The Outrage of Networks: Social Media and Contemporary Authoritarian Populism

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Until the last few years, the vast majority of theorizing about the political implications of online social networking capacities tended to assume that new communications media would empower progressive forces against the undemocratic tendencies in industrialized countries. However, the election of Donald Trump, the electoral success of similar political movements in other capitalist democracies, and the rise to prominence of the so-called 'alt-right' in numerous online spaces constitute a development that requires re-examination of much of the common wisdom about social media and politics. This essay explores why earlier optimistic theory cannot explain why reactionary ideas have been so politically successful in the world of social media.

Keywords: social media, alt-right, authoritarian populism, Trump

Recent years have seen a dramatic change in the way that popular culture and public conversations have imagined the role of the internet in political life. Not long ago, most discussion proceeded with an implicit assumption that the internet empowered individuals and provided progressive activists enhanced opportunities to speak truth to power, making possible a more open, participatory, democratic, informed, just and equitable world. Today, in contrast, the internet is most often discussed as a space dominated by informational oligarchies who invade privacy, spread false news, and offer a safe haven for the fostering of hateful and extremist ideas (Askonas 2019). The discussion has turned from the question of how we can best take advantage of the new freedoms online, to how those freedoms can be kept from undermining democracy (Haggart and Tusikov 2019).

An explanation of this relatively sudden shift, then, requires a significant challenge to what has been, until recently, the dominant way of understanding the politics of the internet. The argument presented here is intended as a start to the explanation of where, precisely, the early thinking about the internet went wrong. It will discuss the rise of authoritarian discourse as it has been manifested since the election of US president Donald Trump in 2016, and other similar developments in other countries in the last decade. It is hoped that a careful look at the optimism of the past can illuminate some of the weaknesses to be avoided in attempting to explain such a political formation was able to take advantage of the potentials offered by new media better than their more democratically oriented opponents.

The argument below proceeds through a theoretical critique of the assumptions behind the approach that is referred to here as 'cyberutopianism', rather than through a close textual analysis of the literature. This is necessary because the assumptions are not often made explicit, but are more likely to be taken for granted and only briefly stated rather than established through detailed argument. Some key texts and statements in them can be identified, however, in ways that are helpful. The argument also does not require close reading of the statements of authoritarian populist political actors, as this work has been done by a number of others whose work can be consulted should the reader desire more detail concerning the content of the discourse discussed (Nagle 2017; Ott 2017; Lyons 2017; Topinka 2018; Kreis 2017). In any case, the discourse often exists mostly in the form of contributions to social media accounts that are intended not to be carefully devised and consistent or representative statements of political position, but rather as emotional responses or attempts to provoke the same. As such, it is of less value to reproduce particular ideological expressions than to discuss the totality of the approach, and leave the particulars to those other discussions.

Cyber-utopianism
The idea that the internet is inherently liberatory, freeing individuals from the constraints of social systems based on centralized technologies, appeared for many years as common sense. This approach has informed a great deal of what has been written, both popularly and academically, about the political implications of the internet since its early days. Even before most people were familiar with the new means of communicating, enthusiasts were trumpeting the revolutionary potentials that they foresaw, and pleading for a laissez-faire approach on the part of governments (Barlow 1996; Dyson 1994). These statements clearly were informed by a neoliberal or even libertarian understanding of freedom as absence of state coercion. They generally identified the internet as a key technology in a transformation away from the top-down, hierarchically-organized social systems of the industrial age (which they saw as primarily government) to a new, decentralized, bottom-up organization that characterized information society. For early cyber-utopians, the implications were an increase to the amount of freedom individuals could enjoy.

There have been more progressive and sophisticated attempts to theorize this shift, which did not share the libertarian conclusions of early writing. For instance, Benkler recognized that both

coercive forms of political organization and market-oriented economic activity could fail to provide the conditions for the development of human potential (Benkler 2006) but still saw the internet as a means of escape from both, which would facilitate a different, more co-operative form of behaviour. For him:

> "The emergence of the networked information economy promises to expand the horizons of the feasible in political imagination. …. However, the overarching constraint represented by the seeming necessity of the industrial model of information and cultural production has significantly shifted as an effective constraint on the pursuit of liberal commitments." (8)

And others on the US left, such as Joe Trippi, campaign manager for Howard Dean's unsuccessful presidential run in 2004, saw a similar development resulting from the inherent democratic potential of the technology:

> For years we've seen the Internet as a revolution in business or in culture. But what we are seeing – at its core – is a political phenomenon, a *democratic movement* that proceeds from our civic lives and naturally spills over in [the music we hear, the clothes we buy,]… the causes we support." (Trippi 2005, p. 203)

Armstrong and Moutitsas, who were affiliated with the Obama administration, also understood the internet primarily as a way for citizens to challenge the power of large corporations and engage more effectively in electoral politics than they would have been able to without it:

