



**MA Thesis in
International Affairs**

The Costs of Commodifying Human Connection

A Case Study on Surveillance Capitalist Social Media
Platforms and Trumpist Political Extremism

Logan Lee Sigurðsson

June 2021



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS
STJÓRNMÁLAFRÆÐIÐEILD

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*A Case Study on Surveillance Capitalist Social Media Platforms and Trumpist
Political Extremism*

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This thesis counts as the final project for a Master of Arts degree in International Affairs from the University of Iceland.

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Abstract

As a global means of communication and information access, social media platforms are increasingly becoming integral to daily life. Subsequently, platforms are becoming more characteristic of modern threats, such as political extremism, calling into question what responsibilities social media companies should have. Currently these companies operate with little to no oversight, and have largely placed responsibility for their platforms onto the users themselves. However, their economic model of mining personal data for profit, called surveillance capitalism, has been criticized for manipulating and exploiting users in ways that negatively shape online engagement and environments for profit. The purpose of this research is to investigate the relationship between surveillance capitalism and political extremism. This was done through a case study examining the roles of the four core influential features of digital technologies, as identified by an EU report, in Trumpist-political extremism. These features were reviewed for how they function for the surveillance capitalist model, followed by an analysis of aggravating and/or enabling roles the for-profit features had in the extremism. Findings reveal the extremism was exacerbated by the features in a way that created financial value for social media companies, indicating an active relationship between surveillance capitalism and political extremism.

Útdráttur

Þar sem samfélagsmiðlar eru orðnir að alþjóðlegum samskiptaleiðum og alhliða aðgangur að upplýsingum, eru þeir í auknum mæli að verða ómissandi í daglegu lífi. Í kjölfarið eru þessir miðlar að verða einkennandi fyrir nútíma ógnir eins og pólitískar öfgastefnur, sem vekur þá spurningu hvaða ábyrgð og skyldur samfélagsmiðlafyrirtæki ættu að hafa. Sem stendur starfa þessi fyrirtæki undir litlu sem engu eftirliti og hafa að mestu lagt ábyrgðina á notendurna sjálfa. Efnahagslega líkanið sem þessi fyrirtæki nota, þar sem þau nýta sér persónuleg gögn notenda sinna með hagnaðarsjónarmiðum nefnist “Surveillance Capitalism”, og hefur verið gagnrýnt fyrir að hagnýta sér og hafa áhrif á notendur, með því að móta net-þátttöku og net-umhverfi þeirra á neikvæðan hátt fyrir hagnað. Tilgangur þessarar rannsóknar er að kanna tengsl á milli ‘surveillance capitalism’ og pólitískra öfga. Það var gert með því að rannsaka hlutverk fjögurra kjarna-áhrifaþátta stafrænnar tækni, eins og greint var frá í skýrslu ESB, í “Trumpist”-pólitískum öfgastefnum. Farið var yfir þessa áhrifaþætti og skoðað hvernig þeir virka fyrir “surveillance capitalist” líkanið, og þar á eftir greining á íþyngjandi og/eða virkjandi áhrifum sem þessir þættir höfðu á öfgastefnurnar. Niðurstöður leiddu í ljós að öfgastefnur færðust í auka vegna þessara áhrifaþátta á þann hátt að það skapaði fjárhagslegt gildi fyrir samfélagsmiðlafyrirtæki, sem bendir til virks sambands milli ‘surveillance capitalism’ og pólitískrar öfgastefnu.

Preface

Having worked with issues such as human trafficking, asylum, and immigration, I have observed how dangerous “fake news” can be when it comes to demonizing marginalized demographics and mobilizing hate. Moreover, living in the United States, I had often wondered how media consumption can contribute to our drastically polarized communities to the extent that neighbors could seemingly be living in alternate realities. Then having emigrated in 2017 shortly following Donald Trump’s election, not only did I hold these concerns for my home country, but I worried about familiar divisions against foreign communities here in my Icelandic community. For these reasons, I had great interest in gaining a foundational understanding of social media’s connections to security.

However, the focus of my study narrowed as I began reading further into the subject, and came to realize how these connections were intertwined with the intentional, exploitive choices social media companies have made for financial gain. Soon after, the U.S. domestic terrorist attack on January 6th took place as the Capitol building was insurrected, prompting me to further contemplate the platform social media has given hate under the Trump Administration in particular. As social media platforms began to ban Donald Trump’s accounts following the attack, I was appalled by the power they had all along to silence Trump’s hate mongering in ways that our institutions had repeatedly failed to do. This is why I chose this topic specifically, but while the U.S unfortunately makes a timely case study for online political extremist hate-organizing and conspiracies, I hope discussions on this important topic will continue to move forward - as Iceland and other countries are not immune to these phenomena and the choices social media companies continue to make.

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Table of Contents:

Abstract	4
Útdráttur	5
Preface	6
Table of Contents	7
Part 1: Introduction	8
1.1 Research Problem: The Scepticism Surrounding Social Media “Threats”	8
1.2 Research Scope: Surveillance Capitalism and U.S. Domestic Terrorism	11
Research Objective: The Relationship of Surveillance Capitalism and Political	
1.3 Extremism	13
1.4 Aims and Significance	13
Part 2: Methodology	14
2.1 Research Design	14
2.2 Data Types, Forms, and Sources	15
2.3 Data Collection and Timing	16
2.4 Data Reduction and Anlysis.....	16
2.5 Conceptualization:	17
2.5.1 Concept 1: Social Media	17
2.5.2 Concept 2: Political Extremism	18
Part 3: Literature Review	20
3.1 Surveillance Capitalism	20
3.1.1 What is Surveillance Capitalism	20
3.1.2. The Advancement of Surveillance Capitalism	21
3.1.3 Conditions of Surveillance Capitalism.....	24
3.1.3.1 The Extraction Imperative.....	24
3.1.3.2 The Prediction Imperative.....	24
3.1.3.3 Maintaining the Imperatives through Secrecy	25
3.2 Core Behavioral-Influencing Features of Online Technologies	26
3.2.1 The Attention Economy.....	26
3.2.2 Choice Architectures	28
3.2.3 Algorithmic Content Curation	30
3.2.4 Misinformation and Disinformation	31
3.3 Trumpism	31
3.3.1 What is Trumpism	31
3.3.2 Advancement of Anti-Establishment Conservatism.....	33
3.3.3 Advancement of Fascist Ethnonationalism.....	34
3.3.4 Advancement of Trumpism-Extremism.....	36
3.3.4.1 Sphere 1: White Supremacy.....	37
3.3.4.2 Sphere 2: The Patriot Movement	39
Part 4: Analysis	42
4.1 The Attention Economy Analysis.....	42
4.2 Choice Architectures Analysis.....	48
4.3 Algorithmic Content Curation Analysis	56
4.4 Misinformation and Disinformation	63
Part 5: Conclusion	74
Bibliography	78

Part 1: Introduction

1.1) Research Background: The Debate Surrounding Social Media “Threats”

Social media platforms have become embedded in nearly every aspect of 3.8 billion users’ lives, from relationships, entertainment, commerce, and staying connected to news and current events (Jackson et al., 2017). These telecommunication platforms have often been discussed for their positive influence on the world, from creating further convenience in our day to day lives, to promoting democracy. For example, some have argued social media has been used as a tool to increase access to knowledge and to foster empowerment through collective-actions such as the Arab Spring, Black Lives Matter, Hong Kong’s Umbrella movement, and the #MeToo movement (Eltantawy et al., 2011)(Mundt et al., 2018)(Lee F. et al, 2017)(Mendes, 2018).

However, in addition to their contributions to the advancement of human rights, social media companies have also been criticized for the threats they pose to society. This backlash against major tech companies, or “Techlash” as it is often called, is gaining in strength with an array of concerns regarding both how platforms are designed and how they can be used (Hemphill, 2019).

Concerning how the platforms can be used, threats include malicious actors, such as political extremists and other radical individuals, using social media platforms to appeal and connect to their base (Prier, 2017). For example, Twitter has emerged as the internet application “most preferred by terrorists”, including groups like al-Qaeda who after previously opting to spread their message on websites, have now relied on Twitter for its mass dissemination functions that span across multiple networks (Prier, 2017). While many social media platforms have published policies against such activity, including the spreading of violent and/or fake content on their platforms, many still remain more-than-less self-moderated spaces. In response to hate-based and other radical content and activity, social media companies have repeatedly argued that comprehensive enforcement of these policies is troublesome (Guynn, 2018).

Nonetheless, for many social media users there still exists a level of skepticism as to what degree these groups can genuinely pose a threat by using social media versus any other mode of communication, as long as everyday users are generally careful of their own activity

and apply critical thinking when engaging with information and actors, just as they would in any other space (Solve, 2013). With this view, it is difficult to imagine how social media can play an active role in enabling or aggravating political extremism, as it may seem that the communication platforms could only serve as a reflection of existing behaviors and tendencies. Moreover, while social media poses new challenges, governments are developing their cybersecurity capacities in part to combat malicious actors in these spaces, suggesting that perhaps a change regarding the social media platforms themselves may not be a necessary step to ensure future security. These views are also often met with a general sense of inevitability in the way social media platforms have evolved, as it is often assumed that ever-expanding communication in the online domain cannot be contained nor organized, and that any attempted intervention into the platforms themselves and thus their companies risk violating individual rights and liberties such as the freedom of speech and equal access to information (Zuboff, 2019).

The other concern commonly discussed regards the designs of the platforms themselves. Part of this refers to the social-ills that have been linked to platforms - such as how social media can be harmful to well-being and relationships (Hampton et al., 2015)(Sagioglou et al., 2013)(Kross et al., 2013)(Primack et al., 2017)(Muisse et al., 2009). Nonetheless, while these studies exist, they seem to demonstrate that social media can affect different people in different ways, which can then return back to the same skeptic argument that people should simply know themselves and their personal limits better, and practice personal responsibility (Eyal, 2019)(Marwick et al., 2017)(Zuboff, 2019). The other concerning part of platform design regards their business models, and the ethically controversial ways in which social media companies acquire and use the personal data of their users. This is because while social media companies may appear to be nothing more than free communication platforms, their business model actually operates by shifting users from consumers to raw-material sources of data that they then store and sell to third parties (Leetaru, 2018)(Zuboff, 2019).

