



The horror of communication

Olivier Jutel¹ 

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Abstract This article is concerned with the Lacanian subject of cyberwar and how the Real of network communication in the post-Trump era is experienced as horror. The centrality of the technological sublime and practices of self-divination to the American political imaginary give this moment of the Real a properly cosmic and spiritual scale. What returns are techno-horrors of intersubjective dread and the capitalist Real of the network in which we are fragmented and manipulated by occulted forces. The generalization of cyberwar shapes the liberal/populist entanglement between the hysteria of the disinformation expert and the perversion of the QAnon digital soldier.

Keywords cyberwar · techno-horror · critical disinformation studies · technosticism · QAnon

Introduction

The rise of the Trumpian far-right was an event foreclosed by liberal post-politics. That his success was owed in no small part to mastering the political potential of social media shattered the digital teleologies upon which liberal technocratic consensus was based. The bounties of connectivity and communication have been replaced by a techno-political malaise and horror. Zuboff (2021) has described the American polity as subject to ‘epistemic terrorism’ as communication networks and misinformation have seemingly dissolved the solid ground of liberal-democracies. This traumatic return of the political and antagonism has been understood as a subversion and manipulation of communication systems by dark forces feasting on

✉ Olivier Jutel
Olivier.jutel@otago.ac.nz

¹ University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand



chaos. The language and iconography of horror have been central to confronting the Real in this political moment. The January 6 storming of the US Capitol by the Trump loyalists of QAnon represented the high point of this horror with the legions of unreality attempting to subvert democracy. Paradoxically the Q movement saw themselves as answering Michael Flynn's call to become 'digital soldiers' (Young America's Foundation, 2016) in what was a form of information and spiritual warfare to expose apocalyptic truths about a demonic cabal.

This article will argue that the reversal of the network, from fantasy to horror, is demonstrative of the Real of cyberwar. Where the 'interface fantasy' (Nusselder, 2009) of early web 2.0 promised social mastery through pure representation, the present moment is marked by the trauma and *jouissance* of the other. Network technologies once imbued with the power to objectify and understand the other are now a vector of malaise and horror. My description of techno-horror draws on Žižek's gothic motif of the Real (Noys, 2010) as the other is distributed, abstracted and occulted across the network as fragments of human and inhuman agency. Thacker's typologies of horror (2011, 2015a, 2015b) further underscore the desire of science, language and philosophy to overcome this ontological cosmic dread. The generalization of the alienation and apocalypticism of techno-horror is understood through Žižek's insistence that capitalism is the Real structuring network communication (2012, p. 245).

Finding oneself at the centre of geopolitical and cosmic cyberwar is a confrontation with the Real suppressed by a particular American history and the 'cult of the technological sublime' (Davis, 1998, p. 106). A religious belief in univocal communication through technology and tech-gnostic self-divination have been foundational to American empire and political life. The technological frontier has been imbued with a purity of purpose that obfuscates the military histories and traumas of the digital. Network communication has been central to the technocratic conception of politics and a view that social antagonism might be transcended through expertise and big data solutionism. That the internet could materialize the spectre of QAnon can only be experienced as a spiritual crisis and confrontation of communication as an unknowable horror. Cold War hysteria and apocalyptic visions return with enemies embodying pure *jouissance* pervading the network.

I claim that in the current populist/technocrat antagonistic frontier the material reality of cyberwar is mediated by either the hysteria of the disinformation expert (Jacobsen, 2020) or the perversion of the digital soldier. For the hysteric expert fantasies of social wholeness and epistemic consensus are threatened by the agents of unreality and post-modernity that have weaponized the internet's openness. There is a demand for security and cyberwar mobilization against a demonic other of *jouissance*. Neither the demand nor the enemy can be fulfilled. Thus this seemingly sober-minded expertise experiences the failure of communication as the horror of demonic falsifiers producing a non-linear Lovecraftian unreality. The material and historical context of cyberwar is elided by conjuring the horror of a disinformation influencing machine controlled by the enemy who pursues the *jouissance* of rewiring brains, implanting thoughts and controlling bodies from afar. In the *New York Times* documentary *Operation InfeKtion* (Elick & Westbrook, 2018), the mere



sentiment of mistrust in media signals a political virus attacking the body politic that is so sophisticated as to be imperceptible.

For the perverted QAnon digital soldier there is a full identification with paternal enjoyment and the obscene underside of the law. The desire to bring forth a military coup and divine revelation through information warfare is a form of techno-religion and *jouissance* consistent with the repressed military histories of the internet. The digital soldier enjoys being made an object of Q, Trump or Michael Flynn and, as such, QAnon followers have found pleasure in horror as part of a transhistorical, cosmic and spiritual struggle. There is a fidelity to American tech-gnosticism by invoking every overdetermined ‘black-box delusion’ (Sconce, 2019) and tech-alienation with the promise of ecstatic and bloody tech-mediated revelation. One’s mediated life and frenetic activity assumes the significance of information warfare and places the QAnon participant at the centre of apocalyptic events. The QAnon injunction to ‘enjoy the show’ captures a tech-gnostic dualism in which horror and transcendence are constitutive of media technologies and inscribed in every image, event and communicative encounter.

