

Alternative Facts and Fake News: Digital Mediation and The Affective Spread of Hate in the Era of Trump

Kayla Keener
George Mason University

ABSTRACT

The role of negative affects such as fear and hate, their manifestation in atmospheres, manipulability, and mobilization as a response to threat perception play a pivotal role in the current political conjuncture. This essay traces the dissemination of fake news and the role of affective labor in its digital spread through the example of the recent Pizzagate phenomenon. This particular viral story and its real world fallout speak to the turn to a ‘post-truth’ politics, which has been embraced by President Trump and his surrogates, through the appropriation of the term ‘fake news’ and rhetoric of ‘alternative facts’, to describe all forms of dissent and justification for executive actions, respectively. By examining the circulation and coalescence of negative affects such as fear and hate, and their utility in a moment of political uncertainty defined by divisive populist rhetoric, it becomes clear that a reorientation to affective engagements with digital media and facticity is necessary and pressingly urgent.

Keywords: affect, fake news, populism, digital media, post-truth politics

INTRODUCTION

Within the current political conjuncture, the manipulation and mobilization of negative affects as a response to threat perception have become a key tool in the promulgation of hate and fear-based policy, legislation, and democratically damaging rhetoric. Hate has become a uniquely mobilized affect and gathering point for public sentiment in the era of Trump, signaling a dangerous turn toward a politics predicated on distrust and demonization of all imagined outsiders and ‘others.’ This essay explores the significance of hate in the 2016 U.S. election cycle and its fallout by tracing the dissemination of fake news and the role of affective labor in its digital spread through the example of the recent Pizzagate phenomenon, which was largely perpetuated by hatred for an imagined ‘other’, embodied by Hillary Clinton among other actors. This particular viral story and its real world fallout speak to the turn to a ‘post-truth’ politics, which has been

embraced by President Trump and his surrogates, through the appropriation of the term ‘fake news’ and rhetoric of ‘alternative facts’, to describe all forms of dissent and justification for executive actions and political policy, respectively. Affect is an apt mode of analysis for the viral spread of fake news as it extends beyond emotion to include the precognitive and unconscious ways that individuals and collectives engage with biases and feelings, particularly here in regards to facticity. By examining the circulation and coalescence of affective atmospheres among Trump supporters and the broader alt-right, and their utility in a moment of political uncertainty defined by divisive populist rhetoric, it becomes clear that a reorientation to more positively productive affective engagements with digital media and facticity are necessary and pressingly urgent.

There has been a growing attention to, and influence of, fake news, understood here as “hoax-based stories that perpetuate hearsay, rumors, and misinformation” (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017, p. 4), and its role in perpetuating and modulating affective responses to news and politics, if not also swaying minds and votes. While it is outside the purview of this essay to discern the origins of fake news in the U.S., or the motivations of its creators, I will examine at least some of the conditions that have allowed for its quick ascendancy as a political tool and lightning rod during the 2016 U.S. election and into the Trump presidency. This essay likewise thinks through not only the political and democratic hazards of a post-truth rhetoric promulgated by fake news, but ends by examining potential means to reorient affect and foster a reinvigorated relationship with media, news, and truth.

THE TURN TO POST-TRUTH POLITICS

While the popularized dissemination of fake news stands out for its brazen assault against the democratic ideal of an informed public and its representativeness of the turn to a post-truth political moment, it is, in many ways, only the most recent and virulent iteration of rumors and disguised agendas being used for affective manipulation and political gain. During World War II, the Office of Strategic Services Planning Group (OSSPG), which was run through the CIA, understood rumor formation to be a central technique of their ‘morale operations’ branch: “Rumors were designed by the OSSPG to act affectively: to spread confusion and distrust, stimulate feelings of resentment and generate panic” (Anderson, 2014, p. 47). During the same time period, psychologist Gordon Allport – among many others – worked to “control and counter anti-Semitic accusations” through a “rumor clinic” established in the Boston Traveler as they saw prejudice to be a flaw

in the American national character and “a fundamental source of war and a threat to democracy” (Herman, 1996, p. 57).