This data-mining business model has therefore been accused of unethical surveillance of users who often are not providing meaningful consent to their data being collected, and then thereafter are not able to see how their data is being used (Leetaru, 2018). Some scholars and data-activists have gone as far as to say that the bombardment of targeted advertising to influence user behavior and decision-making is also a threat to the future of true human

autonomy (Zuboff, 2019)(Piven, 2019). This economic system of surveillance for profit is called surveillance capitalism, but studies on the system are relatively recent and the issue of how severe its consequences actually can be has been tensely debated. For example, Cory Doctorow and Shoshanna Zuboff have both authored books on surveillance capitalism. While Zuboff warns in her book about the capacity for user data to be used to manipulate behavior, Doctorow is among the more skeptic voices explaining “Being able to target cheerleaders with cheerleading uniform ads does not make you a marketing genius or a mind controller. It just makes you someone who’s found an effective way to address an audience, so that even though your ad may not be very persuasive, you’re not showing an unpersuasive ad to someone who will never buy a cheerleading uniform.” (“New...”, 2020). Instead, Doctorow only argues along with part of Zuboff’s view, emphasizing the real concern of surveillance capitalists is that they have disproportionate amounts of power due to the tremendous amount of information they have access to from data-mining paired with little to no regulation (Doctorow, 2021).

However, while these privacy rights violations are being discussed by some, too many of today’s 3,8 million users seem to share a sense of skepticism to how urgent these violations can be (Rieff, 2013). This is despite their general awareness of a certain level of surveillance social media has introduced into their daily lives (Rieff, 2013). Instead it seems to be the common belief for much of this population that opting into surveillance is just an inevitable price to be paid as part of living in the modern world, with reports demonstrating that even those who identify as “concerned” about surveillance likewise do not seem to engage in any real resistance in response to it (Zuboff, 2019)(Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2017). Instead, the “free” aspect of social media, as well as any customized targeted-ads users may receive as part of the platform’s data-mining business model, often tend to be viewed more as harmless amenities (“Young...”, 2019). By this logic, being influenced by ‘harmful’ content can seem relatively unlikely if users simply utilize their critical thinking skills (Grant, 2020).

For this reason, calls to action to further challenge social media platforms and impose further regulations on their companies may seem to be a relatively unnecessary response when believing that staying safe and well on platforms is largely a matter of personal responsibility, and that users largely have agency in their content consumption (Zuboff, 2019)(Lecher, 2020)(Eyal, 2019)(Marwick et al., 2017). However, as this thesis will examine, these often downplayed concerns relating to the intent and use of social media platforms - which are

much more interconnected than they may seem - may actually pose greater threats than often assumed. Now given this background of the broad debates surrounding social media's intersections with security, the next section will review this issue deeper by discussing the focus of this thesis.

1.2 Research Problem: Surveillance Capitalism and U.S. Domestic Terrorism

Within Zuboff's account of Surveillance Capitalism, the "surveillance economy" (which will be examined further within the thesis) can be generally understood as the larger economic system making up the surveillance market, for which the data-mining model, or "surveillance capitalist" model, works to generate capital. According to Zuboff, this capital generation is conducted only through maintaining certain conditions, and only operates in accordance to its economic logic (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff therefore argues that our digital space is anything but inevitable because of its economic drivers (Zuboff, 2019). Which she further warns that there are indeed serious threats to allowing our means of communication and information access to be operated as if it were a business - subsequently allowing our human experiences (captured in personal data) to be monetized (Zuboff, 2019).

While not all concerns make this economic link to "Surveillance Capitalism" as Zuboff discusses it, she is far from alone in questioning the consequences of leaving our information and communication channels in the hands of private companies. As social media increasingly becomes an integral part of our lives, experts have raised that it cannot be ignored how this can be transformative to threats - even those as grave as terrorism (Archetti, 2015). Within recent years, there have been growing concerns within the United States in regards to the threat of domestic terrorism, with extremists being motivated by various political, racial, ethnic, economic, health, and other grievances (Jones, 2020). Across political lines, voices have raised over these concerns as Democrats and Republicans have both periodically called for various changes in Big Tech (Mims, 2020).

On January 6th of 2020, much of these concerns materialized as a mob of Pro-Trump militants displaying Confederate symbols, pro-Nazi messages, QAnon and other right-wing conspiracies, breached the Capitol building's security in an effort to forcefully halt proceedings to certify Trump's defeat and to execute members of their political opposition (Borger, 2021)(Lakshmanan et al., 2021). Lawmakers were instructed to take cover, being evacuated with gas masks while violent extremists roamed the hallways vandalizing offices

and smashing windows within the route of their search (Borger, 2021)(Lakshmanan et al., 2021). Lasting hours, five people lost their lives with many more injured before the mob could be cleared (Levenson et al., 2021). Donald Trump was later impeached for inciting the insurrection, which took place after his 70-minute speech spurring his supporters to walk down to the Capitol building, warning in his speech that “if you don't fight like hell you're not going to have a country anymore” (“Capitol riots:...”, 2021). However, this attack was not an impulsive response solely in response to Trump’s speech - but an attack that was planned online, often publicly, for weeks on end (McSwane, 2021). Militants arrived to Trump’s speech already heavily armed with guns and pipe bombs, dressed in helmets and bullet proof vests in anticipation for combat (McSwane, 2021)(Lynch, 2021). They arrived having memorized the floor plan, brought zip ties, and erected a gallows on the White House lawn to hang Vice President Mike Pence (Lynch, 2021)(“Capitol riot...”, 2021)(Fitz-Gibbon, 2021).

Jim Steyer, who operates the advocacy organization Common Sense Media who helped organize the Stop Hate for Profit Campaign along with a number of other civil rights organizations, reflected on the domestic terror attack stating,

“The violence that we witnessed today in our nation’s capital is a direct response to the misinformation, conspiracy theories and hate speech that have been allowed to spread on social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc...Social media platforms must be held accountable for their complicity in the destruction of our democracy.” (Paul, 2021).

In the aftermath of the attack, many social media platforms including Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Reddit, and more moved to remove and/or permanently ban Donald Trump’s accounts (Thorbecke, 2021). Yet many experts accused the move of being too little too late, as since the very beginning of Trump’s presidential campaign social media was his primary method of reaching his base (Kroon, 2017). This base included radicalized extremists, who themselves have characteristically corresponded and organized on social media platforms, often plain sight with little to no intervention from social media companies (“Alt-Right”, n.d.)(McSwane, 2021)(Thorbecke, 2021).

Following the attack, Zuboff took to Twitter calling on social media companies to address their culpability in the incident, stating that the future of our rights, laws and institutions will need to confront the Surveillance Capitalist system in order to ensure

democracy (Zuboff, 2021). Following her assertion that the economic system driving these social media companies, Surveillance Capitalism, has had a direct relationship to this political extremism - the aim of this thesis will be to test if she is right. The next section will discuss this aim and how the thesis will approach it.

1.3 Research Objective: The Relationship of Surveillance Capitalism and Political Extremism

This thesis will examine the relationship of Surveillance Capitalism and political extremism, specifically by looking at what, if any, role social media has played in Trumpist-based political extremism. To answer this, the thesis will first review what surveillance capitalism is and how it works according to Shoshanna Zuboff. Then it will examine the four core influential features of digital technologies, as identified by an EU report on the influence of online technologies on political behavior and decision-making, detailing what the primary concerns are associated with each feature according to the report and additionally explaining how they work to maintain the surveillance capitalism system. These core features (which will be further touched on below) include: the attentions economy (maintaining user engagement as long as possible), choice architectures (the framing of the digital space), algorithmic content curation (the automated curation of personalized content), and misinformation and disinformation (false news). These four features will then be examined in relation to Trumpist-based political extremism. The purpose of this case study is to investigate links between surveillance capitalism and real-life political activities, thereby providing further evidence in the debate concerning the political role and effects of social media platforms outlined above.

1.4) Aims and Significance:

Social media affects so much of our world, yet it can still be quite difficult to conceptualize how digital activity can translate to real-world behaviors and conflicts. While this thesis will touch on multiple previous studies that have have pointed to potential links between social media and conflicts and violence, not many however have appeared to support this link with economic drivers behind social media as Zuboff describes (Zuboff, 2019). Likewise, Trumpism has been studied for its connections to violence and radicalization, including how social media has been used as a tool for Trumpism, but Trumpism does not

seem to have been studied within the context of how it occurs in relation to the economic drivers of surveillance capitalist system specifically.

Moreover, surveillance capitalism as stated above is still newly being researched. Therefore, a study of how this system has contributed in one example of political extremism provides new insights, and also sheds light on the level of power and capacity surveillance capitalists have - and the degree of damage that can be done when global communication and information channels are structured exclusively for profit maximization, despite any consequences that may have for human life. This thesis would have therefore scientific value in addressing this very large and complicated topic by demonstrating the role of the surveillance capitalism structure in specific real-world phenomena, bringing together the intersections of technology, politics and economics.

Finally, there seems to be little to no consensus on what exactly the response should be to raised concerns, let alone exactly what/who the primary problems are. As a result, virtually no democratic state or system has been able to sort out how to deal with the legitimacy challenges to democratic processes surveillance capitalism has brought to our digital age (Anderson, 2020). This thesis therefore holds value in tackling a relatively new problem, and can contribute to the larger, and highly important debate for if and how to approach social media companies in terms of policy for safe and equitable societies. While the focus for this thesis is on the United States, it can still offer support to other international contexts as the social media companies, forms of extremism, and political strategies it reviews are not exclusive to the United States.

Part 2: Methodology

2.1) Research Design:

As stated above, the objective of this thesis is to examine the relationship between surveillance capitalism and political extremism. This will be done through a case study that narrows the scope of “surveillance capitalism” specifically to social media platforms and “political extremism” to Trumpist-political extremism (dating between Trump’s announcement for his presidential run on June 16th, 2015 up until the end of his presidency on January 20, 2021).

The primary research questions then are:

Case Study:

- 1.) “What are the roles of social media in Trumpist political extremism?”