Lacan and Cyberwar

This article will argue that the crisis of network communication represented by the conflict of online far-right political movements and disinformation experts is experienced as the horror of the Real. I propose here a theory of the Lacanian subject of cyberwar in which the traumas of language, the material economies of the network and the encounter of the inhuman, all *too* human, political enemy engender a crisis that cannot be recuperated within the symbolic order. The Lacanian subject and model of communication relies on the tripartite structure of the symbolic, imaginary and the Real. Put simply the oedipal traumas of language and subjectivity (the Real) are mediated by our fantasies (the imaginary) which lodge us in the symbolic order. Communication is self-alienating, wound up in the intersubjective anxiety of aiming for ‘true subjects’ but finding only ‘shadows’ and a lack in ourselves (Lacan, 1978/1991, p. 244). One navigates this fraught discursive social reality through objective attachments as stand-ins for truth in the symbolic order or an enjoyment in our thwarted fantasy. A defining characteristic of network communication is what Nusselder terms the ‘interface fantasy’ (2009). The fantasy, which has governed cyberspace and the proliferation of smart devices is of pure language and ‘that we might represent the real “as it really is”’ (Nusselder, 2009, p. 27). Sconce (2019) describes this as the ‘positivist drive toward explaining, actualizing and controlling the world as data’ (p. 294) with the concomitant fantasy of the ‘elimination of the lack [through] scientific standardization’ (p. 296). By imbuing the object (computer, smart phone, sensor) with the power to represent the Real there is a technocratic fantasy of mastery in which we might transcend or dominate the other (Golumbia, 2009, p. 185). I will return to the properly religious aspects of this fantasy of network communication, suffice to say a horrifying other and excess of the Real intervene.



In the current conflagration liberalism is wracked by overdetermined cyber evils and the ghosts of history, while the far-right has been consumed with online mediations of the occult, satanic and apocalyptic. In order to explain the prevalence of both horror metaphors and the literal horror of occult enemies in cyberspace I turn to Noys's gothic reading of Žižek and the Real (2010). In the failures of language and our intersubjective dread of the objectified other we face what is outside the symbolic order. For Žižek this encounter is akin to the xenomorph, an infected wound (1989) or the Lynchian entomological fixation on 'disgusting ... glistening, indestructible life' (1994, p. 114). This structuring trauma is 'our kernel of reality' analogous to Lovecraftian cosmic horror in which human epistemologies can only reveal 'terrifying vistas of reality' (Noys, 2010, p. 1). The horror of cosmic pessimism and the Real both centre on the limits of science, philosophy and language. In this article I consider Thacker's exploration of horror (2011, 2015a, 2015b) as a 'gothic supplement' (Noys, 2010, p. 9) to the Žižekian Real able to explain the reversal of the interface fantasy into techno-horror. Žižek spares us the nihilism of cosmic pessimism in his formulation of Capital as the Real which objectifies, abstracts and submits all life to its spectral logic (2012, p. 244). Thus historical materialism and ideology critique requires an analysis of horror metaphors and typologies as the Real which manifests material processes.

The experience of the liberal/populist conflagration as techno-horror and cyberwar owes to the structuring role of network communication and capitalism. Jodi Dean's thesis of communicative capitalism describes the compounding alienation of language and the subject through exchange value in the network (2009, p. 26). Participation involves throwing oneself into social circulation to be fragmented and objectified by lurking others and imbricated into mystified practices of data production. However with the prizing open of the psyche by capitalism the demarcation of the Cartesian mind from 'the bodily realm of enjoyment' (Nusselder, 2009, p. 139) folds in on itself. Žižek describes the 'real horror' of occulted algorithmic powers as the cybernetic fantasy of frictionlessness:

Even though actual "frictions" continue to insist, they become invisible, forced into a netherworld outside our "postmodern" and post-industrial universe; this is why the "frictionless" universe of digitalized communication, technological gadgets, etc., is constantly haunted by the notion of a global catastrophe lurking just around the corner, threatening to explode at any moment. (2012, pp. 245–246)

This condition of apocalyptic techno-horror is rendered brilliantly in Kyoshi Kurosawa's *Pulse* (2001). Set in the context of Japan's lost decades, the internet precipitates a mass extinction event through a collective withdrawal into online life. In encountering the boundaries of subjectivity, multiplicity and fragmentation users become entranced by a desire for death and digital apparitions haunt the material world. The Cold War genealogy of this internet alienation is rendered explicitly through the nuclear shadows that are left behind by those erased by network computing. This is demonstrative of the cosmic scale of techno-horror and capital's role as the Real in structuring the network, which abstracts and subsumes language and lifeworld.