More contemporarily, cloaked websites have become a key tool of cyber-racists to spread racist propaganda. Jessie Daniels defines cloaked websites as those that are “published by individuals or groups that conceal authorship or feign legitimacy in order to deliberately disguise a hidden political agenda” (Daniels, 2009, p. 661). While “similar to previous versions of print and electronic media propaganda” (Daniels, 2009, p. 661), these particular websites tend to use civil rights rhetoric to popularize “stigmatized knowledge” such as Holocaust revisionism, conspiracy theories and anti-Semitism (Daniels, 2009, p. 673). Noting that “One of the key features of the mainstream right-wing’s political success in the USA has been to challenge ‘fact-based reality’” (Daniels, 2009, p. 675), Daniels sees the work of cyber-racists as “call[ing] into question what constitutes the ‘truth’ that we say we know about ‘race’, racism and racial inequality. . . [and] calls into question how we make and evaluate knowledge claims, as well as our vision for social justice in this new digital terrain” (2009, p. 674). While these represent only a few examples of the ways that rumors and disguised intentions have been used to manipulate public sentiment and make appeals to ‘alternative facts’, they speak to the historical conditions that have allowed for fake news to rise and function as a powerful political tool in the reconceptualization of truth and knowledge.

As a practiced user of social media, Donald Trump has worked diligently throughout his campaign and into his presidency to harness the political potential of fake news and claims to alternative facts and knowledge. Early in his presidency, Trump “referred to the media as the ‘opposition party’ to his administration, and he has blamed news organizations for stymieing his agenda” (Grynbaum, 2017, para. 5). He has fostered within his base distrust, if not outright hatred, for mainstream media outlets in an attempt to discredit their work, and any dissent that they may voice, or find evidence of within the general populace or ranks of government. Just a few weeks into his presidency Trump gave his first official press conference – a true media spectacle – in which he remarked to the journalists present that, “The public doesn’t believe you people anymore. . . Now, maybe I had something to do with that. I don’t know. But they don’t believe you” (Grynbaum, 2017, para. 17). Trump’s glib statement is indicative of not only his contentious relationship with mainstream media and facts, but also his own role in upending the public’s understanding of what constitutes news and what is ‘fake’. Just after hitting his first 100 day mark in office, Newsweek (2017) ran an analysis of Trump’s tweets which found that the term “fake news” appeared 30 times between January 20th and April 28th – more than any other phrase (Lanktree, 2017). Trump near exclusively uses

this phrase to refer to either the mainstream media, or various news stories that do not reflect his narrative, or which show his administration to be in conflict or trouble. Tweets such as: “Totally make up facts by sleazebag political operatives, both Democrats and Republicans – FAKE NEWS! Russia says nothing exists. Probably. . .”; “Congratulations to @FoxNews for being number one in inauguration ratings. They were many times higher than FAKE NEWS @CNN – public is smart!”; and, “The FAKE NEWS media (failing @nytimes, @NBCNews, @ABC, @CBS, @CNN) is not my enemy, it is the enemy of the American People!” (“Trump Twitter Archive,” n.d.) are typical of Trump, and demonstrate the ways that he continuously seeks to undermine mainstream media, while exploiting divisive populist rhetoric, and reorienting the logic of fake news to his own ends. For Trump, what makes fake news ‘fake’ is not its lack of a fact-based narrative, but *its inability to fall in line with his personal narrative of truth.*

This reorientation to facticity and truth within the usage of fake news is not limited to Trump, however. As Douglas Kellner (2016) notes, “Trump’s authoritarian populist supporters are driven by rage: they are really angry at the political establishment and system, the media, and economic and other elites. . . Trump provokes his followers [sic] rage with classic authoritarian propaganda techniques like the Big Lie, which he falsely repeats over and over” (p. 24). Trump has successfully harnessed the preexisting ‘rage’ of a particular subset of Americans with his electoral victory and the unwavering support of his base. Through the example of Trump and his surrogates, it is clear that the spread of fake news, and its logic and rhetoric, is accomplished not only “from below” (Anderson, 2010, p. 164) through the modulation of collective affects and online affective labor of conspiracy theorists, but, unfortunately, through the top echelons of (the U.S.) government as well. Numerous references by former White House press secretary Sean Spicer to a non-existent terror attack in Atlanta and from KellyAnne Conway of a fictional “Bowling Green Massacre” were used in defense of the president’s xenophobic travel ban (Dalrymple, 2017).