And subsequently for the purpose of the main objective:

- 2.) “What, if any, relationship can this reveal about surveillance capitalism and political extremism”

In support of this research objective, this thesis is structured as follows. This chapter, on Methodology, will explain the choices made in the thesis design including what will constitute as social media platforms and political extremism in the Conceptualization section below. The Literature review chapter thereafter begins with reviewing Shoshanna Zuboff’s work explaining the surveillance capitalist system and the economic logic that drives social media platforms. Then it will examine the four core influential features of digital technologies, as identified by an EU report on the influence of online technologies on political behavior and decision-making which is also discussed, further detailing what the primary concerns are associated with each feature according to the report. In addition to the report, these features will also be explained for how they work to maintain the surveillance capitalism system, tying together Zuboff’s work to explain their for-profit functions. The following section will examine what Trumpism is, and who constitutes as Trumpist-based political extremists for the purpose of this research. The Analysis chapter will then map existing literature for what, if any, roles (understood as enabling or aggravating factors, as described further below) these features have played in Trumpist political extremism, in order to examine if there are any consequences of the feature’s economic objectives. The concluding section would then discuss this examination and what, if any, relationship this subsequently reveals between surveillance capitalism and political extremism.

2.2) Data Types, Forms, and Sources:

The data collected will take an exploratory approach that takes data to develop theories to answer the above “what” primary questions in the research. This thesis also uses a deductive approach that begins with the theory that the surveillance capitalism system has a relationship in political extremism, and it will then attempt to test that theory through the case study. It

will primarily rely on qualitative data describing online and offline activities from scholarly journals from experts in varying backgrounds where cyber-security intersects (political science, computer science, business, etc.), as well as some news coverage, and reports from nonprofit organizations working to combat hate. Therefore, source material will be sources *about* social media, not from social media directly.

2.3) Data Collection and Timing:

Considering the timeframe on Trumpism events, I have selected to use only the time Trump began his run for office, June 16, 2015 up until presidential-elect Joe Biden took over the position on January 20, 2021. While the activities of Trumpism-based political extremism are projected to continue beyond Trump's time in office, this timeframe will enable a usable scope for the sake of this paper that should still entail more than enough data to answer the research questions.

2.4) Data Reduction and Analysis:

As stated above, the thesis will take each of the four features of social media as identified within the EU report and compare them to recruiting and mobilization activities of Trumpist-based political extremist groups. This will be done in order to answer "What was, if any, the role(s) of this feature in Trumpist political extremism?". "Roles" will be understood as any enabling and/or aggravating factors towards the extremism, for which existing literature will be used to map this (possible) connection. If little to no existing literature can be found to demonstrate such roles, this could contribute towards the more skeptic side of debates (as touched on above in the "Research Problem" section) that argue that social media features have little to no real role in such matters. On the other hand, if there do seem to be roles that connect the surveillance capitalist features (as stated above, the literature review will further explain how the features work as part of surveillance capitalism) to the case, this can contribute towards the debate in the opposite way by revealing an existing relationship between surveillance capitalism and political extremism.

The Analysis section is therefore structured as follows. Each case in the analysis will rely on existing literature to examine these roles. To consider the skeptic counter-arguments in this process, a publicized memo titled "Thoughts for 2020" is frequently referred to. This

memo was written by one of the most long-standing and prominent voices of Facebook, Andrew Bosworth (Lecher, 2020). Bosworth currently sits as the Vice President of the Facebook's Augmented and Virtual Reality Department, and was the creator of News Feed. Bosworth does not speak for Facebook as a whole in his memo, nor for any other social media company for that matter. However, his claims embody these same common arguments that social media's influence on the world is unfairly blown out of proportion and that users are ultimately responsible for themselves on and off the platforms (Eyal, 2019)(Marwick et al., 2017)(Zuboff, 2019). His memo argues this point with contradictions to the specific features and concerns raised by the EU report. So while the sections will not be structured around dis/proving Bosworth's statements per se, it will refer to them occasionally in order to represent and test these commonly-held viewpoints. As well as because his memo in particular was selected because of the way it specifically uses these viewpoints to argue with the subject matter of the case - as his argument is essentially that social media *did* help Trump get elected but not because of the same exploitive nature of the features this thesis will review (thereby removing responsibility from social media companies and their economically driven choices).

Reviewing all of this, each feature-section will thereafter conclude by examining any enabling and/or aggravating factors to the extremism, discussing any revealed economic connections (or not, if such assertions are not as fair as skeptics like Bosworth have suggested).

2.5) Conceptualization:

This thesis will be using the concepts of 1.) "social media" and 2.) "political extremism". To set some parameters on these concepts for the sake of the study, the following definitions will be observed.

2.5.1 Concept 1: Social Media

Social media platforms will be observed in this research as Web 2.0 platforms, or platforms that shift the user from a consumer to a participant (Obar et al., 2015). In other words, instead of solely consuming content, 2.0 platforms allow for users to create and contribute content (Obar et al., 2015). While there are multiple smaller platforms with strong associations to Trumpism in particular, such as Gab and Parler and Trump's campaign app

Trump 2020, in an attempt to not skew the study in a particular way, the focus will instead be on the Web 2.0 platforms that dominate the market with no clear political leaning. These platforms consist largely of **Facebook**, **Twitter**, and **YouTube**. However, while the analysis will focus on these platforms, Reddit as another widely popular platform was mentioned in a supporting example. As well as Discord and 8chan were mentioned for their specific roles in events, but only due to the fact that their activity connects somehow to the activity being examined on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. In sum, the main arguments will revolve around those three platforms.

2.5.2 Concept 2: Political Extremism

There exists no legal definition of political extremism, and the concept has been used somewhat vaguely (Bötticher, 2017). When considering when something becomes “extreme”, it can theoretically be perceived that something is extreme when it reaches the farthest removed spatial distance from the midpoint (Backes, 2007). The concept of something being “extreme” then can be subject to relative positions, an example being Bishop Stephen Gardiner’s use of “extremite” in 1546 to describe his enemies, who likely did not view themselves in the same way (Backes, 2007). Moreover, understanding extremism spatially in this way could indicate rarity of the extremists if a society’s midpoint beliefs were judged only by centering the spectrum on the largest belief group instead of the content of the beliefs themselves (Backes, 2007). Yet modernly in the western tradition, the term political extremism has been used to describe content, specifically actors who exude non-democratic beliefs (Backes, 2007). These actors therefore are those seen as undermining equality, human rights, and the freedom of democratic participation on matters concerning the general public (Backes, 2007). Accordingly, the result of political extremism regardless of original intention is to challenge the hierarchization of those governing and those governed (Bötticher, 2017). Considering this, the thesis will follow the definition of political extremism as proposed by scholar Astrid Bötticher. Her definition is as follows:

“Extremism characterises an ideological position embraced by those anti-establishment movements, which understand politics as struggle for supremacy rather than as peaceful competition between parties with different interests seeking popular support for advancing the common good. Extremism exists at the periphery of societies and seeks to conquer its center by creating fear of enemies within and outside

society. They divide fellow citizens and foreigners into friends and foes, with no room for diversity of opinions and alternative life-styles. Extremism is, due to its dogmatism, intolerant and unwilling to compromise. Extremists, viewing politics as a zero-sum game, tend - circumstances permitting - to engage in aggressive militancy, including criminal acts and mass violence in their fanatical will for gaining and holding political power. Where extremists gain state power, they tend to destroy social diversity and seek to bring about a comprehensive homogenisation of society, based on an often faith-based ideology with apocalyptic traits. At the societal level, extremist movements are authoritarian, and, if in power, extremist rulers tends to become totalitarian. Extremists glorify violence as a conflict resolution mechanism and are opposed to the constitutional state, majority-based democracy, the rule of law, and human rights for all.” (Bötticher, 2017)

Following Bötticher’s reasoning, the term non-violent political extremist is not considered by this thesis. Bötticher explains this decision as, “While some authors use the term ‘non-violent extremism’ for Islamist fundamentalists who are not active jihadists, holding extremist views without the political will to translate thoughts into action might be more a question of circumstances and opportunities than principles” (Bötticher, 2017). Building on this logic, extremists will be observed based on their contribution to upholding the extremist movement as a whole which may or may not necessarily involve their personal involvement in direct, physical violence (more on this point further below).

Understanding the role of violence in political extremism in this way, this thesis therefore uses the terms “domestic terrorism” and “domestic terrorists” within the scope of the research, with observance to the definition of terrorism as provided by the United Nations. This definition is as follows:

“All criminal acts directed against a State and intended or calculated to create a state of terror in the minds of particular persons or a group of persons or the general public.”

The thesis also uses the term “hate group”, which is observed in accordance to the definition from anti-hate organization The Anti-Defamation League (ADL):

“An organization whose goals and activities are primarily or substantially based on a shared antipathy towards people of one or more other different races, religions, ethnicities/nationalities/national origins, genders, and/or sexual identities. The mere presence of bigoted members in a group or organization is typically not enough to qualify it as a hate group; the group itself must have some hate-based orientation/purpose.”

Hate group can therefore also fall under the scope of Bötticher’s definition of political extremism when the bigotry of the group is mobilized. For example, the thesis will review a few examples of how online actors can organize physical events without necessarily engaging in any physical altercations themselves. Given that this organization was intentionally done to further the movement and its ideals, then this actor is considered an extremist. As will be discussed, the Trumpist-political extremist groups embody Bötticher’s definitions often in a way that overlaps both bigotry and anti-establishment beliefs. However not every person holding Trumpism views and beliefs may necessarily be purposefully taking any kind of action to promote or perpetuate a cause. Therefore, when the analysis sections examine enabling and/or aggravating factors of political extremism, they will be looking at “extremists” as those who are actively working to advance their group’s agenda, which may or may not include their personal acts of physical violence.