> "[I]f information is power, then this new technology – which is the first to evenly distribute information – is really distributing power. This power is shifting from institutions that have always been run top down, hording information at the top, telling us how to live our lives, to a new paradigm of power that is democratically distributed and shared by all of us." (Armstrong and Moulitsas 2006, p. 4)

The most recent manifestation of cyber-utopianism, however, followed the 2011-12 wave of protests against state power in the Middle East known as the Arab Spring, and the 'Occupy' protests in the industrialized world that began on Wall Street. Most widely known is Clay Shirky's response to Malcolm Gladwell on the subject in the popular press (Gladwell 2010; Shirky 2011), but the academic debate is also extensive (see for example, Brym et al. 2014; Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra, and Tormey 2016; González-Bailón and Wang 2016; Hermida 2014; Jensen and Bang 2013; Jung 2016; Karolak 2017; Kavada 2015; Kidd and McIntosh 2016; Micó and Casero-Ripollés 2014; Milan 2015; Suh, Vasi, and Chang 2017; Theocharis et al. 2015). For such authors the use of these tools in these movements is indicative of their potential as democratizing agents; the potential use of same technologies for other purposes is not considered.

These events having taken place at the same time that social media services like Facebook and Twitter were becoming extremely popular led many to identify, not unreasonably, a causal relationship between the two developments. The volume of writing on the use of social media in these protests is indication of how central such technologies were seen to be. And clearly they did play some role, although there is evidence that is exaggerated (Morozov 2010), but the amount of that attention devoted to the relationship indicates the power of the assumption that this is the primary political implication of the new technology.

The best-known theorist of the information age, Manuel Castells has joined in this kind of analysis as well, with his 2012 survey *Networks of Hope and Outrage*. He presents much well-developed reasoning to explain the abilities of social movements to organize in new ways that suit the post-industrial structures of information societies and does not explicitly appear utopian. However, his conclusions are not inconsistent with the utopian narrative of the earlier discussions. His analysis is much more thorough, however, in his *Communication Power,* as well as in his earlier trilogy

The Information Age.

In those works, it is clear that Castells shares Dyson's idea of the internet as part of a shift from the industrial society characterized by hierarchical organization to an informational society marked by a more fluid, decentralized, organizational form (Castells 2000, ch. 1). He also identifies and analyses a variety of types of power exercised through networks (Castells 2009, p. 42) in ways that might be very helpful. It is also clear that Castells, unlike most of the optimistic thinkers mentioned so far, sees these forms of power in direct relation to the economic power exercised by capital in a market economy. But the application of these ideas is restricted to discussion of the relation between capitalism and the mass media, and when he has an expanded opportunity to apply them to internet-based means of communication, he neglects to do so, and only discusses their use by pro-democratic social movements. For instance, he asserts that

> "[B]y engaging in the production of mass media messages, and by developing autonomous networks of horizontal communication, citizens of the Information Age become able to invent new programs for their lives with the materials of their suffering, fears, dreams and hopes." (Castells 2015, p. 9)

For Castells, it seems that the hope and outrage exist, and the role the technologies play is a passive one allowing that sentiment to be mobilized.

What is common to all of the discussions described as cyber-utopian is that while individuals are seen to be empowered by these new means of communication, the actual nature of the powers from which they are liberated are not closely examined. This results in one-sided and limited analyses of the relationship that well be explored in the context of recent events.

Whatever the flaws in its internal logic, this kind of thinking is now appearing much less plausible, as a result of the political developments of recent years. And now that our shared imagination of the potentials of the internet is becoming less utopian, some understanding of where the mistakes in the past lie is needed. Many writers have already been taking a different approach, drawing on political economy and other critical perspectives to understand why the internet has not yet lead to radically more democratic social organization. One helpful analysis is that of Tucker et al, who recognize the contradiction between the utopianism of recent theory and the reality of the power of the far right (Tucker et al. 2017). Their discussion is a helpful start, but does not deal with the reasons that the forces of reaction have been more successful in recent years than their progressive counterparts. The current discussion is intended to assist the explanation of these recent developments. But first those political developments require some description.

Contemporary authoritarian populism
The year 2016 marked a turning point in politics in many ways, with the arrival of a new kind of political tendency that manifested itself in major industrialized economies both inside and outside of electoral politics. This new politics is both populist, in the sense of appealing to the sense of disempowerment and alienation from the political establishment felt by many, and authoritarian in that it seeks to restrict the operation of liberal freedoms for many and institute increased forms of discrimination against those it sees as the source of social problems.[1]

The rise of authoritarian populism can be seen in developments in a number of countries, including the election of Donald Trump in the US and the rise of an extremist right-wing formation describing

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[1] The term 'Authoritarian Populism' is being used here to refer to something more explicitly authoritarian than earlier formations for which the term was used (see Hall et al. 1978; Jessop et al. 1984; Hall 1985).

itself as the 'alt-right' there, the referendum result opposing UK's continued participation in the European Union on the basis of nationalist anti-immigrant sentiment, and the rise to power of a number of other authoritarian politicians such as Vladimir Putin in Russia, Recep Erdogan in Turkey, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Viktor Orban in Hungary (Fuchs 2018a). The US case is probably most instructive, although it is hoped that the analysis will apply more broadly.

