. “It’s a bunch of people like me. Black people in major cities and it’s basically six degrees of separation. I might not know you, but I might have a friend of a friend of a friend who does.”

“In the past three years, Twitter has become a necessary platform for dissent, discussion, breaking news and, yes, *trends*,” writes Stereo Williams in the *Daily Beast*. “And in the case of what has become colloquially known as “Black Twitter,” all of those things have gelled to create an online culture of black intellectuals, trendsetters, and talking heads giving voice to many of the issues that 20 years ago would’ve remained far away from the mainstream radar.”

But perhaps here lies another danger: could it be that the more powerful anchor for community identity and protest social media becomes, the more of an echo chamber it could turn out to be? In other words, is Twitter – particularly a community within Twitter – really a substitute for the “mainstream” – or simply another resource to be exploited by white people for clicks, views and cash?

“Mainstream media platforms mine Black Twitter for content and ideas,” Williams goes on to write. “Popular hashtags become fixtures on the nightly news and Twitter is breaking news stories hours and sometimes days before CNN or Fox News. And as it pertains to advertising, Madison Avenue also appears to be paying close attention to the memes and hashtags generated by the culture; with Taco Bell and IHOP “on fleek” and Jimmy Johns calling customers “bae.” Black writer April Reign admits that “When I did #OscarsSoWhite at the beginning of the year ... There were also a lot of instances I was told of where I was not given credit for starting the hashtag. And I think that happens all too often. Is mainstream media following us? Absolutely. Are we getting credit for what we’ve created? Absolutely not.”

Some writers contend that the real problem with Black Twitter is that it’s not so very black in the first place – the writer Dex Digital proclaimed it already dead by Summer 2014. “We should keep in mind that this whole ‘Black Twitter’ phenomenon that people seem to love to talk about isn’t really all that ‘black,’” he wrote in the *Those People* blog, arguing that Black Twitter observes the same racial dynamic as, say, the rap industry – largely black artists performing to largely white audiences. “In the same way that it doesn’t make any sense to call BET ‘Black Entertainment Television’ unless you mean ‘Television for people that want to be Entertained by Blacks’, ‘Black Twitter’ can’t be understood as some sort of closed-off, coherent force,” he continues. “And as a space for uniquely ‘black’ cultural expression in which black people would call the shots, Black Twitter was dead long ago. Or really, it was stillborn. It never had a chance.”

After all, as he points out, the internet’s anonymity means that anybody can play along – spend a little time on sites like Rap Genius or Urban Dictionary swotting up and you could “pass for black”.

“People creating their own, customized ‘black’ entertainment will once again be the norm,” he adds. “We lost this battle. Retreat, make something new, and try again.”

Mainstream media may sometimes acknowledge the creators of #BlackLivesMatter and other Twitter hashtags that have sparked movements, but all too often news segments simply credit “Twitter”. Moreover, as Reign herself found, the words and ideas of black writers might simply be taken from Black Twitter in the form of tweets for news segments, but the writers themselves found it hard to be employed or taken seriously by editors. “[Writers/editors] will submit a resume and not even get a response,” she revealed. “You’re writing about my hashtag and I see myself on your site and apparently I’m enough in 140 characters and yet I’m not what you’re looking for when you’re actually looking for a writer or an editor? When, really, that’s what I’m doing with my tweets all day long.”

“How many black people does HuffPost have?” she asks. “Are they all centered in HuffPost BlackVoices? Are they recent hires and people you would recognize as someone who’s created something recently? Or are they writers from something else who have been stuck in the ‘black section’ because they’re black?”

The hyperbole around Black Twitter suggests black people should only be grateful for an online space to congregate – even while black content is being used to drive up everything from television ratings to page views. As Williams concludes, “the big guys still have the loudest megaphone.”

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It’s a grim picture: with their sense of catharsis, e-petitions may actually be as detrimental as they are useful, channelling all the agitation into something safe, giving us the opportunity to demonstrate our compassion to our Facebook friends. They may be “tricking us into thinking we are doing something,” as comedian Sara Pascoe puts it, “disguising our apathy from ourselves.” The worst possibility of all this, perhaps, is that it actually negates the power of real-world activism, transforming us into a “lumpen commentariat” – endlessly tweeting, hashtagging and commenting while actually achieving very little on the ground. When Tom Payne wrote a pamphlet called *The Rights of Man* over two centuries ago it ended up in almost every commoner’s house in England – despite the fact that a third of the country could barely read. Today a writer lucky enough to get, say, a blog with something like the *Huffington Post* can expect a view count that barely breaks into triple figures. Ever since it surfaced, people have regarded the internet as a potential underground *samizdat*. But a world of communications with infinite bandwidth creates “spamizdat” rather than *samizdat*: there are just too many blogs, too many articles and videos and tweets, and not nearly enough people to read them.