Part 3: Literature Review

3.1) Surveillance Capitalism

3.1.1 What is Surveillance Capitalism:

Capitalism continuously evolves by claiming things that exist outside of market dynamics and pulling them in to generate commodities that can be sold and purchased (Zuboff, 2019). Industrial capitalism for example, followed the concept that a company’s capacity to generate profit relied on their capacity to capture nature (Zuboff, 201). In this way, the nature that was already there was brought into the market sphere when it became deemed by capitalists as their “means of production” to profit off its real estate value or resource extraction (Zuboff, 2019). Surveillance capitalism, as described by Harvard business professor and Doctor of Social Psychology Shoshana Zuboff, similarly annexes nature as a

new economic logic that unilaterally claims private human experiences as free raw material for translation into behavioral data (Zuboff, 2019). Some of this behavioral data is used to improve products and services, however the rest of it, which she calls *behavioral surplus*, is then put through manufacturing processes entailing artificial intelligence and machine learning (Zuboff, 2019). This process results in the product that anticipates human behaviors based on the behavioral data they derived, known as *prediction products* (Zuboff, 2019). These prediction products form a new type of marketplace that Zuboff calls behavioral futures markets where companies lay bets on future behaviors of their targeted consumers (Zuboff, 2019). The full definition of Surveillance Capitalism in Zuboff's words, as presented in her book *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, is as follows:

“ A new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales; 2. A parasitic economic logic in which the production of goods and services is subordinated to a new global architecture of behavioral modification; 3. A rogue mutation of capitalism marked by concentrations of wealth, knowledge, and power unprecedented in human history; 4. The foundational framework of a surveillance economy; 5. As significant a threat to human nature in the twenty-first century as industrial capitalism was to the natural world in the nineteenth and twentieth; 6. The origin of a new instrumentarian power that asserts dominance over society and presents startling challenges to market democracy; 7. A movement that aims to impose a new collective order based on total certainty; 8. An expropriation of critical human rights that is best understood as a coup from above: an overthrow of the people's sovereignty.” (Zuboff, 2019)

3.1.2 The Advancement of Surveillance Capitalism:

Zuboff describes the evolution of surveillance capitalism from its origins at Google (Zuboff, 2019). In the early 2000s, Google was not utilizing behavioral data for profit in this way and instead was operating as a service that just so happened to be receiving this data as 'exhaust' – that is, data incidentally collected, but deemed useless - from its search engine (Zuboff, 2019). However, the speculation of internet-related companies and their ability to raise money came to a peak during this time, referred to as the bursting of the “dotcom bubble”, where the inflated stocks of dot-com business of the previously flourishing Silicon Valley took an abrupt plunge into recession (Zuboff, 2019). This massive hit challenged the

survivability of tech companies, Google included (Zuboff, 2019). Despite the fact that the company was widely viewed as the top search engine gaining extraordinary amounts of web traffic, Google's top investors' support began to waver over its skepticized monetary capacity (Zuboff, 2019). Investors were concerned that Google was perhaps moving too slowly with the current ad system only having modest profits, driving them to question what the longer-term prospects to generate capital would truly resemble without any changes to keep up with the company's rivals (Zuboff, 2019). Pushed by these anxieties, Google founders requested that their Adwords team look into ways that the company could generate further capital (Zuboff, 2019).

Adwords is Google's pay-per-click online advertising platform that companies would pay to have their ads assigned to keywords (Zuboff, 2019). At the time, these keywords were selected by the paying company itself (Zuboff, 2019). It was only a month into this assignment to the Adwords team that the Carol Brady Moment occurred (Zuboff, 2019). This refers to a moment in 2002 where Google staff noticed mass search queries of the 1970's television character Carol Brady across one day in five different spikes (Zuboff, 2019). From this, they were able to discern that these spikes correlated with the airings of the popular TV show "Who wants to be a millionaire" across five different time zones, which correlated with a question about the actress (Zuboff, 2019). In response to this observation, Google co-founder Sergey Brin compared this incomparable ability to a "moment-by-moment barometer" of the world, with "tremendous possibilities" (Zuboff, 2019). Essentially, the Adwords team had observed that their growing cache of data had massive computational power that could link ads and queries (Zuboff, 2019). However, the isolated data by itself was not able to tell Google staff anything worthwhile, as explained by Google data scientist Amit Patel reflecting on the "Carol Brady Moment", "You can't interpret it unless you know what else is going on in the world." (Zuboff, 2019).

Amit Patel recently joined the company during this period with a personal interest in behavioral data-mining as Google was searching for new avenues, alongside the recent appointment of Eric Schmidt as CEO who was hired specifically with the intent to raise funds (Zuboff, 2019). Coincidentally, the two ended up sharing an office (Zuboff, 2019). Schmidt has stated that it was during this time that the computational power Patel was able to provide resulted in better revenue figures than his own financial planners (Zuboff, 2019). As stated by Zuboff,

“ We do not know (and may never know) what other insights Schmidt might have gleaned from Patel about the predictive power of Google’s behavioral data stores, but there is no doubt that a deeper grasp of the predictive power of data quickly shaped Google’s specific response to financial emergency, triggering the crucial mutation that ultimately turned AdWords, Google, the internet, and the very nature of information capitalism toward an astonishingly lucrative surveillance project.” (Zuboff, 2019).

Patel’s personal work with data logs of user’s thoughts, feelings, interests, that he surmised provided a “broad sensor of human behavior” began its shift into the company’s business model utilizing the growing cache of data that had previously been treated as “exhaust” (Zuboff, 2019). Adwords shifted from companies paying them for the keywords they selected, to Adwords using their predictive tools to tell companies to pay them a rate and trust them that they would put their ads in places that would target the right people (Zuboff, 2019). The success was evident, with Google’s revenue experiencing an increase of 3,590 percent, a growth of \$86 million in 2001 to \$3.2 billion in 2004 (Zuboff, 2019). Realizing the profit potential in the surveillance market, other companies began to follow suit (Zuboff, 2019). For example, GM motor’s ability to share the common locations of their drivers to sell to restaurants in those areas to send them ads, or the speed they travel to those locations to sell to insurance companies determining their premium costs, and so on (Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, surveillance capitalism itself should not be conflated with “technology”, as it is not limited to the tech industry per se (Zuboff, 2019). Rather surveillance technology is what brings the economic logic to life and makes it possible to operate (Zuboff, 2019). As Zuboff explains, “if technology is the bone and muscle, surveillance capitalism is the soft tissue that binds the elements and directs them into action.” (Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, the algorithms, sensors, machine intelligence and platforms are all the data-mining tools dictated by the logic that is surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).

However, while cautionary of avoiding this conflation, this thesis will focus specifically on social media companies, many of which have exclusively adopted this model of mining personal data for their financial sustainability and profit (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, because of the fact that these platforms have redefined global communication and information access within our modern age with little to no consent or oversight, these platforms also have some of the most extensive and intimate records of our personal lives making them some of the most expansive surveillance interfaces (Zuboff, 2019). As it stands, this has resulted in

the social media industry having faced little parameters in its evolution other than the pursuit of profit, or in other words - the economic imperatives dictated by the surveillance capitalist logic (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff describes these two separate economic imperatives as the extraction imperative and the prediction imperative (Zuboff, 2019). These imperatives, as will be explained further below, set conditions for surveillance capitalists (including social media companies) to meet in order to maintain profitability (Zuboff, 2019).

3.1.3 Conditions of Surveillance Capitalism:

3.1.3.1 The Extraction Imperative:

The extraction imperative refers to the need for economies of scale, as companies must produce an ever-expanding scale in order to dominate the market and maximize products (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff further explains this phenomenon as, “Sustainable dispossession requires a highly orchestrated and carefully phased amalgam of political, communicative, administrative, legal and material strategies that audaciously assert and tirelessly defends claims to new ground.” (Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, the extraction imperative requires an immense apparatus of surveillance interfaces that collects as much data as possible, constituting the *extraction architecture* (Zuboff, 2019). This includes the automated systems that monitor user’s online behaviors both through the user’s engagement with the platform itself as well as other features such as image tagging, facial recognition, location tracking, audio and video etc. (Zuboff, 2019). This data results in a profile of the user and their patterns, including but not limited to where they go, what they are doing there, who they are doing it with, how they feel about it, etc. (Zuboff, 2019). If data cannot be equally extracted, companies will also infer user profiles based on extracted data of those around you and/or similar demographics (Zuboff, 2019).

3.1.3.2 The Prediction Imperative:

The prediction imperative refers to the need of economies of scope (Zuboff, 2019). In order for behavioral surplus to approach a level of certainty that makes prediction products reliable and thus valuable, extraction must be vast but the surplus itself also must be varied (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff describes these variations having developed along two different dimensions (Zuboff, 2019). The first she describes as “the extension of extraction operations from the virtual world into the “real” world of embodied human experience” (Zuboff,

2019). In other words, extracted data must also be applicable to the offline, tangible world in order to extend into real-life supply routes (Zuboff, 2019). So more than just online behavior and how people engage with the surveillance platforms themselves, data about people offline is also sought, as Zuboff explains “Extension wants your bloodstream and your bed, your breakfast conversation, your commute, your run, your refrigerator, your parking space, your living room, your pancreas.” (Zuboff, 2019).

Economies of scope also are concerned with a second dimension Zuboff refers to as “depth” (Zuboff, 2019). The idea of depth is concerned with understanding a deeper sense of the user’s self and their more intimate patterns (Zuboff, 2019). For example, the depth supply operations take data from facial recognition, affective computing of voice, gait, posture, and text analysis in order to map a person’s intangible personality, moods, emotions, lies, and vulnerabilities. Depth therefore adds a crucial layer to developing valuable prediction products because it is not only extracting surplus from traceable actions such as search, browse, and purchasing data but it is analyzing the meaning of such behaviors in an attempt to infer our feelings and thoughts behind them (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff adds to the depth dimension further stating, “Surveillance capital wants more than your body’s coordinates in time and space (Zuboff, 2019). Now it violates the inner sanctum, as machines and their algorithms decide the meaning of your sighs, blinks, and utterances; the pattern of your breathing and the movements of your eyes; the clench of your jaw muscles; the hitch in your voice; and the exclamation points in a Facebook post once offered in innocence and hope.” (Zuboff, 2019).