In the US, the Trump victory marks not only a further shift of the political spectrum to the right after 35 years of neoliberal domination of federal politics, but a deeper change that involves a rejection of the social values of formal equality that had been widely – but obviously not universally – accepted as the basis of political life. Authoritarian populism asserts a more aggressive defense of existing inequalities, and in this resembles traditional conservative values of a century ago more than it does the neoliberal status quo of the post-cold war era. But at the same time, it dispenses with the respect shown in discourse for the norms of civil debate and respect for difference of opinion.

This disrespect for the norms of civil debate is most closely associated with the political expression of a certain subset of the authoritarian politics in the US in the last few years. The so-called 'alt-right' is best described not as a coherent movement but as a discourse that includes extremist forms of white supremacism and misogynistic gender politics, and which manifests itself primarily online. The rhetoric of the Trump campaign and presidency echoes many of the themes of the alt-right, although in less extremist forms, and many of the key figures of the alt-right have expressed support for Trump and his policies. But the term is an ambiguous one, and not all who would identify with the goals of authoritarian populism would accept being described as belonging to the alt-right. This discourse has been discussed and documented elsewhere (Nagle 2017; Neiwert 2017) so this argument will focus on broader themes that are part of both this discourse and the broader narrative outlined by authoritarian populism.

Most of what has been written about the alt-right, however, is mostly descriptive, (Hawley 2017; Wendling 2018; Benkler et al. 2017; Marwick and Lewis 2017), and while it generally notes the value of social media to its project, what has been written does not attempt to deal with the fact that this use of the internet is at odds with the expectations that can be derived from what was a dominant set of assumptions about that technology.

Before that can be explored however, the substantive content of the ideas that constitute authoritarian populism need to be identified. These have been discussed elsewhere (Lyons 2017; Nagle 2017; Fuchs 2018b), but some of its key features can be readily summarized through identification of elements of a vision of the world shared by political movements that have gained support in various countries:

- **Ethnic nationalism** which involves a racialized understanding of the nation and its membership, and is frequently manifested in the expression of opposition to high levels of immigration

- **Patriarchal gender relations,** involving a reaction against many of the gains of feminism in recent decades

- **Patriotic militarism,** associated with an imperialist understanding of global politics

- **Loyalty to powerful individual leaders,** which typically manifests through a concentration of state power in the office of the executive and often resembles a cult of personality

- **Anti-intellectualism,** in which simple solutions to complex problems are preferred and which demonstrates little attachment to factual evidence, or reasoned debate

- **Intolerance of difference,** implying an exclusivist response to demands for rights for sexual minorities, transgendered communities, unorthodox religions, and other groups that are not part of the established order are dismissed as unimportant or inappropriate.

- **'Law and order'** responses to any organized dissent, expressing a nostalgia for an earlier, simpler time of clearer power hierarchies, and the use of force to deal with any kind of social problems

- **Economic nationalism,** which is often in conflict with other elements of conservative thinking, but is connected to the ethnic nationalism that is part of the core ideology of authoritarian populism.

What binds these various elements together in the simplest sense is that the discourse is, literally, reactionary. As Norris puts it, it is "a cultural backlash in Western societies against long-term, ongoing social change" (Norris 2016). It is motivated to defend the privileges of a certain kind of subject who feels threatened by changes that are demanded within the liberal democratic order. This subject is, most generally, the white, male, law-abiding individual member of the nation.[2] All others are seen as a threat, to whom the same privileges do not need to be extended, and whose rights can only be extended at the cost of some rights of the dominant group. Quite often, given the important role that race and the politics of immigration play in this politics, many authors equate the alt-right and authoritarian populism with white supremacist thinking, (for instance, see Main 2018) but the other elements are also a significant part of this politics.

As others have described, the foundations of this authoritarian populism can best be understood as an ideological response to the ongoing crisis of contemporary capitalist economies (Muller 2016; Norris 2016; Fuchs 2018a). Particularly since the financial collapse of 2008, and the jobless recovery in its aftermath, the material conditions that form the lived experience of most of the populations of the US and Europe have been fertile ground for cultivation of reactionary ideas that were recently thought to be outside the range of legitimately expressible opinion. That does not imply that other social factors related to gender, race, citizenship and a number of axes of social difference are not relevant or not connected to the origins of this cultural formation, but suggests that it was the economic conditions which gave these other elements an opportunity to cohere and manifest themselves in a more productive manner (Inglehart and Norris 2016).

In sum, the ideology of contemporary authoritarian populism is a set of beliefs and assumptions that sees a certain type of subject of the nation at risk of losing the privileged status that they have enjoyed. That subject may not enjoy the privileges of the economic elite, and it does include members of the industrial working class as well as other classes fractions (such as small business and the professional managerial class) as long as they can identify themselves as enjoying the kind of privileges that have been enjoyed by straight, white, male, citizens, and as being at risk of losing some status in society. Anyone who can consider themselves to have benefitted from the distribution of wealth and power in the last half century but now fears that their status in the social order is not secure can easily see themselves reflected this way. This is supported with evidence from exit polls in the 2016 election in the US, for instance, which indicate that typical Trump voters possessed less education, but had similar incomes to others (CNN 2016).