These instances of falsified terror events, combined with Conway’s defense of alternative facts and negation of the many falsities spread by the administration, such as when she unabashedly asked a CNN anchor, “Are [falsities] more important than the many things that he says that are true that are making a difference in people’s lives?” (Watkins, 2017, para. 4), reify the notion that truth is a malleable affectively *felt* fact that is meant to reflect the worldview of the consumer/citizen, and anything that does not is, indeed, fake news. The dismissal of mainstream narratives and defense of actual fake news affirm the felt realities and affective common sense of these possibilities for certain rage-driven populations. As will be seen with

Pizzagate, it doesn't matter if the underground trafficking ring ever existed, and it doesn't matter if the terror events used to justify the implementation of a xenophobic travel ban ever actually occurred – what matters is that they could have happened, that their possible certainty affirms the worldview of Trump supporters and purveyors of fake news, and, specifically, that it *feels* right.

TRACING PIZZAGATE

“This was our worst fear. . . that someone would read all this and come to the block with a gun. And today it happened” (James Alefantis, owner of Comet Ping Pong, quoted in Siddiqui & Svrluga, 2016).

To some people, Edgar Maddison Welch was a nice guy, someone who was trying to recover from an Internet addiction. In the past, Welch told friends about various conspiracy theories he had become obsessed with, particularly surrounding the September 11th, 2001 attacks, and would spend hours reading articles, watching videos, and collecting evidence of government collusion. On Sunday, December 4th 2016, Welch, after driving from North Carolina to Washington, D.C., entered Comet Ping Pong (a pizza restaurant in a wealthy D.C. neighborhood) armed with an AR-15 assault style rifle, a Colt .38 handgun and a shotgun. He intended to rescue the kidnapped and abused children he believed were hidden in a secret labyrinth of tunnels beneath, and between, the pizza shop and neighboring businesses. Welch's actions were the cumulative result of the affective fervor and viral digital spread of the fake news story colloquially known as “Pizzagate.”

Pizzagate demonstrates the powerful mobilization of negative effects from atmospheres to action through the deployment and circulation of fake news and conspiracy theories in both the virtual and real worlds. It is representative of a post-truth political moment where facts have been unseated by belief, felt reality, and the rise of ‘stigmatized knowledges’. By drawing out this example, I hope to make clear its connection to affective formations that play on populist rhetoric, fears, and demands as a way to legitimate alternative narratives, as well as dangerous action and political policy.

Immediately following the release of the now infamous Access Hollywood tapes featuring then presidential candidate Donald Trump making lewd comments toward women, WikiLeaks released then Chairman of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign John Podesta's emails on October 7th, 2016 (Sharockman, 2016). It was not until October 30th, 2016, two days after then FBI Director James Comey told Congress that he was reopening the investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server, that someone tweeting under the handle @DavidGoldbergNY cited

rumors that the new emails “point to a pedophilia ring and @HillaryClinton is at the center” (Fisher, et al., 2016, para. 8). This rumor was retweeted more than 6,000 times (Fisher, et al., 2016). As users of 4chan and Reddit parsed through more than 2,000 of Podesta’s emails (Sharockman, 2016), this particular accusation against Clinton soon merged with other patterns and rumors stemming from the WikiLeaks dump (Fisher, et al., 2016). Some of these anonymously posting users noticed that numerous emails about Podesta’s social gatherings mentioned pizza (Breiner, 2016). Naturally, these users “decided that ‘pizza’ was a complex code for pedophilia” (Breiner, 2016, para. 7) and quickly connected this to emails showing that Podesta occasionally dined at Comet Ping Pong (Fisher, et al., 2016). Pizzagate was born.