3.1.3.3 Maintaining the Imperatives through Secrecy:

As a result of these imperatives, mining data takes place through camouflaged features, with the lines of where our surveillance begins and ends becoming increasingly blurred as technology continues to further advance and integrate into user’s day to day lives (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff compares this unfolding process to Mark Weiser’s 1999 vision of “ubiquitous computing”, where he describes “The most profound technologies are those that disappear. They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it.” (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff explains that it is this feeling of not being surveilled that allows for authenticity in the data, as well as increased susceptibility to influence (Zuboff, 2019). Moreover, in order to maintain access to such vast, comprehensive surveillance of people’s “human natural resources”, secrecy is essential because ultimately resources are

being taken without valid consent by the users themselves (Zuboff, 2019). By dodging the ethical questions of what users would like to share and how, this allows Google and other surveillance capitalists the ability to annex these “resources” under the jurisdiction of their supply chain operation (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff explains that all of this is why Google has actively taken measures to conceal its data mining operations, for which she relies on the testimony of former Google employee Edward Douglas to further explain Google’s secrecy culture (Zuboff, 2019). According to Douglas recalling working with Google co-founder Larry Page, “Larry opposed any path that would reveal our technological secrets or stir the privacy pot and endanger our ability to gather data.” (Zuboff, 2019). Zuboff added to this citing, “Page questioned the prudence of the electronic scroll in the reception lobby that displays a continuous stream of search queries, and he “tried to kill” [according to Douglas] the annual Google Zeitgeist conference that summarizes the year’s trends in search terms” (Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, this secrecy, granted by its unregulated nature, permits Google and other surveillance capitalists the extensive access required for the volume and variation of data necessary to get predictions of user’s behavior as close to certainty as possible (Zuboff, 2019). It is these conditions described in this section that set the parameters for how social media platforms are designed and operated as data-mining interfaces in the surveillance economy ecosystem, examined further in the following section (Zuboff, 2019).

3.2 Core Behavioral-Influencing Features of Online Technologies:

3.2.1 About the EU Technology and Democracy report

The EU report being referred to within this thesis is titled Technology and Democracy: Understanding the influence of online technologies on political behavior and decision-making technology. This report is a product of the Joint Research Centre’s (JRC) Enlightenment 2.0 multi-annual research program, which began with the “classical Enlightenment premise that reason is the primary source of political authority and legitimacy”. The aim of this report was to identify the drivers that influence political decision-making in regards to our contemporary digital information space with the hopes of offering helpful considerations for policymakers. The JRC team then identified four core pressure points of online technologies that influence behavior which include the Attention Economy, Choice Architectures, Algorithmic Content Curation, and Misinformation and Disinformation (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). The EU

report was structured by reviewing each of these identified core features, then providing studies that supported how they were influential (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

The analysis of this thesis is structured somewhat similarly. However, the EU report concludes that “Current research relies upon data collected either painstakingly under uncontrolled conditions on the existing platforms, or upon highly simplified experimental paradigms in the laboratory or online. None of these options are a sustainable solution to satisfy the urgent need to establish a full and transparent understanding of online behavior” (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Additionally, the report only mentions two case studies that suggest links between social media platforms and hate crimes, as “influence” is broadly discussed (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Likewise, connections to extremism are mentioned throughout the text, but the report does not share the same specified scope on extremism like this research will (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Therefore, this case study on Trumpism will be able to build onto the work of the EU report by providing a further case study to examine these four features.

Yet this thesis will also newly build on this report by examining the economic dimension that Zuboff provides. In other words, the case study will be examining the link of the features and Trumpist-political extremism in regards to how the features operated in accordance to the economic imperatives of surveillance capitalism. So for the rest of this section, each of these features will be reviewed in accordance to the report and how they connect economically to surveillance capitalism. The analysis will then later explore these connections within the case study.

3.2.2 Attention Economy:

The first feature, the attention economy, raises the concern that social media is fundamentally different from other communication “tools” that carry out functions based on the actions of the user, as instead social media platforms are designed with their own objectives towards users, which is to hold their “attention” and keep them online as long as possible (Laidler, 2019)(Pivien, 2019). The “economy” portion of this term refers to its link with the profitability of this attention – which can be understood as the surveillance economy, as this engagement is what enables the surveillance. So while perhaps initially perceiving to operate as “free services” to consumers, these platforms actually make their profit by giving third parties access to and/or the personal information of the users, who then act as the “source” of the product (their data) within the business model (Laidler, 2019)(Pivien, 2019)

(Zuboff, 2019). To keep pace with these economic imperatives, platforms are deliberately designed by their engineers to be addictive (Andersson, 2018). Former Mozilla and Jawbone employee Aza Raskin, designer of the infinite scroll feature that allows users to endlessly swipe down through content without clicking, has explained how stock prices have resulted in how app-users spend their time (Andersson, 2018). "If you don't give your brain time to catch up with your impulses" Raskin stated, "you just keep scrolling." (Andersson, 2018). Raskin explained that he and many other designers were and are currently driven to create addictive app features in order to secure their next round of funding stating, "In order to get your stock price up, the amount of time that people spend on your app has to go up"(Andersson, 2018). He continued, "So, when you put that much pressure on that one number, you're going to start trying to invent new ways of getting people to stay hooked." (Andersson, 2018). Multiple other former social media employees have expressed similar concerns about addictive features, including Facebook's founding president Sean Parker that the company set out to consume as much of the user's time as possible by "exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology" (Andersson, 2018). Parker was referring to the addictive factors of Facebook's Like button, proven to trigger reward pathways in our brains similar to the dopamine hits gambling addicts experience on the brightly colored slot machines casinos design for player "time maximization" (Andersson, 2018). As a result, social media platforms are often criticized for how they exploit their users into subconsciously providing not only their data but their time and focus without considering the potential consequences that can have for themselves and others (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). The analysis will therefore focus on this feature in regards to these concerns surrounding addiction.

3.2.3 Choice Architectures:

Choice architectures refer to how the structural design of an environment – in this case the online environment – is framed (Thaler et al., 2010). Unlike physical spaces, digital settings are ubiquitous meaning the designers have full control over creating the user's experience from what they view and how they can engage with it (Thaler et al., 2010).

So rather than social media operating like an open network where everyone is equally connected to one another, platforms vary in how that communication and information-access is organized (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). One of the ways this is done is through company choices of "searchability", which refer to how users can find and identify accounts and subscribe to content (Bossetta, 2018). "Connectivity" furthermore sets standards for how

connections between accounts can be initiated and established (Bossetta, 2018). These structural features can be controlled by the companies to create bias on who can reach whom, and what information is shared across platforms - essentially controlling user access to information (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Additionally, the network's structure for privacy settings is another choice architecture concerning the ability for users to have control over who can find and interact with them (Bossetta, 2018). Consequences of such features are said to challenge the freedom of association, the ability to find fact-based information, and the ability to discover new perspectives (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

However, please note that while these consequences are due to design *choices* that are made for organizing the online space, much of the organization itself is carried out by algorithms which is why some of these concerns will somewhat overlap with the below "Algorithmic content curation" section. For the sake of organizing the thesis, the concern being focused on for the choice architecture analysis will be on "nudging" – or the intentional organizational choices to steer users based on platform motives (Thaler et al., 2010).

While the EU report stated that not all choice architectures are necessarily setting out to be influential, there is a danger in the powerful opportunity to use pervasive "dark patterns" to "nudge" and coerce behavior (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). For example, creating an Amazon account will require a few easy-to-follow clicks, making joining easy, but deleting the account is much more complicated, requiring 12 clicks that can be confusing without instruction, deterring users from leaving (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Another example could be shopping websites, that use various techniques such as misdirection, applying social pressure, inciting a sense of urgency or scarcity, or adding items to user's shopping baskets without notifying them (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Regarding social media companies specifically, nudging is often criticized in relation to complicated and/or impractical privacy settings and opt-out features that collect personal data ("Deceived...", 2018).

The EU report noted that dark pattern choice architectures could therefore be a significant concern for the ways in which political influencers may be utilizing them (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). In the context of surveillance capitalism, these nudging features work to elusively and invasively acquire mass amounts of data needed for the business model (Zuboff, 2019). Therefore, the analysis section will be focusing on this choice architecture concern of nudging, specifically data-nudging.

3.2.4 Algorithmic Content Curation:

Like choice architectures, discussions regarding algorithm concerns also relate to what content should be displayed to users, what should be hidden, and how it should be presented (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Only algorithms refer to the *automated processes* that carry out design choices dictated by choice architecture decisions. So as stated above, there are some overlapping “concerns” to choice architectures and algorithms in general as they work together to organize online spaces. Although the feature discussed in this section, “algorithmic *content curation*”, specifically refers to the ways in which algorithms operate to personalize content to cater to viewers based on their prior behaviors (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

Using digital technologies would be nearly impossible without the algorithms that organize information online, and factoring in preferences can be convenient in a number of ways (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). However, it can be more concerning when algorithms act without the user’s knowledge to satisfy their “presumed” preferences, as despite being designed by people how they operate - sometimes their effects can be complex and non-transparent by designers and users alike (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). This creates what the report calls a “responsibility gap” in the effects of the algorithm and the actual intent of the designer, making it often difficult to assign responsibility for algorithmic discrimination and biases (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Regardless of intent, some algorithms clearly benefit some platforms due to how they curate interests in order to feed into the attention economy (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). This leads to funneling like-minded individuals into self-perpetuating “echo-chambers” (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). These polarized spaces may then place users into “filter bubbles” (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). The concept of filter bubbles refers to the concern that algorithmic content curation intellectually isolates users by reducing the likelihood of that user being confronted with new content that could challenge their own perceptions (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). This is then surmised to reduce the capacity of users to create autonomous opinions, and supposedly can skew their perception of the world (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

Algorithms can of course also be hacked to change the way information is organized from how the company’s designers originally set them. However, because the focus of this thesis is on the companies, the scope of this thesis will not look at these vulnerabilities and will only be concerned with the original, unaltered algorithmic content set by the companies. The analysis will therefore look at the concern that this algorithmic content curation (in its

original, unaltered state) can potentially organize users through customized echo-chambers that can result in intellectual isolation, or “filter bubbles”, that may skew user’s views.