The subject of network communication is enmeshed in cyberwar, not simply as part of the geopolitics and military history of the internet, but the network's diffusion of war as a social logic. The network constitutes a social totality mediated through quantifiable engagements with objectified others and subject positions via dashboards and metrics. There is a desire to map the social field for strategic interventions eliciting both the fantasy of 'omnipotent control and the fear of being affected, attacked or injured' (Nusselder, 2009, p. 97). One's intersubjective anxiety and fear finds a network cut through with opaque influence campaigns, whether the state, capital, private intelligence, hackers or literal influencers. Zuboff captures this anxiety and dread of occulted forces in declaring we 'have become targets for remote control' with the totalizing algorithmic power appearing 'carrying a cappuccino, not a gun' (2020). Cyberwar's defining characteristics – subterfuge, anonymity, asymmetry – provokes the hysteric's outburst: Who am I to the other? What does the other want from me? As Mellamphy puts it, cyberwar turns the fog of war 'inward onto the battleground that is subjectivity' (2015). Here the enemy in cyberwar takes on a horrific and spectral presence that exists to gnaw at one's sense of wholeness 'as the secret agent stealing social jouissance from us' (Žižek, 1997, p. 43). The horror of communication and encounter of the Real necessarily retains a historical materialist basis. Dyer-Witford and Matviyenko (2019) describe cyberwar as the driving force of contemporary capitalism, geopolitical rivalry and the techno-accelerated search for new markets.¹ Our mundane communicative failures become part of a capricious speculative economy defined by digital enclosure, occulted forms of data production and subterranean power struggles.

American Techno-Religion and Frontier Gnosticism

The scale of this horror and its centrality to the American subconscious owes to the religious, libidinal and imperial investment in communicative technologies in American politics. I offer here a quick history of American tech-gnosticism as a means to understand techno-horror in this moment as the return of the Real in a historical materialist sense. The roll of American capital and the state in evangelizing communicative technologies has served interchangeably as a divine mission and the extension of an imperial frontier and cartography. US President James Buchanan described the telegraph in the first information age as a medium of 'Divine Providence to diffuse religion, civilization, liberty and law throughout the world' (Powers & Jablowski, 2015, p. 133). The horror of communication is a dialectical reversal of the divine that is neatly captured in Morse's first telegram transmission 'what hath God wrought?' (Sconce, 2000, p. 21). Techno-utopianism and the divine have been constitutive of the American frontier running the gamut of the cyber counterculture, Cold War technocrats, and religious and cult movements. The historian of Silicon Valley mysticism Erik Davis takes up Harold Bloom's

¹ This imperial history is something wholly neglected by Zuboff even as she rehears Cold War theories of communication as psychological warfare with Facebook and Google achieving a power analogous to the 'push-button millennium' (Simpson, 2015, p. 132).



thesis that American Christianity is principally a form of gnosticism with information technology serving as a form of ‘self-divinization’ (1998, p. 96). For Davis the American ‘cult of the technological sublime’ (1998, p. 106) is born of the frontier with techno-mastery making one as a god, reconciling man and nature in a cybernetic, gnostic pleroma. There is a ceaseless drive in expanding communicative technology and achieving a vista of information that aspires to a near cosmic totality.

The technological sublime as American secular theology requires the disavowal of the trauma and material realities that engender the Real. From the military industrial complex, nuclear apocalypticism, genocide and counterinsurgency, the dialectics of horror and spirituality, annihilation and salvation pervade (Noble, 2013). An exemplar is Wernher von Braun the Nazi rocket scientist and father of guided ballistic missiles, who was brought to the US to work on ICBMs, nuclear weapons and later the space program. Von Braun’s V-2 rocket presaged weapons of spatial annihilation which remapped the terrain of war necessitating the development of network computer systems from SAGE, Arpanet to the internet. For von Braun the ascent of rocketry transcended terrestrial barbarism with space and revelation beckoning:

On that future day when our satellite vessels are circling the Earth; when men manning an orbital station can view our planet against the star-studded blackness of infinity as but a planet among planets; on that day, I say, fratricidal war will be banished from the star on which we live ... humanity will then be prepared to enter the second phase of its long, hitherto only Tellurian history - the cosmic age. (von Braun quoted in Noble, 2013, p. 127).

Von Braun’s techno-utopianism places faith in the image and vision as the means to render the universe ‘like a mathematical grid’ (Nusselder, 2009, p. 65). It was a faith he shared with the vanguard of the techno counterculture and frontier communalists who shaped the founding ethos of the internet. Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog* used the iconic ‘Earthrise’ image to invoke the divine overview effect and a cybernetic universality that computing tools afforded the individual. As the *Whole Earth Catalog* states, ‘We are as Gods’ (Brand, 1971), and access to technology and information networks would be the means to understand the divine language of the cosmos.

What American discourses of information and communication technology retain in these religious and universal terms are the teleologies of univocal knowledge and truth. Mattelart’s history of the first age of network utopianism identifies the belief in the universal bond forged through communication that is ‘revived with each technological generation’ as a disavowal of communication’s role in the ‘struggles to control the world’ (1996/2000, p. viii). The internet has been central to American liberal fantasies of post-politics (Jutel, 2020) from the Atari Democrats, to Obama and Hillary Clinton. In 2008 Obama’s campaign was claimed as the fulfilment of digital teleologies with the ‘wiki-candidate’ relying on the ‘wisdom of crowds’ and the ‘wealth of networks’ (Cohen, 2008). In 2016 Clinton inflected these web 2.0 teleologies with big data solutionism, boasting that her campaign was run by algorithm (Goldmacher, 2016) and staffed by Silicon Valley’s best and brightest.