The hashtag #pizzagate first appeared on Twitter on November 7th, 2016, and would be tweeted and retweeted between hundreds and thousands of times each day over the next several weeks (Fisher, et al., 2016). A Reddit subforum (/r/Pizzagate) was also created (Breiner, 2016) and quickly garnered more than 20,000 subscribers (Kang, 2016). The theory that Comet Ping Pong was a hub for a ring of child sex-traffickers, led by Hillary Clinton and John Podesta – among other influential Washington figures – began circulating through Reddit, Twitter, Facebook, fake news sites, and vitriol-spewing punditry pages such as the Internet sensation Alex Jones’s Infowars (Fisher, et al., 2016). Even former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn shared stories about Clinton’s alleged links to pedophilia (Siddiqui & Svrluga, 2016). At the height of hysteria, threats to the restaurant came in online and over the phone, with as many as 150 calls per day (Fisher, et al., 2016) and five #pizzagate Twitter posts per minute (Kang, 2016). Likewise, employees, patrons, performers and business neighbors of Comet Ping Pong received similar threats, accusations of involvement in the alleged sex trafficking ring, and were subject to their (and their children’s) personal information being posted online (Breiner, 2016).

This frenzy was further propelled by the questionable search for evidence of an alleged pedophilia ring, which quickly expanded beyond email archives and various forms of harassment. Diligent internet sleuths connected the imagery of stars and moons found in the entryway signage of Comet Ping Pong with generic images associated with Satanism that (incredibly) also depict stars and moons. Wall art within the restaurant and album cover art belonging to bands that have performed at Comet Ping Pong over the years were also caught up in this elaborate decoding process, as well as performance artist Marina Abramoviæ and her 1996 performance piece *Spirit Cooking*, which was briefly referenced in an email to John Podesta’s brother, Tony, a progressive D.C. lobbyist (Gotthardt, 2016). Bold sleuths also traveled to the restaurant to collect their own evidence.

On November 16th, 2016 Jack Posobiec, a former Navy Reserve intelligence officer (Fisher, et al., 2016) popularly known for spreading conspiracy theories and pro-Trump tweets, visited Comet Ping Pong and attempted to gather evidence of wrongdoing and stream it all live on his Periscope feed. Posobiec found only a child's birthday party being hosted in the back room, which he was quickly ushered out of, as "It did not seem appropriate for a child's party to be broadcast on a stranger's Periscope feed" (Fisher, et al., 2016, para. 53). The lack of concrete evidence, and his being asked to leave the premises, only further fueled the conspiracy flames. Likewise, as "mainstream media outlets worked to debunk the growing conspiracy theories, their reporting only legitimized the existence of the story and emboldened those perpetuating" the falsities (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017, p. 4).

Finally, the affective tension and fervor built online and through unsuccessful attempts to gather evidence in person, coalesced in the form of Edgar Welch's seemingly ultimate and final act of charging on to the premises, determined to save the children. Welch entered the pizzeria and fired at least one warning shot to ward off interfering employees before he shot the lock off a door and attempted to find the helpless children, while employees fled the building (Breiner, 2016; Siddiqui & Svrluga, 2016). Welch's story ends anticlimactically, as he surrendered himself to police after "he realized there was nothing to find" (Breiner, 2016, para. 16). Several months after being taken into custody, Welch pleaded guilty to the interstate transportation of ammunition and a firearm, a federal charge, in addition to a D.C. charge of assault with a dangerous weapon (Shelbourne, 2017). On June 22nd, 2017 he was sentenced to four years in prison (Hsu, 2017).

Instances such as Pizzagate, along with falsified terror attacks in Atlanta and Bowling Green are made possible through the legitimization of fake news, alternative facts, and other forms of 'reality news' and the concomitant delegitimization of empirically-based, fact-driven news. They are likewise driven by a mobilization of affects through populist rhetoric and calls to retake the nation from an imagined 'other'.