3.2.5 Misinformation and Disinformation:

Misinformation and disinformation refer broadly to all false information, which has a tendency to spread faster on social media than fact-based information (Lewandowsky et al., 2020) (Dizikes, 2018). This is largely because, again linking with the attention-economy business model, sensationalized content that invokes strong emotions such as fear, anger, and outrage is more likely to keep people engaged than things that are less emotionally charged (Dizikes, 2018). Though not all false information is the same (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). For example, “misinformation” refers to content shared accidentally without malicious intent, while “disinformation” is intentionally fabricated with the intent to mislead or cause harm (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Then there is also the related “malinformation”, which while true, is shared with the intent to cause harm such as leaks of confidential information (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Content such as this can be especially dangerous, and social media has been notoriously criticized for providing a platform for rather than adequately responding to propaganda, systematic lies, and conspiracy theories (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Yet while some content can be convincing to any demographic, the concern for false information is often discussed as especially dangerous for vulnerable demographics such as those with age and/or cognitive attributes that affect those individual’s ability to challenge the integrity of news and sources (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). This analysis will therefore be dealing with this concern that false information, expanding into the larger debate of the influential capacities of content exposure in general, can meaningfully affect the general population in a way that stimulates the attention economy.

3.3 Trumpism:

3.3.1 What is Trumpism:

George H. Nash, a historian who has written about American conservatism for more than four decades, described Trumpism as a “rebellion” against conservatism (Lee M., 2017). This “rebellion” has seemingly taken over as the dominant camp of conservative thought (Lee M., 2017). The traditionally characterized small government, lower taxes, and a respect for tradition ideologies that marked the Reagan era, “Trumpism” has since advanced

towards a rejection of modern U.S. American “corrupt” institutions and elitist “expert” leadership, mobilized by an ethnonationalist agenda (Lee M., 2017). The prevalence of this seemingly new brand of conservatism has gained much momentum under Trump’s “Drain the Swamp”, “Hoax”, and “Build the Wall” rhetoric (Lee M., 2017). Nonetheless a key principle within this rhetoric, which identifies the government itself as part of the problem in the United States, falls under a long-withstanding conservatist camp termed anti-establishment conservatism (Lee M., 2017). As well as the Republican party also has a clear history of utilizing fascist identity politics long before Trump’s usage of ethnonationalist policies and rhetoric (Lee M., 2017). Against Nash’s assessment of a “rebellion” against conservative ideology, scholars such as Michael J. Lee contrastingly point out that while the political identity of conservatism has always been generally incoherent, that Trumpism, like all the other brands of conservatism before it, resembles another “continuous reenactment” upon traditional conservative political identities, sharing the same loosely organized political languages, narratives, and tropes (Lee M., 2017). However, unlike other brands of conservatism, Lee also raises the point that Trumpism escalates this reenactment further, stating that Trumpism is “an original strain of conservatism [that] surfaced and then survived, strengthened, and, for myriad reasons, captured both a party and the presidency.” (Lee M., 2017). Scholar Mary E. Stuckey adds to this debate by arguing that Donald Trump and his governing style and rhetoric are both products of a developing political landscape and a change agent themselves (Stuckey, 2020). Therefore, according to Stuckey’s reasoning, Trumpism could be observed as both a continuation of and recreation of traditional conservative ideologies (Stuckey, 2020).

In light of Stuckey’s assessment, this paper will observe Teun A. van Dijk’s definition of ideology which actively produces and is produced, explained as “a form of social cognition shared by the members of a group’, a ‘cognitive framework’ which ‘assigns coherence among social attitudes which in turn codetermine social practice’ and which ‘embod[ies] an interest-dependent (re)construction of social reality.” (van Dijk, 2008). Considering this definition, this section will be organized first by reviewing the progression and relationship of conservative and Republican roots to the anti-establishment and ethnonationalist social attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors exhibited as the defining characteristics of Trumpism. Then it will overview the Trump supporters themselves, including a discussion of who the “extremist groups” are that have since adopted or newly emerged within the Trumpism movement.

3.3.2 Advancement of Anti-Establishment Conservatism:

Beginning in 1993, the New Deal's economic and welfare legacy led by former president Franklin D. Roosevelt was interpreted by conservatives, and subsequent early anti-establishment conservatives under the conservative umbrella, as potentially granting too much of a federal regulatory role on the nation as well as unprecedented presidential power (Horwitz, 2013). This movement of conservative thought was also mobilized by the anti-communist agenda rooted in the language of individual rights and freedom from large government (Horwitz, 2013). This call to reduce domestic spending yet make significant military commitments effectively developed an "anti-statist statism" conservative agenda which combined U.S. American international dominance and exceptionalism with a general skepticism of domestic expertise and government authority (Horwitz, 2013). While Ronald Reagan and much of his administration openly supported social and economic deregulation winning support from anti-establishment conservatives, it was not until the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks during George W. Bush's Administration, that anti-establishment conservatism anti-statist statism was revamped (Horwitz, 2013). During this time conservatism also received a strong support from Christians who viewed the U.S. as playing a key role in the Armageddon prophecy as told by St. John in the Bible's book of revelation (Horwitz, 2013). Coinciding with this apocalyptic prediction that must precede a second coming of Christ, a new Christian right emerged within neoconservatism to remake the Middle East through the cleansing of fire and violence (Horwitz, 2013). The Bush administration's expenditures on the Iraq War increased the federal budget deficit far beyond any previous administration at 6.1 trillion USD (Horwitz, 2013).

This debt, followed by the housing and financial crash in 2008 under the Obama Administration, prompted the new administration to attempt relief strategies such as the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) that aided financial institutions, and the Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare) that provided universal healthcare (Horwitz, 2013). Any dampened conservative support from Iraqi war failures were then reanimated to oppose higher taxes and promote traditional small-government principles, but an anti-establishment response in particular gained support against TARP in the form of the Tea Party Movement (Horwitz, 2013). The populist Tea Party Movement characteristically expressed disgust of this seeming elitist class bias of the "corrupt" government to bailing out banks, insurance, and mortgage companies that were responsible for the financial collapse (Horwitz, 2013). After years of

development, the Tea Party Movement demonstrated the largest demographic of anti-establishment conservatives that openly criticized the government as being the problem (Horwitz, 2013). By the time Donald Trump stepped into the presidential race for the 2016 election, there was already an abundant support to demolish a perceived corrupted, elitist government that actively worked to conceal the “truth” from everyday U.S. Americans (Neiwert, 2017). As well as while Donald Trump’s wealth and status seems contradictory to the anti-elitism emphasized throughout the Tea Party Movement, he was already recognized by the movement for his advocacy of alternative “truths” (Neiwert, 2017). Notably one of the conspiracies Trump pushed, the birther conspiracy which asserted President Barack Obama was not born in the United States challenging the legitimacy of his presidency and true aims and beliefs (claiming Islamic terrorist ties), was especially prevalent within Tea Party Movement rhetoric (Neiwert, 2017). Donald Trump’s association with these particular claims along with other stances he had publicly taken that the United States had become a weak, exploited player in international system and that domestic justice had failed to keep everyday Americans safe, also positioned him as a passionate crusader of populist, anti-state statism rhetoric of the anti-establishment sect (Neiwert, 2017). This sect, eager to support his militarized, isolationist “America First” ideologies, then became more visible than ever before under Trump’s leadership, rebranding the new Republican Party to be characterized by the previously viewed “fringe” beliefs of the anti-establishment camp (Neiwert, 2017).

3.3.3 Advancement of Fascist Ethnonationalism:

Intrinsically linked to the anti-establishment movement, and therefore critical to understanding the development of this current brand of right-wing politics, are the persistent elements of fascism rooted throughout the history of U.S. American politics. Anti-establishment conservatism calls for dismantling the U.S. government which directly coincides with conspiracies and mistrust, aligning with fascist strategies to undermine credibility of expertise and education in order for propaganda to rewrite reality (Stanley, 2018). This paved the way for a state of unreality where Trump’s motto to “Make America Great Again” idealized a romanticized past (Stanley, 2018). The romanticization of this motto was effectively observed by supporters as returning to a more oppressive, misogynistic, and white past, aligned with fascist ideals of a nation-state that would be ethnically and religiously “pure” without degeneracy or women outside of traditional roles (Stanley, 2018). According to American Philosopher Jason Stanley in his book *How Fascism Works*, “Fascist regimes

justify oppressive processes by dehumanizing or otherwise devaluing some targeted group as a threat to the purity, cultural or ethnic, of the true nation that supposedly existed in the mythic past.” (Stanley, 2018). Stanley explains that generations of “Us vs. Them” mentalities fostered by fascism in the United States are responsible for the white nationalism plaguing the United States today and fueling the current Trumpism political phenomenon (Stanley, 2018).

Notably fascist origins can be found within the predominantly conservative Republican party, from which Trump ran under, when they first made the strategic decision to use racism as a means to become the “White Man’s Party” under the presidential run of segregationist Barry Goldwater (Haney-Lopez, 2013). Goldwater’s supporters, largely the same faction that rallied against the New Deal, were previously no more white than the Democratic party (Haney-Lopez, 2013). Both the Democratic and Republican party had supporters of Jim Crow laws for example, but Goldwater perceived an opportunity in appealing to the racist sentiments of white voters stating, “We’re not going to get the Negro vote as a bloc in 1964 and 1968, so we ought to go hunting where the ducks are.” (Haney-Lopez, 2013). This strategy became known as the “Southern Strategy” named for the South’s establishment of the Jim Crow laws, but appealed to white nationalistic sentiments across the United States (Haney-Lopez, 2013). Conservative journalist Robert Novak reported on this shift after his visit to the Republican National Committee in the summer of 1963, writing, “A good many, perhaps a majority of the party’s leadership, envision substantial political gold to be mined in the racial crisis by becoming in fact, though not in name, the White Man’s Party. ‘Remember,’ one astute party worker said quietly . . . ‘this isn’t South Africa. The white man outnumbers the Negro 9 to 1 in this country.’” (Haney-Lopez, 2013).