That Trump could be a stand-in for the political logic of the network and a prevailing *jouissance* of conspiratorial obsession was a trauma that could not be recuperated into the symbolic order.

The Cyberwar Hysteric and the Cursed Network

Fantasies of a universal network and global communication have been replaced by Cold War and the internet becoming, as Obama puts it, the ‘single biggest threat to democracy’ (in Goldberg, 2020). The antagonistic frontier that mediates this crisis of communication pits the hysteria of the disinformation expert (Jacobsen, 2020) against the perversion of the QAnon digital soldier. For the disinformation expert an other stalks the internet, requiring impossible eternal vigilance from the government and citizenry. Communication technology is now acknowledged as part of the struggle to control the world, however a political economic understanding is elided for a battle between universal truth and an overdetermined evil permeating language, images and the material infrastructure of the internet. I wish to retain a distinction between the hysteric’s perpetual dissatisfaction which gestures towards the lack, and the psychotic’s identification with the void (Žižek, 2012, p. 68). There has been a well-documented malaise among prominent disinformation researchers who view the problem as intractable and feel unable to act meaningfully (Martineau, 2019). In this way they express the hysteric’s potentially redemptive crisis of truth. This is in contrast to those, particularly in the national security field, who enjoy a psychotic foreclosure, who really believe that this Other stalks the network and who act as though the horror of the Real can be managed by expertise. Horror is wedded to rational analysis not simply as allegory; as Thacker puts it the logic of horror ‘is not “as if” ... it really is’ (2015b, p. 15). Therefore the Russian other *really is* an inhuman agent of subversion, a demon of Otherness (Thacker, 2011, p. 11) seeding the social space with an ambient malaise. As a recent *New Statesman* cover story puts it, Putin is the ‘evil demiurge, the great tyrant Yaltabaoth, the Son of Chaos’ whose desire is occulted from the West (Maçães, 2021). Between the hysteric, psychotic and the pervert in cyberwar there is a proximity to *jouissance*. One is either symbolically adrift, develops an expertise with regards to the horrific Other, or experiences a full apocalyptic identification with enjoyment.

In outlining these Lacanian subjects of cyberwar, I have selected key articulations of this political frontier and their shared logics of truth, horror and enjoyment in mediating the Real. The first is an oft-cited white paper from the Institute of Modern Russia entitled ‘The Menace of Unreality’ (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014), which established the cyber-Kremlinology that pervades disinformation expertise. The second is the *New York Times*’ video ‘Operation InfeKtion: Russian Disinformation from the Cold War to Kanye’ (Elick & Westbrook, 2018). As the font of truth and civility during the resistance to Trump (Jutel, 2019), the *New York Times*’ invocation of horror serves to place the political other outside the bounds of rational discourse. Lastly I consider the work of New Knowledge and its report to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence dealing with the Internet Research Agency and meme warfare (DiResta, et al., 2019). Here the cyberwar



technocrat becomes ‘the expert turned master’ (Jacobsen, 2020, p. 54) indulging in the power to invoke and shape truth by virtue of the enemy’s demonic nature. In the forthcoming section I centre my analysis of the sprawling QAnon conspiracy movement through an understanding of its perverse enjoyment and tech-gnosticism.

Russian hacking, meddling and propagation of fake news have become the principal fixation and explanatory mechanism in American media and politics for the rise of Trump, QAnon and conspiracy culture. Despite the spurious nature of Russiagate,² Nancy Pelosi’s refrain ‘all roads lead to Putin’ would echo throughout Trump’s presidency up until the Capitol attack, with Pelosi and Hillary Clinton musing whether he was on the phone to Putin at the time, what Putin ‘has on him’ and describing the rioters as ‘Putin’s puppets’ (Clinton, 2021). ‘The Menace of Unreality’ is key to the construction of Putin as the agent of *jouissance* attacking social wholeness from afar, through an ‘upside down and reinvented’ reality (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 30). Emerging at the beginning of the Ukraine-Russia conflict in 2014, this paper’s cultural and political analysis of Russian information warfare has defined the field of online disinformation studies or what Galeotti terms the ‘hybrid-war industrial complex’ (2019), from academia, journalism, think tanks and NatSec cyber-consultants.³ Epitomizing the hysteric’s discourse there is a call to take seriously and develop military capabilities to combat this techno-horror in which consensus reality and Western institutions can be undone by the ‘instant, easy proliferation of fakes and copies on the internet’ (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 17). Unreality defines Lovecraftian horror as a ‘question of the reliability of the senses, [and] the unstable relationships between the faculties of the imagination and reason’ (Thacker, 2015b, p. 9). Thacker describes this as being ‘caught between two abysses’ (2015b, p. 9); one is either unaware of a demonic attack on our reality or coming to terms with not knowing the world and oneself. The hysteric expert’s turn to psychosis is in attributing this dread to an internet riddled with Russian backed ‘malevolent actors’ who attempt to ‘muddle minds ... turn the West against itself’ (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 14), and ‘manipulate societies from the inside’ (p. 17). The encounter of antagonism in our communication networks cannot be thought of in terms of political agonism but becomes a vector of this horror and unreality.