THE PROLIFERATION OF FAKE NEWS

The political moment that produced Pizzagate is defined not only by a turn to post-truth politics and the deft manipulation of collective affects, but the concomitant rise of an infoglut (Andrejevic, 2013) paired with a tendency toward confirmation bias (Strong, 2017). These factors work together to modulate not only one's access to the surplus of information and knowledge available digitally, but affective responses to, and engagements with, such ideological reinforcing rhetorics. This is clearly demonstrated with Pizzagate as attempts from the mainstream media to debunk the story –

which increased significantly following Welch's actions – went unheeded, or even further fueled the conspiracy theorists' efforts. The preexisting bias of Trump supporters and those of the alt-right against mainstream media outlets compounded the legitimacy of Pizzagate through their attempts at fact checking and debunkery, which affirmed the productive value of participants' affective labor in spreading fear and hatred through such "alternative" narratives. The rise of infotainment outlets and the multiplication of available 'news' sources online, in print, and via cable news has produced an infoglut and facilitated a "reconceptualization of news as a customizable commodity subject to the vagaries of taste that govern other forms of consumption" (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 49). This multiplication of sources has led to the (self-guided) creation of filter bubbles, which allow citizens to filter the information they consume and share as it reflects their worldview and reifies the felt reality of the affective facts to which one adheres (Pariser, 2012). This customizability of news, reinforcement of felt realities, and the 'facts' that one chooses to adhere to is affirmed not only by the sheer existence of ideologically-inflected news sources, but the rise in a self-aware rhetoric that upholds this logic. In an interview with BuzzFeed News, "New Right" and "American nationalist" blogger and men's rights activist Mike Cernovich stated in regards to the recent rise in "reality news":

We've really created parallel institutions. . . Trump supporters didn't think they were being treated fairly or accurately by the media. So many of us weren't sure we could trust the basic facts of what's being reported in the news. And so we created the answer, which is something I call 'reality news.' (Warzel, 2017)

Within this logic, it is not evidence or journalistic standards that is important, but its resonance with the audience; and if the facts do not *feel* right, then alternative media outlets have a duty to create narratives that do. 'Reality news' has become a prominent representation of alt-right Trump supporters' relationship with 'alternative facts' and narratives. Heralded not only by Cernovich but Alex Jones's Infowars and Steve Bannon's former employer Breitbart News, this brand of 'news' traffics not only in conspiracy theories like Pizzagate, but pro-Trump propaganda as well. Ostensibly as a response to the proliferation of 'fake news' surrounding his presidency, Trump launched a 'real news' program on his official Facebook page in late July 2017. Its first videos featured his daughter-in-law, Lara Trump, and former pro-Trump CNN pundit Kayleigh McEnany who both highlighted Trump's perceived 'successes' while in office and downplayed any negative mainstream media attention or guffaws (Koerner, 2017; Blake, 2017). The operative logic of 'reality news' delegitimizes the dominant narrative(s) of mainstream media while creating a false equivalence between

available ‘news’ options. In simply creating alternative facts that their audience *feels* to be true, branding this work as parallel institutions of ‘news,’ and promoting alternative narratives, affectively based ‘facts’ and information that promote hatred, fear and paranoia are given ample space to grow and spread while confusing what exactly *is* a fact or news. This logic regarding far-right Trump supporters’ changing and fractured relationship with mainstream media outlets makes clear that instances such as Pizzagate represent a targeting of negative affects vis-à-vis populist rhetorics and a dependency on alternative narratives that affirm biases.

THE MOBILIZATION OF AFFECT

In his analysis of the Pizzagate phenomenon, Andrew Breiner (2016) noted, “Conspiracy theories like these seem immune to debunking, and if someone really believes there’s satanic darkness at the heart of this lie, perhaps there’s no measure too extreme for them to take in response” (para. 15). This logic observed by Breiner reflects Brian Massumi’s (2010) articulation of an affective fact, wherein an unactualized threat “will have been real because it was *felt* to be real” (p. 53). In the example of Pizzagate, the affective fact manifests in the unfalsifiable felt reality of the sex trafficking ring, which is immune to any fact checking – or armed charging of the premises on a rescue mission – that ultimately demonstrate otherwise. The affective fact of the underground conspiracy operates as a form of common sense, which, at the level of affect, “feels coherent” and “becomes intuitive” (Anderson, 2015, p. 5), while being mobilized as and through an organization of collective affects that, taken together, further promulgates the hysteria and debunked theory. Along these lines, “In the era of the affective fact, power relies not on the attempt to control and monopolize the realm of empirical facts, but upon channeling this tautological logic: monitoring and modulating the ambient feeling tone that endows non-facts with their ‘truthiness’” (Andrejevic, 2013, p. 47). It is not necessary to control the dominant narrative, or the empirical facts of the matter, so long as one can modulate affect and present “alternative facts” as viable (felt) potentials that adequately reflect preexisting worldviews.