Instead we have the spectre of catharsis replacing meaningful activity – the incessant commentary as much a cry of helplessness as it is a call-to-arms. During the BP Deepwater Horizon spill of 2010 the writer Astra Taylor describes her impotence when – as a citizen journalist supposedly empowered by the exciting power of modern communications – she finds herself confronted by the might of a company determined to use every means within its power to prevent her or any other news sources near the site. “It was a media event for the new age,” she recounts; “thousands of us sat glued to streaming footage of the oil rushing from its source; we forwarded videos of the burning rig, black smoke choking the sky...” Tweeting, commenting, blogging: that’s what everybody was doing now in the brave new world of citizen newsmaking. Just make sure you

don't get too close to what's actually happening – after all, God forbid that you actually dare to challenge the status quo.

And on it goes – a cycle that's become familiar to us all now, as the world processes its grief and anguish with the unfolding of world events, as if by tweeting and sharing it could annul the horror, could put things right again. Through the Spring and Summer of 2014 alone Twitter seethed with butchered lions, with pictures of elephants bleeding where they'd had their tusks removed, with body-bagged corpses of the crashed flight MH17 in Malaysia. Then as the Gazan crisis began to involve the photos took a turn for the more grueling and brutal. Now they didn't just stop at charred corpses or slain animals. They showed dead, Palestinian babies.

“They took him out from the rubble suckling from his dead mother's breast,” wrote Ahmad Mosa on 31st July 2014 as part of the #GazaUnderAttack and #ICC4Israel threads, over a photo of a dead infant having its blood-spattered clothes removed by surgical hands. It was just one photo among many to find their way into retweets and newsfeeds around the world at a time when Israel's audaciously-titled “Operation Protective Edge” was getting into full bulldozing, bombarding swing: a baby with no head here, a limbless child there. Screaming mothers and fathers, dragged into unimaginable human pain and loss. Facebook feeds that normally buzzed with Instagrammed breakfasts shared cute selfies and wedding pics with blood-soaked infants. Was it that we felt somehow that we were in some way fighting or lessening the horror by retweeting it? Was it, in some way, a kind of therapy – a small act of participation meant to symbolize a wider sense of compassion, of participation?

It's almost inevitable to the reader by now that there's a bitter twist in all this. When a journalist for BBC Arabic, Abdirahim Saeed, began to subject the photos being retweeted to Reverse Image Search, a way to identify the original source of a photo, it turned out that many weren't from Gaza 2014 at all. Some were actually recycled from past occupations of Palestine, such as in 2007; some of them were even blithely lifted from the Syrian conflict.

But by then they were on the social web – and starting to get traction. “I didn't expect to get over 1800 retweets,” one 16-year-old Twitter user told the BBC, when approached about the viral spread of the photos. “I didn't actually know that the picture was recycled.”

As usual, an innocent click on a share or retweet button has consequences far beyond the ken of the person doing it. As politicians became aware of the outrage unfolding on Twitter, they sought – as we see time and time again – to jump on the opportunity: Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu spoke of Hamas actively wanting “the telegenically dead Palestinians for their cause”. Thus the suffering of the Palestinians is (helpfully) further discredited.

It would be unfair to pick holes in the entire hashtactivist project. After all, many campaigns heavily utilizing the web have succeeded in their aim of raising public consciousness: UK Uncut on the scandal of corporate tax avoidance, #EverydaySexism and #UOKSis on the ongoing harassment of women, #JeSuisCharlie on the right to free expression. Perhaps petitions, hashtags and online activism are simply part of the greater conversation, allowing the mediation of opinion that's the hallmark of a free society. But then again, there's a strong case for getting past the smartphone screen and actually doing something (especially when we have interesting cases like that of canvassers for the Scottish independence vote actually admitting they sometimes couldn't be bothered to leave the house because it was easier just to tweet their messages). In the run-up to the 2015 General Election the left witnessed the unseemly spectacle of their party leaders cosyng up to Russell Brand, with his huge social media clout, in the hope of a favourable tweet or video clip. But Russell Brand didn't win the election, and neither did they. Perhaps we should follow the example of Stella Creasy, MP for Walthamstow. In the days following the vote on whether or not to bomb Syria in late 2015, Creasy received 12,000 tweets, along with a similar volume of Facebook tags, not to mention emails and normal post. Faced with an impossible volume of messages to engage with – the equivalent of several teeming mailbags – she ended up doing something there seems to be less and less time for at all in modern politics.