In response to the Republican’s strategy, Democrats began to lean in the other direction to acquire votes from people of color, resulting in the profound racial divide of today’s political parties (Haney-Lopez, 2013). Goldwater’s fascist attempts of seeking power through division of the U.S. American people were also “dog whistled”, or signaled without directly identifying the less-than “other” group, by other Republicans and/or conservatives throughout the years (Haney-Lopez, 2013). Following the aggravation of the first African American president Barack Obama’s term, Donald Trump’s attacks to Obama’s legitimacy as a U.S. American citizen compounded with his unyielding racist rhetoric and endorsement of the “racehorse theory” (an antisemitic, white supremacist theory used by U.S. American eugenicists and German Nazis to justify racial purity goals), shifted dog whistling into explicit

naming and degradation of minority groups (Stanley, 2018)(Mehta, 2020). The Trump Administration therefore received significant and open support from white supremacist groups, some members of which were brazenly appointed within the administration (Stanley, 2018)(GRAPHIC, n.d.).

3.3.4 Advancement of Trumpism-Extremism:

In reflection to the anti-establishment and fascist sections above, the “Trumpian Moment” in U.S. politics can be observed to resemble historical roots that have seemed to gradually build up sects of ideologies that once were considered more “fringe” but now have transformed the current Republican party and conservative school of thought (Reid, 2017). Donald Trump and his administration were instrumental in this shift from dog-whistling and Tea Party conservatives perceived as “extreme” towards the safe haven it is today for white nationalism and radical conspiracy tolerance (Reid, 2017). Waves of Republicans including 60 - 70 Bush officials have abandoned the Republican party, including former Undersecretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence under the Bush Administration, Jimmy Gurulé, who stated, “The Republican Party as I knew it no longer exists. I’d call it the cult of Trump” (Reid, 2021). However as the number of Republicans defecting from the party seems to grow, the majority of Republican lawmakers continue their loyalty to Trump post-presidency and the new direction of the Republican Party (McGreal, 2020)(Reid, 2021). Much like Goldwater, Trump’s legacy to the Republican Party seems to have distinguished the party onto a new course that transcends dominant traditional views of Republicanism and conservatism identities and ideologies into “Trumpism” (Lee M., 2017).

However, when approaching the ideology of Trumpism in this thesis, it should be noted however that while many do, not every individual that supports Trump and his MAGA (“Make America Great Again” campaign slogan) worldview necessarily identify as a conservative or Republican. For example there is a movement of Libertarians that have supported Trump, a collection of people who switched parties for Trump or did not consistently follow one before he ran for president, as well as stated above there are certainly Republicans and conservatives within the “Never Trump” movement (Dalima, 2020)(Dias et al., 2021)(Wittes et al., 2020). Moreover, the above does not comprehensively cover the beliefs of Trump supporters as a whole, for example a number of voters self-reportedly did not care for Trump and his ideals but hoped he would fulfill his promises to bring back Coal and other dying industries eroding the livability of many rural communities (Lipton,

2020). As well as other personal characteristics, such as Trump's personal zero-sum style of business, have been argued to uniquely define his administration's strategies apart from political ideology alone (Johnson et al., 2020).

Yet the purpose of this paper is to focus on the widespread Trumpism-extremism that has come out of the Trumpism movement. When it comes to this extremism in particular, the anti-establishment and ethnonationalist characteristics are the defining pillars of these extreme right groups. According to anti-hate organization The Anti-Defamation League ADL, the "extreme right" is a term encompassing "right-wing political, social and religious movements that exist outside of and are more radical than mainstream conservatism ("Extreme Right...", n.d.). In the United States, the extreme right consists primarily of two large, slightly overlapping spheres. In one sphere is the white supremacist movement, including its various sub-movements, such as neo-Nazis, racist skinheads, and the alt right, among others ("Extreme Right...", n.d.). In the other sphere are anti-government extremist movements such as the militia movement and sovereign citizens (collectively, this sphere is often referred to as the "Patriot" movement)." ("Extreme Right...", n.d.). The ADL continues to say that within these spheres there are also several "single-issue" movements, which each tend to be the extreme wing of a more mainstream conservative movement; these include anti-abortion extremists, anti-immigrant extremists, anti-Muslim extremists, and anti-public lands extremists, among others." ("Extreme Right...", n.d.).

Following this assessment, these (sometimes overlapping) spheres contain the following:

3.3.4.1 Sphere 1: White Supremacy

The legal advocacy nonprofit Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) describes the above mentioned ideologies as follows: "Neo-Nazi groups share a hatred for Jews and a love for Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. While they also hate other minorities, gays and lesbians and even sometimes Christians, they perceive "the Jew" as their cardinal enemy." ("Ideologies", n.d.). Furthermore SPLC describes, "Racist skinheads once formed the most violent-minded element of the white supremacist movement. Often referred to as the "shock troops" of the hoped-for white revolution, the movement flourished during the 1980s and 1990s, particularly through the lucrative, international hate music scene." ("Ideologies", n.d.). Both of these ideologies fall under the larger white nationalist ideology umbrella, who are all defined by their white supremacist or white separatist ideologies, often emphasizing

the “inferiority” of nonwhites (“Ideologies”, n.d.). The large tent of white nationalism also encompasses other more specified hate ideologies including but not limited to the Ku Klux Klan, neo-Confederate, and “Christian-Identity” ideologies (“Ideologies”, n.d.).

Part of the white nationalist movement in the United States is occupied with harnessing the anger and frustration of Trump’s election loss into recruiting people into these organized groups (“White Nationalist”, n.d.). However, organized groups themselves seem to be on the decline, with the movement generally becoming more decentralized (“White Nationalist”, n.d.). This is not necessarily reflective of the national level of danger or hate, but instead it is reflective of a change in how people absorb and participate in extremist ideas without adopting some of the personal risks involved in formerly joining a group (“White Nationalist”, n.d.). Social media has therefore taken a large role in this decentralized faction of the movement, often classified as the Alternative Right of Alt-Right (“White Nationalist”, n.d.).

The term Alt-Right was coined in 2008 by Richard Bertrand Spencer, a proclaimed fan of Barry Goldwater’s policies and head of white nationalist National Policy Institute think tank, which emphasizes the racist ideal of a “white identity” and the preservation of a so-called “Western civilization.” (“Alt-Right”, n.d.). While Spencer remains a leading voice in the alt-right movement, many other leading voices have emerged and networked across the U.S. The Alt-right therefore can be understood as a collection of groups, not necessarily united under a singular ideology, but who generally eschew “establishment” conservatism, skew young, and embrace white ethnonationalism as a fundamental value.” (“Alt-Right”, n.d.). Moreover, the Alt-Right are predominantly, “characterized by heavy use of social media and online memes.” (“Alt-Right”, n.d.). Physicist and extremist researcher studying the alt-right, Neil Johnson, also notes that while the Alt-right does have physical meetings from time to time, much of the movement indeed lives online (Wolchover, 2017). Johnson’s findings demonstrate that online Alt-Right recruitment and coordination mirror the evolution of other terrorist groups such as pro-ISIS (Wolchover, 2017). The Alt-Right considers Trump to be a hero, idealizing him in a number of their campaigns and events, including the Unite the Right white supremacist rally in August 11–12, 2017 (touched on again later within this thesis) where Trump notoriously refused to condemn the supremacists in his statement to press that there were “good people on both sides” (“Two Years...”, 2019). The Black Lives Matter movement and human immigration reform have also frequently been the subject of

their online attacks, which similar to the events of Charlottesville have mobilized into physical violence (“Two Years...”, 2019).

However, diversified organized groups have also stemmed out of online platforms into organized groups, but may not necessarily all identify as part of the “Alt-right”, such as the “Boogaloo” libertarian-leaning armed militia group whose origins can be traced to common racist beliefs exerted by sharing memes online (Miller, 2020). Furthermore, while engaging in online activities, libertarian-leaning all-male organized hate group the Proud Boys (And their corresponding female group the Proud Boy’s Girls) also have adamantly denied any connection to the racist Alt-right, insisting they exclusively are interested in spreading an “anti-political correctness” and “anti-white guilt” agenda which hypothetically includes anyone who admits that “white people are not the problem” (“Proud Boys”, n.d.). Despite this however, the Proud Boys have contradictingly been connected to numerous violent, racial hate-crimes and rhetoric, and associate and encompass alt-right and other more conservative-leaning individuals, including their partnership with far-right Patriot Prayer militia and nationalist groups (“Proud Boys”, n.d.). The Proud Boys have especially idealized Trump organizing originally in 2016 and often sporting MAGA merchandise and attending pro Trump events, and were infamously told to “stand back and stand by” by Trump during his 2020 presidential election debate with Biden in contrast to condemning the group as he was requested (Obeidallah, 2020). While many groups and varying ideologies fall under the white supremacist camp, the Proud Boys have become one of the most notorious groups of the white nationalist sphere, often serving as a pipeline for even more violent ideologies (“Proud Boys, n.d.).

3.3.4.2 Sphere 2: The Patriot Movement

Reflecting anti-establishment thought, the “Patriot” movement while a diverse camp of its own all share a conviction that either part or all of the government has been taken over by a malignant conspiracy (“Patriot...”, n.d.). With this anti-government sentiment, there are three main segments of thought including the Militia movement, the Sovereign Citizen movement, and the Tax Protest movement (“Patriot...”, n.d.). The Militia movement emerged first in the mid-1990s in response to gun control laws, continuing with a right to keep and bear arms as one of their major tenets (“Militia...”, n.d.). The Militia movement is also organized around the core “New World Order” conspiracy, a belief in a tyrannical, socialist elites that have taken over the planet and are manufacturing global crises and attacks

to disarm and enslave the world (“Militia...”, n.d.). This particular movement especially pertains to the Three Percenters and Oath Keepers groups, some of the largest and most prevalent anti-government far-right militias, both of whom also have idealized Trump (“Militia...”, n.d.). The Sovereign Citizen movement dates back much farther into the 1860s, but also similarly believes in a new, illegitimate government conspiring to enslave the world (“Sovereign...”, n.d.). Followers of the Sovereign Citizen movement have declared themselves “sovereign” from the new “corrupt” government, and accordingly act by ignoring laws, rules, regulations, and taxes thereby being associated in a range of criminal activities across English-Speaking countries (although originating in the United States) (“Sovereign...”, n.d.). Lastly the Tax Protest movement dates back sooner to the mid-1960s, with their believers also refusing to pay taxes, believing in the government conspiracy that most Americans do not need to and/or are not truly legally obligated to pay federal income tax (not to be confused with war tax resisters who refuse to pay taxes supporting the U.S. military on moral grounds as opposed to conspiracy grounds) (“Tax...”, n.d.). All three of these movements overlap under the larger umbrella anti-government Patriot movement, further fueled by major online anti-government conspiracy-news groups notably including the John Birch Society, Infowars, and World Net Daily (“Antigovernment...”, n.d.). All three of these conspiracy-news groups have idolized and/or held ties to Trump, including for example the John Birch Society taking credit for original “Trumpism” ideologies dating back to their Goldwater support, Infowars host Alex Jones reporting a close relationship with Trump chatting with him multiple times on his show, and daughter of World Net Daily founder Joseph Farah, Alyssa Farah, serving as the White House Director of Strategic Communications and Assistant to the President in the Trump administration in 2020 after formerly working for WorldNetDaily herself (“Antigovernment...”, n.d.).