In mediating the horror of communication disinformation, specialists invert the teleologies of the digital with the cyberwar enemy understood as a technological phenomenon adhering to a manual or ‘playbook’. A key figure in Russia politics for the disinformation paradigm is Vladislav Surkov, who has been described as Putin’s

² Space precludes a detailed account. However, with the collapse of the Steele dossier, the lack of indictments returned by the Mueller investigation and the unsubstantiated effects of Cambridge Analytica’s psychographics, none of the core tenets are left standing.

³ I wish to make a distinction here between mainstream disinformation studies and the emerging field of critical disinformation studies to which this article subscribes. The disinformation specialists widely cited by mainstream media and politicians (the Digital Forensics Research Lab, the Network Contagion Research Institute, the Alliance for Securing Democracy, New Knowledge and Bellingcat) largely enjoy national security backing or are staffed by ex-intelligence and security officials. The critical approach is concerned with questions of political economy, dispelling the ‘myth of the epistemically consistent past’ and the role of American anti-communism and anti-blackness in shaping perceptions of disinformation (Marwick et al, 2021).



chief political ‘technologist’ (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 9). Surkovian political alchemy is characterized as a bewildering ideological incoherence and a ‘simulacrum of political discourse’ (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 10). A similar figure of interest is the mystic Eurasian philosopher Aleksandr Dugin,⁴ regularly cast as Putin’s ‘Brain’ or ‘Rasputin’ (Barbashin & Thoburn, 2014; Nemtsova, 2019). The principal technique of the enemy is the mobilization of the ‘non-linear internationale’ (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 24), meaning all political tendencies that undermine liberal institutions. The spectre of communism is evoked, evacuated of meaning and functions as a stand-in for all the dreaded forces of political antagonism. Thus the Democrat leadership is able to claim that Russian bots engineered the furore over Colin Kaepernick (Papenfuss, 2019) or that George Floyd solidarity protests were ‘right out of the Russian playbook ... to divide us, to cause us to come into conflict with one another, to disintegrate from within’ (Susan Rice in *Secular Talk*, 2020). The fantasy of social wholeness in the disinformation paradigm rests on this anti-blackness, anti-communism (Marwick et al., 2021) and the ascription of Russia as the unique agent of postmodern confusion. Putin cannot be understood as a product of historical forces and a revanchist nationalist response to the West’s economic shock therapy, rather he bears a ‘post modern smirk’ (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014, p. 5) as a sign of his *jouissance* in attacking the West. Where the materialist critique of post-modernity describes a schizophrenic detachment from history and ‘loss of reality’ (Jameson, 1991, p. 27) born of late capitalism, here we find only Russia perfidiousness. The disinformation expert believes in the grand narratives of modernity that the West, truth and an objective reality exist but for the chaos engineered by the demonic other.

The hysteric’s desire for truth reverts to the Cold War imaginary and dreaded Surkovian techniques that puppeteer the new Comintern (Eberle & Daniel, 2021, p. 5) laying dormant in our communication networks. At its height this disinformation thesis rationalizes the void of psychosis. This resembles the schizophrenic techno-delusion of the Tauskian influencing machine that feeds powerful images, implants thoughts, possesses the body and lies outside the bounds of perception (Sconce, 2019). The horror of this technocratic conception of the political is rendered explicitly by the *New York Times* explainer documentary ‘Operation InfeKtion’ (Elick & Westbrook, 2018). The documentary seeks to summarize the Russian fake news playbook as a craft perfected by the Soviets and makes the hysteric’s plea for eternal vigilance and strong state action against an indefatigable enemy. What is striking about the documentary is the horror motif of infection and invisible plague that appears throughout the video as *literal* analysis. The opening narration begins:

This story is about a virus, a virus created decades ago to slowly and methodically destroy its enemies from the inside. But it’s not a biological virus it’s more like a political virus and chances are you’ve already been

⁴ While Dugin’s denunciations of the West makes for provocative headlines, his real influence in Russian politics appears limited. The Rand Corporation has described Dugin as ‘best thought of as an extremist provocateur with some limited and peripheral impact [rather] than as an influential analyst with a direct impact on policy’ (Radin & Reach, 2017, p. 81).

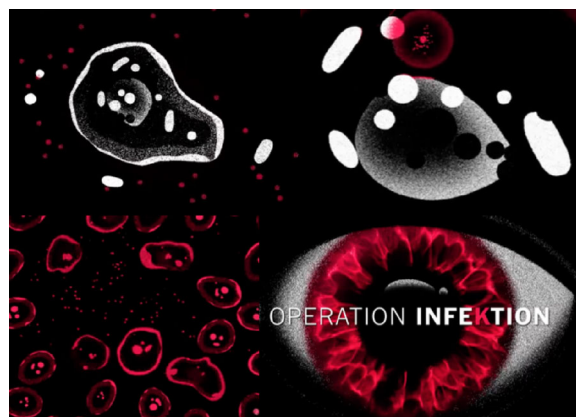


infected ... If you don't know who to trust anymore, this might be the thing making you feel that way. If you feel exhausted by the news, this could be why. And if you are sick of it all and want to stop caring, than we really need to talk. (Elick & Westbrook, 2018)

Accompanying this narration is an animation of a human cell depicted as white (Figs. 1–4). The cell becomes penetrated by a red icosahedron shaped virus. The virus radiates small particles until the cell bursts, with the surrounding cells rapidly replicating the process. The frame pulls out and we see this surging red infection begin to envelop the iris of an eye.