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[2] Much of this discussion is specific to the US context; the authoritarian populist subject in other countries may be constructed in a slightly different way and the analysis might need to be adjusted.

It is worth noting the difference between authoritarian populism and neoliberal ideology, which at least pays deference to liberal notions of formal equality of opportunity within the market economy. Authoritarian populism is not concerned with equality. While neoliberalism emphasizes market freedoms, and is usually opposed to measures such as affirmative action policies that interfere with markets in order to create greater levels of equality between social groups, it does not explicitly seek to privilege one gender, racial, ethnic or religious group over another as authoritarian populism does.

The overall narrative of contemporary authoritarian populism is one of a nation in which some kinds of individuals have worked hard to achieve what they have, but are now experiencing a loss of their status as dominant figures in the social system, and who desire to rectify this problem by attacking what power and opportunity less privilege others have managed to win in power struggles of the past.

Explaining the failure of cyber-utopianism

There are three problems with the optimistic embrace of technologies as democratic equalizers that make it difficult to employ in the context of an empowered online authoritarian populism. First, it ignores what we know about the politics of communication in capitalist societies; it more specifically neglects important features of social media services that support much online discussion, and lastly, it fails to deal with the individualizing tendencies of these new means of communication and the way that public spheres are reshaped by them. The following section deals with each of these three in turn.

The role of capitalism in communication

Cyber-utopian thinking rests on a curious blind spot. On one hand, it recognizes that there was something in the pre-internet social order that prevented people from being fully informed or expressing themselves fully, but on the other hand, it generally fails to explore the nature of those limitations adequately. There is a recognition that traditional print and broadcast media are governed by some kind of gatekeepers, but little is generally done to explain how this worked, or in what interest the gates were kept. Most commonly, such institutions were dismissed as centralized hierarchies of the industrial age, without any discussion of what kind of power they were involved in exercising. Thus this thinking does not see either media in terms of their relationship to capitalist power that derives from specifically from ownership or the power of advertising as a source of revenue. At best, in the case of Castells, the capitalist nature of the mass media systems are recognized, and the extent to which this privileges the dominant class is acknowledged, but the implications of this are not explored in the depth that would have been required (Castells 2009, 73–93).

This approach simply assumes that without such centralized institutions, individuals will be free to engage in their own processes of the construction of meaning. But the process of construction of meaning is always a social process, rather than an individual one, and just because individual citizens are not part of some centrally controlled process does not mean that the meanings that will be constructed will be somehow authentic expressions of their interests, or that political discourse will necessary become more democratic. The cyber-utopian perspective ignores the fact that meaning-making is always embedded in social processes, which means that new media are never simply a means of making individuals free. In particular, the class power that dominates capitalist society does not disappear merely because the capitalist class no longer determines the content of the news that circulates. That power is still present in the control of the leading institutions that produce news, and in the overall character of a society in which the majority are not in a position

to do determine the way that their labor – including their intellectual labor – is used and valued. Most people will still look to some kinds of experts or celebrities to make what they learn about their world meaningful, and those experts will most often have some connection to the power of capital. It remains most likely that the new means of communication will still privilege information and expression from dominant groups, and that effective challenges to those dominant groups will not necessarily circulate more effectively.

But beyond this, because cyber-utopian theory does not analyze carefully the kinds of power that was exercised before the internet, it is unable to accurately identify whose voice was, but no longer is, marginalized. Imprecise claims about 'grassroots' (or 'netroots') interests being supported by social media services, after having been marginalized by 'elites' who were able to minimize the expression of challenges to their power from 'the people', are not adequate to identify what kinds of ideas are likely to be expressed in a new online environment.

In particular, this approach fails to understand that some of the voices and perspectives that had not been heard in the mass media included those with a desire to preserve existing privilege. Because of the mass media's need for the largest audiences possible, its appeal was mostly to the center of the political spectrum, which meant support for the basic principles of liberal democracy, including formal equality of rights, respect for the interests of ethnic minorities, and symbolic support for some demands for social justice. The mass media system, in other words, does not simply exclude all challenges to corporate power from those demanding more equality for women, visible minorities and working people; it also excludes those on the opposite side of the political spectrum. A bias towards corporate interests was never absent, but this bias was uneven and was never total. This bias becomes more pronounced as distribution networks multiply channels and make narrowcasting possible; the practices of the Fox News Channel indicate the possibilities for this. But the selective evidence used to support the claim that the mass media was always supportive of elites and reinforced existing inequalities was never entirely convincing. This pattern of coverage by dominant mass media institutions allowed those who continued to cling to traditional justifications of social inequalities to believe that their positions were being marginalized by what they labeled a 'liberal media' because it took seriously the kinds of equality that are consistent with a market economy.