Threat and its affective response necessarily operate within a futurity of facticity that projects a sense of anxiety onto the present and provides justification for present and future actions in defense of the (seemingly certain) future possibility. In other words, whether Welch found any kidnapped children at Comet Ping Pong, or anyone ever proves the existence of this underground trafficking ring, does not matter; what is significant is that *it could have happened*, and within the operative logic of the affective fact, this certain potentiality is enough to justify not only the action taken in the

wake of the non-event, but the creation of the falsity in the first place, and its continued circulation. Fear, hate and paranoia work together here in an affective atmosphere of anxiety that coalesced around the Pizzagate story. For Welch, Posobiec, and the countless others who worked to spread Pizzagate rumors online, their preexisting prejudice against Hillary Clinton as the likely first female president, and the possible continued political domination by the 'Left', were given justification and release in the Pizzagate story, which reflected and reaffirmed their intuition that Clinton – and everything she represented – were in fact evil and directly opposed to their imagining of the nation and what it represents.

Empirical facts may have little sway in the face of such strongly felt affectively realities, particularly those based in a sense of danger, fear or anxiety. False beliefs, particularly those stemming from white ignorance or gendered and race-based fears of minorities supplanting their dominance, can be “invested with powerful emotions” to such an extent that individuals and collectives are inhibited from engaging with new or conflicting forms of knowledge (Ioanide, 2015, p. 2-3, 12). As such false beliefs, or structural ideologies, function as public and collective forms of ‘common sense’ that may seem intuitive to particular dominant populations, they become intrinsically personal as they are inflected with affective feelings such as hate or fear (Ioanide, 2015, p. 6). To the extent, then, that such beliefs become intimately tied to certain individuals’ (in this case members of the alt-right or Trump supporters) identity, forms of knowledge that conflict with, or outright contradict, their prejudiced and fear-based beliefs are unacceptable as they not only feel wrong, but undermine one’s *very sense of self*. Hate, and other negative affects, play an integral role in the construction of the nation, its unity and its inhabitants for those of the white nationalist alt-right, Trump supporters, and the purveyors of Pizzagate and other fear-based conspiracy theories. While Welch and the other individual investigators of Pizzagate may not have self-identified as white nationalists, the imagining of a nation premised on exclusion and which inherently values certain subjects over others was key to the spread of Pizzagate as a phenomenon and the particular urgency of their response to the threat posed by its (certain) possible (felt) reality. Within this discourse, the ordinary subject is produced “through the mobilization of hate” against “those whom they recognize as strangers, as the ones who are taking away the nation”, which functions as a directly oppositional corollary to their “love for the nation” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 118). The recent upswing in far-right populism has embraced this logic, where the “fantasy” of an “ordinary white subject” is brought to life through hate, which “constitute[s] the ordinary as in crisis, and the ordinary person as the real victim. The ordinary becomes that which

is already under threat by imagined others” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 118). Likewise:

the nation/national subject must defend itself against ‘invasion’ by others. Such a defensive narrative is not explicitly articulated, but rather . . . produces a differentiation between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ whereby ‘they’ are constituted as the cause or the justification of ‘our’ feeling of hate. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 123-124)

Hillary Clinton and her imagined co-conspirators in the child trafficking ring, in this instance, become stand-ins for the threat of all imagined others, justifying the hate that is engendered against them and reaffirming the “ordinary” citizens’ status and alignment with the nation and their protection of what is ‘right’.