“I organised a face-to-face meeting where 350 residents held me to account,” she wrote later, “the atmosphere and content of which was a far cry from the fury-filled online forums.”

Get out and meet her constituents rather than just talking to them on Twitter: it's a strange idea, but it might just work. Perhaps more of us should try it.

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Freedom from speech

Are we scared to speak for fear of the echo?

A woman is barraged with rape tweets for creating a video game, and her college threatened with bomb scares. A professor is suspended for putting a photo of his daughter wearing a T-shirt. A 14-year-old is added to a police database for sexting a friend. We live in a world where the flapping of a Facebook post can cause an earthquake – a “chaos theory of communication” where our words and actions have unintended consequences once they’re put online. What are the effects of this “stream of carelessness”? Can freedom of speech for some actually threaten the freedom of others? And if the internet really is creating a sense of democratic enfranchisement, why do so many women live under a kind of virtual Shar’ia law on social media?

The darkest mirror

Isis and the triumph of “Open Source Jihad”

Does the global community create local extremists? A 2016 video released by Isis shows a child threatening world leaders, while the social media feeds of jihadist “foot soldiers”, where religious genocide stands side by side with breakfast selfies, serve as powerful recruitment drives. The 2014 execution of James Foley at the hands placed the “oxygen of publicity” in the hands of the general public, making us complicit in a new kind of “crowdsourced” terrorist propaganda. The Foley video inspired a counter-campaign called #IsisMEDIABLACKOUT – and yet not only did this fail to stop the video’s spread, it actually boosted Isis in the search rankings. The U.S. State Department attempted to wage war via Twitter on Islamic extremists – and yet just ended up giving them a platform to spread more hate. In a world where every utterance carries an increasingly noisy echo, how is it possible to fight an ideological war against people so much better than you are at it?

Propaganda via YouTube

How to destabilize elected governments on social media

A young man kneels down before a line of riot police and presents one with a flower.... The BuzzFeed listicle “29 heartbreaking images from the protests in Venezuela” was shared by left-leaning progressives worldwide, successfully hitting all the viral buttons (inspiring; colourful; sentimental; rebels vs. authority). But these student protesters are far from disenfranchised underdogs – one received \$500,000 from the Cato Institute – and the Venezuelan

“opposition” is uncomfortably linked to the country's right wing elite. The tools of BuzzFeed and YouTube *et al* turn us all into armchair activists – but might the appealing visual tropes of police and protestor be exploited by reactionary forces? An NYPD officer is snapped selflessly giving shoes to a homeless man; but is it purely coincidence that it appeared at a time when the police were hit by scandal and low reputation, or are certain actors actually exploiting armchair revolution for their own good?

Do a million Likes make it true?

How truth evaporates in a single click

In March 2014 Kim Kardashian sent out a tweet that urged her followers to save the Armenian population of the Syrian town of Kessab from religious genocide. Photos emerged of the devastation – a slain woman with a cross in her mouth, a decapitated child, a Christian church in ruins. A #SaveKessab hashtag emerged. But the photos were actually stolen from horror movies and other wars; there was evidence they were a ploy to discredit rebels. Soon they were being re-circulated by the Syrian regime. Social media is prone to “context collapse”, where snippets, tweets or photos are spread as something they’re not – but as well as being accidental, this can be used for devious ends. A single snippet of Hillary Campaign’s speech was turned into a damaging viral; photos “proving” that British MPs don’t attend sessions were taken from different dates, but serve to strengthen a damaging distrust of politics. As social media’s thirst for endlessly recycled imagery grows do we need to become a little savvier to “media-via-meme”?