If we consider content of the media beyond the major newspaper coverage of specific political events, and includes entertainment from Hollywood and the television industry as well, it is easier to accept that at least some of the mass media institutions in liberal democracies are not always biased towards reproducing existing inequalities. Support for demands made on behalf of working people have generally been less prominent, and this is an important difference that illuminates the limits of the kinds of demands for equality that are taken seriously. But we can now see that there was a significant constituency who found the mass media too respectful of demands social equality; the controversy over the online reaction to the diversity of the cast of Disney's *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016) is an excellent example of this (Ellis 2016; White 2016). This kind of reaction cannot be understood without looking more closely than cyber-utopians generally have.

This kind of conservative response to developments in the culture of liberal democracy can easily make more sense to some than a traditional left critique of neoliberalism. In the particular moment of the aftermath of the crash of 2008 in the US, downwardly mobile members of the professional managerial class, for instance, or unemployed ex-members of a unionized workforce whose jobs had been sent out of the country as a result of free trade deals, are not easy to place within the simple dichotomy of the top percentile, composed of corporate elites and the bottom 99% made of up economic victims. Such individuals, and even more so, the white male members of that demographic group, were not entirely excluded from status and power within the political and

economic system, yet many are finding that they are losing privilege they have. There are in fact many locations within such a structure from which it is easy to interpret one's status as marginalized within a discursive and economic system even if one is comparatively privileged in relation to many others (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Mutz 2018).

Of course there are plenty of reasons to identify the moves toward greater equality in US politics as severely limited, but in contrast to the some of the other societies discussed by Castells and others in their analyses of the political uses of social media, liberal demands for equality have been relatively successful. To include the uprisings of the Arab Spring, or in Iran in 2009, and the Occupy Wall Street protests in the same category is to ignore the difference in the social context for these social movements and is to suggest that the grievances that motivated them are the same. Attending to the differences might help explain how there were many in the US who, presumably, not only opposed the Occupy movement but also believed that the 'liberal media' were overly-sympathetic to its demands.

The political economy of social media
As well as this simple reductionism in the political economy of capitalist communication, a different problem at the level of the understanding of the new communication systems leads cyber-utopian theory to unwarranted optimism. The political economy of social media is represented in ways that ignore the power of the private owners of social media services, which has now come to seem quite naive. While social media services do offer increased opportunity for average users to communicate their own messages, this is not the same thing has having control over the conditions under which that communication happens. This difference is often ignored by those discussing the politics of the internet, leaving the impression that social media creates an unmediated interchange of ideas.

This is, of course, not the first time that this error has been made; it is in fact the general case when a new medium of communication is introduced. Since the previous process of mediation is no longer in operation, and new forms of mediation are as yet not fully understood, communication is seen as not being mediated at all (Mosco 2004). However, every new system has its unique properties that mediate communication in some new way. It may be difficult to recognize the new forms of mediation as they are emerging, but it always needs to be understood before the political implications of the medium can be comprehended. One example of this is Benkler's claim that, in comparison with older media,

> "…at a minimum we can say that individuals are less susceptible to manipulation by a legally defined class of others—the owners of communications infrastructure and media. The net-worked information economy provides varied alternative platforms for communication, so that it moderates the power of the traditional mass-media model, where ownership of the means of communication enables an owner to select what others view, and thereby to affect their perceptions of what they can and cannot do." (Benkler 2006, 9)

In the early days of any media system, analysts can be forgiven for not seeing all the ways that it might end up being shaped to accommodate itself to the structure of power in society. Perhaps it is only hindsight that allows us to see that social media infrastructures are in fact structured by a class of owners and that the conditions for production of meaning that they provide are not in any way free from external forces (Innis 1951). In any case, we can now clearly see that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube reflect many of the influences of private owners of the systems in the communications that they produce.

The operation of algorithmic manipulation of information flows to support the interests of digital monopolists dependent on advertising revenue have been described elsewhere, so it need not be repeated here (Fuchs 2018b; Hrynyshyn 2017); it should suffice to note that platforms funded through the marketing of audience attention or audience labor power will have an interest in

promoting content that is sensationalist and shocking over content that engages the intellectual capacities of audience members. Combining this with the profitability of algorithmic targeting of content at users who belong to narrowly-defined psychographic fragments of the public, so that social media users are more likely to see news that shocks them but does not challenge their existing prejudices, it is not difficult to construct reasons to believe that commercial social media are unlikely promote a more democratic engagement of their users in society (Gehl 2013; Tufekci 2014). Together these two factors allow advertisers to target particular demographic groups online, not only with sensationalist content, but in ways that are easily able to reinforce existing political beliefs and exacerbate tensions between different elements of the population. Advertisers also can include political actors, making the interventions even more direct, as was the case in the US election 2016, with foreign agents using Facebook to spread false news stories and the Trump campaign relying on Cambridge Analytica to assist their campaign's targeting of voters (Benkler et al. 2017; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018).