For the disinformation expert cyberwar manifests itself as a literal miasma where antagonism towards and distrust of institutions are signs of the body being attacked. The Russian influencing machine appears as both a modern technique of cyberwar and the eternal wisdom of KGB active measures. It is a boundless threat and a techno-delusion apt to the cybernetic expansion of the network into our homes and onto our bodies. No mere metaphor, fake news *really is* invading your body as a 'quasi-vitalized "thing"' (Thacker, 2015b, p. 71) transmittable at the micro level of communicative encounters, bodily affects or as the eye motif suggests 'glances between people' (Thacker, 2015b, p. 72). The attempt to objectify language through the interface fantasy reveals only the *jouissance* of the other as this horrific lifeforce collapsing the material and the symbolic. Computer hacking has served as a key metonym for the influencing machine's merging of material infrastructure with cursed communication. As Fareed Zakaria (2020) writes: 'The problem is not just that Russia has hacked America's computer systems. It seems to have hacked our minds.' Whether voting machines were actually hacked is irrelevant, as these political techniques permeate the totality of our communicative networks. Thus Kamala Harris is able to speak of 'foreign powers infecting the [Trump] White House like malware' (in Wise, 2019). That Putin is this horrific figure spreading infection and feasting on social *jouissance* is evident in the portrayals of him in Western media as all manner of beasts (Figs. 5–8).

Figs. 1–4 Credit: New York Times, Erica Gorochow/ PepRally, Tom McCarten





Figs. 5–8 Credits: André Carrilho, New Statesman cover, November 24, 2021; John Berkeley, The Economist cover, February 24, 2018; Roman Genn, National Review, August 15, 2016; Matthieu Bourel, New York Times, September 20, 2018.

The corporal, viral and techno metaphors rest on the logic of a demonic falsifier, whose use of communication causes ‘illness to the coherence and unity of the body politic’ (Thacker, 2015b, p. 28). It is in this way that ‘Meme Warfare’ (DiResta et al., 2019) has become a matter of state requiring a new cadre of technocratic disinformation specialists. New Knowledge was charged with presenting the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence with the definitive analysis of Russian memetic warfare. What animates New Knowledge’s data around the Internet Research Agency’s social media content is the eternal Russian playbook. The authors identify the tactic of manipulating ‘Black, Left-leaning and Right-leaning groups’ (DiResta et al., 2019, p. 83) in order to develop human assets. The uncertainty of online communication and what exactly engagements (likes, shares, follows) denote is absorbed into the sprawling alliance of falsifiers, botnets, sock-puppets and useful idiots serving this inhuman communication. The images of deception, which are said to ‘reveal a nuanced and deep knowledge of American culture’ (Di Resta et al., 2019, p. 25), include pro-Trump ‘Like for Jesus Team and



Figs. 9–10 Source: DiResta et al., 2019, pp. 12, 40



Ignore for Satan Team' (Fig. 9) memes and a series of Jesus anti-masturbation memes (Fig. 10). What would appear as comedic double entendres are understood as the 'timeless espionage practice ... [of] recruiting an asset by exploiting a personal vulnerability ... to blackmail and manipulate these individuals in the future' (Di Resta et al., 2019, p. 40). In meme warfare the very indeterminacy of the message is proof of weaponized and infected communication.

The mediation of horror and the Real through expertise allows the technocrat to enjoy the foreclosure of truth, objectify the political other and cope with the failures of post-politics. The very indeterminacy of language and uncertainty in the network can be attributed to the overdetermined influencing machine enlisting dupes into the inhuman alliance. The greater the enemy's desire, the more the expert is able to claim social mastery. New Knowledge has been exemplary of the 'desire to become master' (Jacobsen, 2020, p. 54) having engaged in an 'elaborate "false flag"' Russian campaign (Shane & Blinder, 2018) and proposed the creation of a federal government 'Reality Czar' (Roose, 2021). The claim to truth allows one to transgress and enjoy truth's malleable nature. What was deemed a characteristic of the enemy's postmodern menace can be justified in tautological terms by the horror they provoke. For the hysteric cyberwar expert, QAnon's storming of the Capital is the apogee of horror as *jouissance*, a case of confronting what you desire in the horrifying other.