Click here for world peace

How cute pictures can lead to missile strikes

When three-year-old Aylan Kurdi was washed up dead on a Turkish beach, the world’s media went into a frenzy. As a result of the millions of shares, online petitions sprang up to force western governments to stop ignoring the plight of refugees. But is it really quite so easy to change the world for the better with a click? The power of a cute photo can be utilized by people all along the democratic spectrum. The Ukrainian government recently employed photogenic police to create a “selfie storm” of civilians posing with officers, photos which were duly scooped up by local news sites, in an attempt to give themselves a pretty PR makeover and legitimate their authority. A photo of an NYPD officer giving shoes to a homeless man got than 1.6 million views ensued within a matter of days; but then reports emerged he might not actually be homeless and

people fell to blaming the victim. As feelgood virals circulate of limbless men surfing, cancer survivors climbing some of the world's highest peaks or a Filipino orphan doing his homework on the street, right wing ideologues use them to tell us to ignore structural problems and marvel at the human spirit. Even the Aylan Kurdi photo failed to have much of a measurable impact on Syrian immigration; instead, it led to the *Sun* urging the government to "bomb Syria for Aylan".

Blog eat blog

The rise of the online ideological wars

Ukrainian students band together to counter "rampant Kremlin propaganda"; in response pro-Moscow youths release a tit-for-tat video. Russia wages a propaganda war against the West; the EU fights back by boosting support for independent media in "eastern neighbourhood" countries. Just one example of the back-and-forth tone to contemporary debate, where social protest has gone from vertical, "them and us" to a kind of horizontal flame-war. As of 2013 there were 20,000 active hate websites – but online fascists are now met by "antifa" groups alerting the police of their racist propaganda, in a war that echoes twentieth century espionage, with password stealing, undercover infiltration, fake ID "sock puppet" accounts and "doxxing" someone's true existence. While twentieth century censorship worked mostly by suppressing the information supply, in our own age armies of volunteer pieceworkers such as China's "50-Cent Party" are paid to obfuscate hot issues by incessant and irrelevant blogging (such "spamizdat" is also alive and well in democratic countries with bombardment techniques like astroturfing). What are the dangers of such an echo chamber? Should we pay more attention to the power of media saturation as a tool for political amnesia?

You can't undo a rumour

How the internet has no corrections page

In 2013 bombs rocked the Boston marathon. Emergency machinery sprang into action to track down the killer. But in the Internet age a new option was available: crowdsourcing the witch-hunt. Wikis and discussion groups sprang up; within hours a "suspect" was being touted, to be repeated dutifully by social media. But Sunil Tripathi had nothing to do with it; he was simply a student with a foreign name. He killed himself shortly afterwards... Just another victim of "crowdsourced" knowledge and the internet's Chinese Whispers. An increasing number of "news" sites now make their money from spreading patently false stories; groups now manipulate Wikipedia and the like in the pay of companies

or run payola extortion rackets. As the fake stories gather they undermine the very idea of truth itself; when a girl went to a doctor recently with cancer symptoms she was told to “stop Googling” and sent home. She died shortly afterwards.

Tweeting to the converted

Are we trapped in a bubble of our own creation?

In 2014 canvassers for the Scottish Yes vote admitted they’d just rather “stay at home” and reach who they could on Twitter. Change.Org petitions 40mn people daily but also produces numerous petitions like “Taco Bell: Give Customers a Minimum of Two Hot Sauce Packets Per Taco”; there was even a petition “stop making pointless petitions on change.org”. From behind a smartphone screen, where talk is cheap but attention is scarce, are we mistaking chatter for action and becoming a “lumpen commentariat”? 95% of blogs, tweets and uploads are barely seen by anyone; rather than solving the Greek or Syrian crisis, the biggest online European petition of 2015 was a campaign to reinstate a racist TV star after he punched a producer. The social web confers the illusion of total participation even while rendering that participation increasingly meaningless (the far right party Britain First has more Facebook Likes than the Conservatives yet can barely muster a rally). Recent research from Oxford University showed that 99.9% of UK e-petitions failed to reach the 100,000 signatures needed to trigger the prospect of a Commons debate, largely because without immediate take-up they suffered from precipitous attention decay – doomed instead to become “digital dust”. What’s the point of the right to speak freely if nobody’s actually listening?

Conclusion

We’ve seen how peoples’ words, clicks, Likes and shares can push them into ghettos, narrow their perspectives and lead them into false beliefs. But they can also do the opposite: from the wealth of contemporary hashtag campaigns that are changing lives to the digital *samizdat* of oppressed peoples around the planet, the social web can be harnessed for liberation and enlightenment. Now that a third of Americans get their news via Facebook, now that the memes we share and the tweets we trend are perhaps as powerful a force on public opinion as CNN, the BBC or the *Guardian*, we need to get a little savvy. In mass-media terms, most of us are fairly wise to advertising bullshit and tabloid “facts”. In social-media terms, this is 1915 and we’ve got a lot to learn.