The power of owners to structure the conditions under which users communicate is, however, completely absent from the analysis of those who posit social media as inherently democratizing. This power has been debated by lawmakers and experts widely, however, and the controversies over the limits of political speech online in 2018, have led Facebook, Twitter and YouTube all take seriously some reason to limit the worst excesses of the alt-right (Chappel and Tsioulcas 2018). The effectiveness of these measures will be an important subject of ongoing study, but such study requires abandoning the utopian approach.

This argument should not be taken as implying that social media do not contribute to the free expression of ideas. Social media include more than Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube; many other platforms, such as Reddit and 4Chan do not, so far, seem to express any particular interest of capital. Reddit, while privately owned, is not funded by advertising (Carr 2012), and there does not seem to be any particular reason why content on such platforms should conform to the logic of commodity exchange. Both of these forums are, in fact, much more open to the alt-right than are Facebook and Twitter, both of which have promised to make efforts to regulate distribution of content more heavily in order to prevent the hate speech and harassment online (Topinka 2018). It might be that neither of these two sites can be said to have a sustainable business model, but they do serve as contrasts with earlier media in the extent to which they facilitate free speech.

That these fora are used so widely to distribute the most toxic of messages - the kind that are 'not safe for work', or more to the point, not safe for mass mediation - is a clear indication that the ideas that were less likely to be distributed through mass media were not only those that challenged the discourse of corporate power, patriarchy or racism. They were also the ideas that challenged the cultural norms of the liberal democracy that had been adopted widely across the mass media industries as well. Advocates of illiberal ideas, who were marginalized by mass media for commercial reasons, were thus able to exploit the openness of social media with great effect. The form of resistance that came to dominate in the least regulated online spaces, therefore, seems to require more explanation that can be found within popular critical accounts of the political economy of media.

The fragmentation of the public sphere
A further reason for the failure of optimistic expectations about social media can be seen when examining the relationships between the nature of different discourses and the functioning of different media systems. While authoritarian populist discourse works very well in a social media environment, the democratic discourses of activists have features that make it more effective when distributed through the mass media, and this discourse still is shaped by the fact that it grew out of the activist work done that relied on that media system.

Commercial mass media succeed by appealing to as large (or at least as profitable) an audience as possible in order to maximize advertising revenue. This leads to a prioritizing of the kind of messages and meanings with which the largest number of people can identify. Such messages tend to lead members of the society to feel as if what they are receiving is a message about the interests that are shared with the rest of the members, on which everyone can eventually come to agree. Mass media messages can be targeted at more profitable demographic groups but the extent to which this is possible is limited by the nature of the medium involved. Social media, in contrast, have the potential to very effectively reach groups of users narrowly defined in not just demographic but psychographic terms. This is an ideal system for distributing messages that are designed to appeal to very specific interests of certain kinds of members, and which include ideas about other kinds of people in society as a threat or as doing harm to the intended recipients of the messages.

With this in mind, it should be clear that the authoritarian populist discourse of white nationalists, men's rights advocates, and those who support an exclusivist politics are more likely to succeed in social media than in mass media. Of course all activists do make use of social media, but not all have messages that is best suited for the structure of social media.

Comparing the reactionary discourse of authoritarian populism with that of progressive movements can illustrate this point helpfully. Castells' choice of the Occupy movement is, in fact, illustrative of exactly this problem with the analysis (Castells 2015, 160–219). The Occupy movement made extensive use of social media, particularly as it was mostly ignored for the first few months after the initial attempts to make itself known on Wall Street (DeLuca, Lawson, and Sun 2012). The framing of economic inequality was expressed explicitly through the assertion that the movement represented the interests of almost all of the population; this reference to the 99% and the identification of the 1% as the source of the problem eventually became very well known. In this sense it was a successful intervention in the discourse about politics in the US; but the failure of the movement to achieve any other of its objectives is also now quite clear.

The idea that the political problems of the day can be understood as one in which a small elite minority is harming the interests of almost everyone else is not new, of course. But Occupy's use of that claim inserts it into a narrative that holds that practically everyone should be able to identify with the movement's goals of a more egalitarian redistribution of wealth. While this might seem to be common sense to many in the movement, it is not really obvious that everyone outside of the wealthiest has an interest in greater redistribution of wealth. Certainly one could hope that most of those at the bottom of the wealth scale could easily identify, but many middle-income members of US society might actually believe their interests are better served by less redistribution, since redistribution is usually accomplished by taxing income, and thus might not be able to identify with a movement with such a narrative.

This identity of the 99% is not the first attempt to assert a universal interest motivating a progressive movement; the title of one of the best known discussions of the mass media and the new left derives from the slogans of activists outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where police attacked anti-war protesters with truncheons and tear gas (Gitlin 1980). The sentiment expressed there was the hope that the fact that 'The Whole World is Watching' might deter police from their actions; this of course assumes that the police don't want the rest of the world to know what they are doing. But of course there are always at least some in a society that think that violent suppression of dissent is a good thing, and in the end it turned out that the protesters may not have had the support of a sufficient proportion of the population, and that movement, too, ultimately failed to sway the election.