QAnon and Techno-Revelation

The culmination of the liberal/populist frontier in the antagonism between the technocratic defenders of truth and the techno-mystic, far-right extremists of QAnon demonstrates the mutually constitutive horrors of communication. Both investments in *jouissance* – whether divining the agents of demonic falsification or the sprawling conspiracies of a child-sacrificing Satanic elite – interminably reproduce their own horror. This entanglement is politics on the plane of American tech-gnosis between technocratic mediums and QAnon as a new religion invested in the power of online revelation and 'spiritual warfare' (Argentino, 2020). The success of QAnon owes specifically to a wedding of right-wing conspiracy, techno-delusions and cyberwar with the properly religious elements of the American technological sublime. In other words, there is a perverse over-identification with the military history of network communication and the *jouissance* of tech-gnostic claims. Adherents both enjoy serving as instruments of the big Other (military intelligence) and perceive the horror of the enemy as the 'non-separated object' (Vanhuele, 2011, p. 137) or demiurgic media infrastructure. This 'war of biblical proportions' (WWGIWGA, 2019, p. 8) resembles a crowd-sourced intelligence operation that will result in 'The Storm', a media spectacle of justice and death so profound as to melt away the 'purest of pure evil' (WWGIWGA, 2019, p. 36). QAnon can be thought of as a techno-delusion and crowd-sourced religious movement that while 'exemplifying the unreal, the untrue and the irrational' is irreducibly a 'product of material social processes' (Sconce, 2019, p. 41). That is, the generalization of cyberwar in network communication.



The horror of QAnon for the technocrat is the movement's identification with the Real of cyberwar and American power 'inclusive of its concealed underside of obscene enjoyment' (Vighi & Feldner, 2007, p. 136). This is manifest in the key figure in QAnon mythology, aside from Trump himself, disgraced former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn. As the former director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, he is seen as part of the Q-Team of patriots, if not an archetype for the mythic figure of Q. What coalesces the innumerable strains of QAnon is the pervert's structure of enjoyment invoking the-name-of-the-father, in this case the principles of martial law in the service of Trump as the obscene father and ego-ideal of *jouissance* (Jutel, 2017). Through the perverse identification with Trump and Flynn one may enjoy the 'deep state' as the transgressive supplement of the law and American patriotism. For QAnon, there is pleasure in horror and cyberwar as 'baking the Q breadcrumbs' (WWG1WGA, 2019, p. 122) makes one an intelligence officer able to understand and shape the spectacle of politics for the promised revelation. In this way they embody Baudrillard's ecstatic mode 'at the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect and remote sovereignty' (1983, p. 147). In the figure of Flynn we have a permissive agent of the symbolic law; a general enlisting 'digital soldiers' (Young America's Foundation, 2016). Flynn's coinage has been central to QAnon, with the digital soldier pledge serving as a key act of social media communion and invocation of spiritual and cyberwar. In his formulation Flynn described the Trump internet movement as 'an insurgency ... irregular warfare at its finest ... citizen journalis[m] ... [and] the American people decid[ing] to take over the idea of information' (Young America's Foundation, 2016). What is resonant for QAnon in this reheating of digital teleologies is a licensing of cyber and spiritual warfare as a form of tech-gnostic self-divination.

Where the hysteric disinformation expert mediates the Real through studying the other, the QAnon cyber warrior gladly offers themselves, not only to the perverse underside of the law, but the apocalyptic event prophesized as 'The Storm'. Equal part military coup and rapturous revelation to vanquish a Satanic cabal, the other is dwarfed by the cosmic scale of this desire. The methods of digital divination, from parsing Trump's tweets, pop-culture symbology or the psychonautics of the great awakening map, assume an eschatological weight. It is tech-gnostic cyberwar and dualism between the (spiritual) high plane of technological revelation threatened by the low in the form of an elaborate Satanic or Demiurgic (material) complex of media manipulation. This dualism captivates QAnon adherents through the fantasy that 'modern form(s) of power might actually be named, its plots exposed' (Sconce, 2019, p. 241). The totality of communicative capitalism and cyberwar can be conceptualized but only as cursed material forms infecting the population. The 5G and covid conspiracies have been central to the Q constellation (Gallagher et al., 2019) and symbolize the traumatic encounter of the material as demonic or cursed. The protrusion of 5G towers materialize the invisible power that accounts for a subjective fragmentation and alienation under capitalism, however this can only be understood as a Luciferian plot within this dualist logic. The 5G tower is an exemplary trope of the 'black box' techno-delusion that collapses a 'vast, abstract, and perhaps unknowable apparatuses of control into a single comprehensible device' (Sconce, 2019, p. 18). This black box functions as *objet petit a* in psychosis,



as a ‘non-separated object ... a strange internal element the subject has to manage’ (Vanhuele, 2011, p. 137). Thus Lacan’s aphorism that the psychotic subject ‘has its cause in its own pocket’ (in Vanhuele, 2011, p. 137) neatly captures the cybernetic horror of modern communication devices.

In the popular QAnon documentary *Out of Shadows* (Smith, 2019) this technognostic dualism folds all hitherto techno-delusions and conspiracies into this struggle as a transhistorical black box.⁵ The entirety of modern media and its relationship to elite power is understood as a deep state plot to condition the population through MKUltra tactics and Satanic magic into accepting ritual child sacrifice. The filmmaker describes his discovery by way of occult symbology and etymology. He describes ‘Hollywood’ and ‘Entertainment’ as clues of an occult logic analogous to Druids, spell-binding the public through holly tree wands and magic mediums (Smith, 2019). In a key moment of revelation and exposition the filmmaker directly addresses the audience:

Cut to today, what do we have in our houses? We have these black boxes, what are they called? TVs ... Tell-A-Vision. And when you turn on that television what do you get ... a list of *channels*. And when you turn on those channels what do you get, *programming*. They are programming you, they’ve been programming your whole life, you don’t even know it. (Smith, 2019)

The horror and pleasures of QAnon derives from this formulation of the transhistorical scale of information and media warfare. Not merely a response to digital connectivity and fragmentation, all mediation can be understood through the black box delusion, all images are suffused with this logic. Everything relating to prophecy’s fulfilment or spiritual warfare is contained through one’s own self-divining media consumption (Figs. 11–12).