The quick ascendancy and fallout of the Pizzagate phenomenon was made possible by the current political moment, which privileges felt realities and affirms hatred, and its coinciding actions, as a defense of the nation against the invasion of ‘others’. Propelled by far-right populist rhetorics and the legitimization of alternative forms of ‘news’, it became thinkable that this conspiracy – and Clinton’s involvement – *could* be possible. Yet, even after Clinton ultimately failed to win the presidency, and Republicans secured a majority rule both in Congress and gubernatorial races in the 2016 election, Pizzagate continued to be deployed in defense of the nation and the ‘ordinary’ citizenry. Shortly following Edgar Welch’s March 2017 appearance in court in which he pleaded guilty to a series of charges relating to the incident at Comet Ping Pong, several dozen people gathered outside the White House to demand an investigation into the Pizzagate rumors (Miller, 2017). During the demonstration, “Several protestors said they were motivated to attend the event because of abuse they themselves had suffered or witnessed” (Miller, 2017, para. 19), and further noted that “People don’t believe the victims” (Miller, 2017, para. 23). The affective response of fear and hatred operate not only as excesses of affect subject to a nonlinear logic of threat and threat potential, but demonstrate that the affective target is malleable, corresponding to the next potential crisis in the animation of the ‘ordinary’ subject which perpetuates their (imagined) victim status. The capacity for an affective fact to spread is as much dependent on threat potential and the activation and mediation of (the excess of) affects, as it is on the proliferation of ‘news’ sources and media outlets, which can never fully address or contain the totality of the story.

AFFECTIVE FUTURES

Much the way that hate can be described as an affective investment in

the 'other' in order to maintain the fantasy of the 'ordinary' citizen whose subjectivity is under attack (Ahmed, 2004), it may also be useful to think of hate as a form of political *jouissance* employed by Trump supporters and otherwise extremists of the alt-right (W. Mazzarella, personal communication, July 20, 2017). Thinking alongside hate as an investment in the self and one's hate-based community, and in the affective fact of the perceived threat potential, hate as a form of political *jouissance* is useful in elucidating how hate continues to circulate, despite its failures – as seen with the lack of 'success' in rescuing the children of Pizzagate.

Jouissance demands the existence of a political opponent as such in order to maintain the pleasurable experience derived from acting while remaining stuck – from fixating on what one imagines as standing in the way of their personal and group (political) fulfillment (W. Mazzarella, personal communication, July 20, 2017). Within the current political moment, this has manifested in alt-right extremists thriving on the outrage their affective investment in falsities such as Pizzagate brings to the mainstream media and those they imagine to be on the political Left; or, in their stubborn adoration of Trump's unapologetic trolling, as well as misogynistic, racist and xenophobic behavior both on and offline. To this end, encouraging comprehensive media literacies is not enough, nor is simply encouraging a rational approach to engagement with news. Rather, it is pertinent that alt-right extremists recognize the myriad ways their rage has been harnessed and mobilized by Trump and others for electoral and political gain through such ideological tools as fake news, 'alternative facts' and a multiplication of narratives. While Trump and his surrogates employ hate-based language to simply garner political support from the alt-right, it is those who are dangerously invested in this affective *jouissance* who end up in prison for brandishing weapons in restaurants or driving cars into crowds of people – *not* the political leaders who so cynically mobilize their ideological convictions. Disarming fake news may be less about debunking its 'alternatively' factual accounts, than unraveling its ideological utility and the work it does to foster an atmosphere of negative affective responses to perceived threat.

While negative affects such as hatred, fear and paranoia are modulated as forms of control, or means by which mistrust is fostered, they can also never be completely consumed or harnessed. Affect's potential may, in fact, lie in its failure to be delimited, its capacity to always escape full confinement or manipulation; and this is to say nothing of the potential of positive affects, or less antagonistic iterations of *jouissance*. The (collective) cultivation of, and reorientation toward, positive affects and their potential is a politically potent and necessary step at this current conjuncture, where negativity – in all its forms – reigns, and panic is a reflexive response within

political and media narratives. The need to disengage, deemphasize and dismantle fake news is only one of many areas in the political arena where such a reorientation toward positively productive forms of logic and interactivity is necessary, but it is a good place to start. Such a project has the potential to not only reorient affect, but to erase the alternative modifier from fact as well.

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