Not only does the radical democratic counter to the alt-right discourse assume a universal set of interests, but it also assumes that there are a set of facts on which all can agree, with which we can settle political differences. This is the main foundation for the reporting of Daniel Dale, the Washington correspondent of the Toronto Star who relentlessly pores over every statement and tweet from Trump to find things that could be said to be not quite entirely true (Dale 2018). His reporting takes the form of regular lists of lies that Trump has told each day, and has been syndicated across the US (CNN n.d.).

What makes Dale's reporting different from Trump's claims that the messages of the left and the mainstream media are composed of 'fake news' is that Dale not only claims that Trump's statements are false, but he provides evidence and explanations of what makes them false, rather than being simple assertions of falsehood. This may be a necessary response, but it should be understood as part of a broader narrative that relies on a belief in an objective shared reality that can be stated accurately and understood in ways that help meet our shared interests. It is, however, unlikely to convince those who are predisposed to believe Trump's claims for other reasons, and ultimately appears condescending to such individuals, since it implies that the claims of Trump or the alt-right could only be believed by people who lack knowledge or a capacity to understand; this furthers the image of the alt-right struggle against a privileged elite who are out of touch with average people.

These attempts to counter the exclusivist rhetoric of authoritarian populism share with the cyber-utopian point of view a reliance on assumptions derived from classical liberal enlightenment philosophy. Perhaps best expressed in Mill's *On Liberty* (Mill 1859), this philosophical position holds that given unrestrained competition in a marketplace of ideas, the truth will be identified and agreed upon by rational individuals seeking consensus. In theory, this might make sense but the reality of today's conditions of intellectual engagement online do not seem to meet these criteria. A message designed to appeal to those who believe in the shared democratic interests might be a necessary part of a strategy for progressive activists, but this does not mean that social media will be the best way to distribute such ideas.

In contrast, contemporary authoritarian populist discourse is not concerned with presenting something that everyone can believe or identify with. Its message is that the interests of average citizens in the US are being harmed by current policy which is driven by and favors a 'liberal elite' sympathetic to feminists, anti-racist advocates, and unions (among others). This message is not intended to appeal to all, or even nearly all, in the population. It is a purposefully divisive claim, and therefore is less effective at being distributed through the mass media. That the mass media avoids polarization in order to avoid alienating segments of the potential commercial audience actually leads to this discourse being excluded from the dominant narratives, but there is no such incentive in social media for excluding divisive ideas, which make them ideally suited for distribution of the discourse of authoritarian populists.

This is perhaps best illustrated not with statements from the alt-right or the Trump campaign, but an early conservative presidential contender. In 2012, while running for president, Mitt Romney claimed that 47% of the US population pays no taxes and thus are not able to take responsibility for their relationship to society and cannot be persuaded to support the conservative cause (Corn 2012). This kind of message is not intended to appeal to anyone who is part of that supposed 47%, and its release may have contributed to his election loss. But the statement was made at a closed fundraiser for wealthy donors, and was not intended to be made public; a video recording was released without his permission, and was subject to fact-checking (Madison 2012). Had it been circulated on social media, the message might have had different effects, as the recipients there would be less likely to be exposed to the counter-claims and fact-checking of the mass media.

This helps to illustrate how a progressive message presented in contrast to the alt-right is difficult to present without appearing to reinforce the claims of elitism that the alt-right mobilizes. The claim that authoritarian populist policies are harming the country's interests, when expressed by those presenting their ideas as informed by facts and supported by experts, is unlikely to convince those who feel aggrieved by what is left of the redistributive state and liberal policies concerning social inequality. The experts, and the 'liberal' media, after all, are seen from this perspective as part of the threat to the interests of the nation as well.

This advantage that polarizing, exclusivist discourse gets from social media relies heavily on the capacity of social media to employ algorithms that can target individuals and envelop them in content that reinforces their existing understanding of the world, thus insulating them from information that might question their worldview (Tufekci 2014; Pariser 2012; Sunstein 2018). In a discursive environment more saturated by commercial social media, those predisposed to believe claims like Romney's are less likely to encounter the falsifying claims of others. Progressive narratives which are intended to appeal to a broad audience by expressing support for policies from which practically all members of society can benefit, are much more likely to succeed at reaching their target through the mass media. This heritage of the progressive message that emerged in the days before social media may be limiting the ability of the left to make effective use of social media. It may also be the case that abandoning the universal appeal would mean giving up the democratic nature of the message, and that progressive forces still need to attempt to reach mass audiences as they have always done.

Social media and mass media in the representation of the authoritarian populist subject
Any mediated discourse is not just about a particular narrative, but fosters a particular kind of identity or subjectivity. The difficulties of progressive democratic discourse, and the advantages held by its opposite in the world of social media can be illustrated through reference to popular cultural representations of the types of subjectivity in different historical phases over the last several decades of popular television sitcoms.