QAnon functions as a perverse techno-religion with participants ‘elevating the enjoying big Other into the agency of Law’ (Žižek, 1997, p. 47). Whether the occulted Q, Trump or Flynn, one places themselves at the centre of world historical and cosmic events by pledging loyalty and availing themselves to the big Other’s will. There is the promise of human law in the form military tribunals and executions, but also divine justice. The 5D Great Awakening Map (Parinya, 2021) is exemplary of the convergence of information warfare with a tech-gnostic new age akin to Baudrillard’s view of the modern media subject as an astronaut.

⁵ A remarkable weaponization of the black box delusion as the underside of the law is captured in a recruitment video for the US Army Special Operations Command, or psywar division, entitled, ‘Ghosts in the Machine’ (GoArmySOF, 2022). The ad is a cinematic montage of world historical events and the far reaches of the globe ominously interspersed with a ‘spooky’ Betty Boop cartoon playing on a television. The ad incites a paranoia of the deep state boasting that the US military *is* the ghost in the machine that is ‘pulling the strings’ lurking ‘in the shadows’ and able to shape all world events from Tiananmen square to ‘colour revolutions’. The modern spectacle of media, culture and politics are pseudo events as it declares: ‘All the world’s a stage...anything we touch is a weapon...[and] we are everywhere’ (GoArmySOF, 2022). The promo culminates with scenes of war, US Army Rangers shot hauntingly at distance in a forest wearing masks and a cartoon ghost appearing on a television that is on fire. It concludes in cosmic techno-horror tones with the division describing itself as ‘a feeling in the dark, a message in the stars, ghosts in the machine’. They are as the non-separated object, spectral and material, trying to induce paranoia and psychosis through the horror of communication. There could hardly be a better demonstration of how horror, the logic of QAnon and the black box delusion are integral to cyberwar.



colonial new world to the heavens, has been a calling justifying all manner of horrors and traumatic histories of war and apocalypticism. The failures of communication and technocracy thus engenders the return of spectres of history with communication's role in the struggle to control the world understood not in material terms but tech-gnosticism and horror.

The dominant disinformation paradigm that has emerged in response to 2016 has attempted to mediate the Real through the hysteric expert's call to mobilize against the horrific enemy of *jouissance*. The presence of social antagonism and the failures of communication indicate an agent of social chaos and subversion wielding techniques of literal horror. The fantasies of American social and epistemic wholeness persist but for the agents of subversion who are either inhuman trolls or unwittingly serve Putin's non-linear internationale. At the core of this thesis is a belief in cursed images and cyber-demonology. The uniquely Russian qualities of unreality are able to charge memes and political messages with an animus that gnaws at the heart of Western democracies and cultivates foreign agents, whether wittingly or through the hacking of American minds. The spectral presence of Dugin, Surkov and Putin conjures the overdetermined evil of the warlock, technologist and monstrous autocrat. This is a social science that rests upon Cold War phantasms, tech-gnosticism and the schizo-delusion of a Russian influencing machine reaching through the internet and beyond. In the *New York Times*, the standard bearer of epistemic consensus, this transhistorical machine produces literal viruses through the transmission of doubt and malaise in communication networks. In the US Senate, the indeterminacy of online communication in meme form is evidence of weaponized and infected communication. The very techno-horrors of the elite and the national security state have become key to the creation of new epistemic and governance structures aimed at reconstituting their power.

Where the technocracy's horror forces a confrontation with the failure of digital teleologies and a return of the Real, QAnon is perversely reconciled with the horrors and obscurities of cyberwar. There is an experience of *jouissance* and overdetermined techno-delusions that place one at the centre of world-historical, spiritual and apocalyptic events simply through immersing oneself in media. They embody and embrace American traditions of tech-gnosticism through a spiritual material-dualism that allows them to perceive the Satanic media infrastructure while retaining the belief in the revelatory power of communication technology. Through the prophetic figure of Q there is a perverted over-identification with the material realities of cyberwar. Trump and Flynn become permissive agents of deep state and martial law fantasies with promises of ecstatic and bloody tech-mediated revelation. Self-divination becomes a process of simply 'enjoying the show' and perceiving the eschatology of QAnon inscribed in every image and mediated event. The ultimate failure of QAnon prophecy in the January 6 Capitol assault has scattered the movement across platforms and cut it off from presidential visibility. What persists, however, are the horrors of communication from imperceptible powers of abstraction, our imbrication in material processes through language and the hegemony of a cyberwar political habitus. As such the hysteric/pervert mediation of horror will pervade the network in the place of a material and political challenge to communicative capitalism.



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Olivier Jutel is a lecturer in the Media, Film and Communication Department at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