In the first phase, the post-war welfare state era, a certain kind of white working class male subject was imagined as possessed of sufficient confidence, as the successful breadwinner in a nuclear family, and able to believe that he belonged in and was respected by the society, and that his role was valued. The archetype here might be the figure of Ralph Kramden from *The Honeymooners* (CBS, 1955-56).

Later, as the redistributive welfare state came under stress, such men found themselves reacting against the rising cultural status of women, visible minorities, and other marginalized groups. But they still could consider themselves to have achieved their own version of the American Dream, and be satisfied that they were valued by the society in which they lived. Here the best-known version is most likely Archie Bunker, from *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-79).

As the decline of the post-war order deepened, and the future of social democracy came to be more seriously questioned, the subject at the center of these representations loses the confidence he once had, and finds himself bewildered about his location in social structures. Here we can identify representations such as Homer from *The Simpsons*, (Fox, 1989-present) as well as men who no longer do industrial work but instead work in sales: *WKRP in Cincinnati*'s Herb Tarlek, (CBS, 1978-82) or Al Bundy from *Married… with Children*, (Fox, 1987-97) and then later David Brent or Michael Scott from the BBC and NBC versions, respectively, of *The Office* (2001-2, 2005-13). These characters are clearly insecure about their ability to succeed in the social order, but are not

able to express that insecurity in any effective way - partly because they are still characters in mass mediated cultural content.

But after this neoliberal period, with the more recent developments in global capitalism, popular culture was less able to engage in the representation of such subjects, as they began to feel insecure about their privileges and saw people like themselves losing the social status that they perceived themselves to hold, thereby becoming increasingly anxious about their place in the world. But as social media came to dominate processes of cultural diffusion, they no longer need to look to mass mediated representations as role models to represent their insecurities. They can then express their anxieties on social media, by liking and redistributing what they see on social media, and expressing their own understandings of their lives through blogs and other forms of user-generated content.

These examples shed light on the way that social media should be understood as allowing the expression of anxieties that already exist but have not been considered expressible as they contravene the liberal assumptions about tolerance that gradually came to be dominant in post-war industrial democracies. Those anxieties however, are given new relevance in a global economy of trans-national flows of capital and people in ways that challenge multiple forms of social relations that provided a sense of security in previous decades:

- The breakdown of social democratic welfare state, leading to a loss of economic security, especially for unionized industrial workers and professional-managerial workers.

- The breakdown of the traditional nuclear family, which meant a loss of security in the identity of the patriarchal male head of household.

- The breakdown of national homogeneity under pressures of increased migration, which challenges the security experienced by those who identify as members of a dominant ethnicity within a national community.

These anxieties are not new, but in the past were kept under control, limited and contained, perhaps at the level of insecurities, within a system in which a mass audience could be relied upon to accept a unified notion of what it meant to be successful within the power structure of a society. With the fragmentation of that audience, and the social mediation of meanings, these anxieties can now be expressed more freely and widely.

Conclusions and implications for further research
The inability of utopian theories of communications technology to explain the political success of authoritarian populist forces in using social media clearly requires a comprehensive analysis of a number of types of factors. A complete explanation is beyond the scope of this paper, but further work revising such theories will need to take into account at least three lines of inquiry.

First, a clear understanding of the political economy of social media is needed. This work has started, and is progressing in important directions. But more work on the particular ways that the power of advertising interests intersects with the political forces that operate outside the conservative limits of establishment discourse will be important. To what extent advertisers are successfully able to profit from the commodification of the attention of members of an audience attracted to content that is considered deeply offensive by so many is an open question, and explorations of this contradiction of interests will likely be very productive.

Second, this analysis needs to take into account a more sophisticated understanding of the contradictions of contemporary capitalist society. The effectiveness of the way in which the

discourse of marginalization has been successfully deployed to defend those who, from an even mildly critical perspective, have been quite privileged - older, cisgendered, heterosexual white male citizens - but who may be facing decreased levels of economic security, should make us take seriously the need to identify more carefully the operations of what is known as 'mainstream' media discourse. In particular, the mass mediated representations of the traditional industrial proletariat in a neoliberal informational capitalist economy should be considered closely.

And finally, these factors also need to be understood through a framework that takes seriously the cultural, emotional, or psychological implications of the way that the production of meaning is supported by social media. For these means of communicating do not merely transmit information or fake news - they are the processes by which many of us make sense of the world in which we live. Their structure helps to shape the way we think about who we are and how we relate to others, but it does so against the background of the way we have already come to think about ourselves and our place in our society.

Such an investigation could shed light on the way in which the emergence of authoritarian populism can be understood, at least partly, as the expression of the anxieties of a certain kind of subject, formed in past decades under cultural conditions that included the mass mediation of images and representations, and which is now attempting to make sense of a world in which that they are experiencing a loss of the status on which their identity had been built.

These suggestions would be only the start of an analysis of how the rise of social media has led to unexpected results. It is hoped that more work can continue to examine this development in politics and its relation to the new ways communication is done, in order to devise better ways for progressive political forces to respond to the rise of authoritarian populism.

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