These major conspiracy channels, as well as smaller ones falling under the same anti-government camp, operate online similar to the white supremacist sphere channeling into both organized groups and also decentralized followers (“Antigovernment...”, n.d.). While these many anti-government conspiracies may overlap and differ from these groups, one of the most prominent conspiracy movements is Qanon, supposedly led by the anonymous “Q” (“What...”, 2020). “Q” supposedly is a high-level government official who posts information for followers to decode about an “alleged master plan in which President Trump will take down the cabal (“deep state”) they believe is working against him.” (“What...”, 2020). In this conspiracy, Q’s followers believe Trump is a hero working to overturn the secret elitist cabal

of satan-worshipping pedophiles that abduct children to harvest their blood for a chemical known as adrenochrome used to extend their lives (“What...”, 2020). This trope dates back centuries to the Blood Libel conspiracy of Jewish elites who control the world and similarly kidnap children for their blood (adrenochrome chemical), reanimated by “Q” and various other Q-inspired “Q-influencers” with the anti-LGBTQ dog whistle #SaveOurChildren slogan previously used to demonize the LGBTQ community as pedophile threats to children (“What...”, 2020). Many QAnon followers have also overlapped with “alternative health communities” engaging in anti-mask and anti-vaccine theories, as well numerous baseless sex-trafficking conspiracies including Wayfair and Pizzagate (“What...”, 2020). Other movements within QAnon have also supported criminal behaviors such as those in the sovereign citizens movement, as well as child and migrant abduction efforts (“What...”, 2020)(Beckett, 2020).

Furthermore, thousands of QAnon followers have reportedly threatened and harassed people online and offline, with several arrests made by self-proclaimed QAnon followers who have been charged with varying violent offences including murder and terrorism (Beckett, 2020). Along various representation from other groups mentioned in this chapter, QAnon was a major influencer of the domestic terrorist attack on January 6th when the White House was insurrected, with many participants in the act being QAnon followers (“Antigovernment...”,n.d.). QAnon had predicted a “Great Awakening” moment when the Deep State would be taken over and executed for their crimes, with many QAnon followers present on the day with reported plans to locate and harm, if not kill, government officials (“What...”, 2020). After this “Great Awakening” did not materialize, some QAnon followers reportedly left the ideology, but still high numbers of followers persist, including pro-Trump officials who openly support “Q” and believe Trump actually did win the election and will be eventually re-sworn into the presidency as part of his master plan (Wong, 2021). Compared to as both a cult and a religion, it is important to note that studies have shown that the QAnon cult movement is widely diverse with perhaps only a minority believing all of the Q-related conspiracies (“What...”, 2020). Instead, the Q phenomenon umbrella like the other groups and ideologies mentioned in this chapter unite a variety of individuals under an anti-government, pro-trump identity, which continues to challenge the stability of the post-Trump Republican Party and export anti-government conspiracies and violence internationally (“What...”, 2020).

Part 4: Analysis

4.1 The Attention Economy Analysis:

Section Objective: The concern of the Attention Economy feature is that it works to addict users to maximize the time they spend on their device. This section will therefore examine what, if any, role this addiction has within Trumpist political extremism.

As stated above, following the January 6th domestic terrorist attack when the White House was insurrected in accordance to “Q”’s prophecy to carry out the “great awakening” for which evil would be defeated, some QAnon followers strengthened their resolve for the next move in “the plan” (“What...”, 2020)(Klepper, 2021). Others however, facing criminal charges and torn-apart families, turned to therapy and online support for what has often been compared to a conspiracy “addiction” (Klepper, 2021). Loved ones of “Qanoners” (sometimes called QAnonCasualties) have also turned to similar sources of support, having stated that they no longer recognized the person anymore after their immersion into the “Qult” (Klepper, 2021)(Jaffe & Real, n.d.)(Carrier, 2021). One of the recommendations for recovering QAnoners is to take a break from the engulfing videos and message boards on social media and channel their time elsewhere to recuperate (Klepper, 2021). Computer engineer who helps administer a QAnon recovery channel on the social media platform Telegram, Michael Frink, warns that a lack of sympathy for recovering Qanoners will only further alienate people, stating “These are human beings. If you have a loved one who is in it, make sure they know they are loved.” (Klepper, 2021)

Yet many others are not ready to grant the same empathy to QAnoners, including Hilary Clinton, a frequent target in QAnon conspiracies (Perrett, 2021). Clinton also commented on this addiction phenomenon stating, "We are facing a mass addiction with the effective purveying of disinformation on social media," Clinton said. "I don't have one iota of sympathy for someone like her [Congressman and conspiracy theorist Marjorie Talyor Greene], but the algorithms, we are now understanding more than ever we could have, truly are addictive. And whatever it is in our brains for people who go down those rabbit holes, and begin to inhabit this alternative reality, they are, in effect, made to believe." (Perrett, 2021). Hillary is far from the only voice to be hesitant to grant any sympathy for QAnoners, as due to the harrowing beliefs and activities of movement, the term “addiction” can become quickly

controversial granted the accountability irreversible harm the movement has already done (Klepper, 2021). Social media addiction in general has become controversial, with Bosworth among the voices who have expressed his disgust for the association:

“In these moments people like to suggest that our consumers don’t really have free will. People compare social media to nicotine. I find that wildly offensive, not to me but to addicts. I have seen family members struggle with alcoholism and classmates struggle with opioids. I know there is a battle for the terminology of addiction but I side firmly with the neuroscientists. Still, while Facebook may not be nicotine I think it is probably like sugar. Sugar is delicious and for most of us there is a special place for it in our lives. But like all things it benefits from moderation. At the end of the day we are forced to ask what responsibility individuals have for themselves. Set aside substances that directly alter our neurochemistry unnaturally. Make costs and trade-offs as transparent as possible. But beyond that each of us must take responsibility for ourselves. If I want to eat sugar and die an early death that is a valid position. My grandfather took such a stance towards bacon and I admired him for it. And social media is likely much less fatal than bacon.” (Lecher, 2020)

Bosworth’s reasoning follows the common logic previously addressed that the self-discipline of users (not social media platforms) hold sole responsibility for their actions. Part of this logic is likely a disbelief of the capacity for conspiracies and other fake news to be able to influence the general public, which will be the examination focus of the Misinformation and Disinformation section further below. However, another part is the disbelief that social media addictions can be just as severe as others. This is a major challenge of measuring the true threat of the attention economy, as while the literature review already touched on the ample evidence that features are indeed addictive - if those addictions can be fairly understood as less serious than “bacon” - then any platform-immersion QAnoners fall into should be more equated with their personal responsibility rather than the platform’s as Bosworth and other critics tend to suggest.

So to follow Bosworth’s assertion that neuroscientists should be the ones trusted in identifying what is and isn't addiction, this section will point to the increasing neuroscience research that identifies how social environments and related identities may generate neuro-physiological changes similar to that of substance addiction (Simi et al., 2017). Studies have

identified that stimuli of such non-drug activities can still affect certain neural pathways in a way that can increase dopamine in the brain's reward circuit (Simi et al., 2017).

Furthermore, in a study of 89 in-depth interviews with former members of U.S. white supremacist groups, addictive qualities of hate-based identities with triggers and physiological responses were found in numerous participants (Simi et al., 2017). One interviewee shared cognition changes describing “I can’t watch like the old war movies or like say *Inglorious Bastards* or, or something like that, you know, and they show like a, or like a, the History Channel has the World War II in HD and they, you know, even though they’re showing the Germans getting slaughtered and stuff, I still see that, that, you know, the swastika in the background, you know. I get a little goose bumps. I can’t lie, you know.”(Simi et al., 2017). Another former member of the American Nazi party reiterated this sharing, “I guarantee you it’s an addiction. I can listen to white power music and within a week be back to that mindset. I know it.” (Simi et al., 2017). The study observed that white supremacists in these situations did not just hold beliefs but that they became totalitarian all-encompassing lifestyles and identities rooted in a culture of hate and violence that built their collective identities (Simi et al., 2017)(Szanto, 2020). Expressing and reaffirming this identity included routine engagement in hateful content and sometimes acts of violence in order to express the individuals’ commitments to the supremacy ingroup and thereby their own sense of self, leading to these activities producing a “high” (Simi et al., 2017) (Szanto, 2020).

Moreover, against common conceptualizations that white supremacists are entirely consumed by hate, making their personal addiction to violence and violent activities seem inevitable, white supremacist groups often struggle with retention rates (Simi et al., 2017). Therefore, hate groups often have to rely on these addictive highs to sustain participation due to the high burn-out rates caused by the intensity of the lifestyle (Simi et al., 2017). As well as in the digital age, they are increasingly turning to online platforms for this purpose by disseminating hate-based ideas and symbols with the intent of mobilizing their movement (Daniels, 2018)(Blout et al., 2021). So similar to substance addictions, exposure to triggering the stimuli of hate-based content and environments were observed as making it more difficult to leave, and in some cases pushed former members towards relapse into their former identity and behaviors (Simi et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, the authors of the study were cautious not to necessarily equate hate to substances, stating, “To be clear, we are not suggesting that hate should become a new

addiction diagnosis, but rather pointing to the ways social experiences can become so engraved in our interactions, psyche, and body that the parallels between identity residual and addiction become an interesting point of exploration.”(Simi et al., 2017). The study therefore demonstrated how non-drug substances such as hate stimuli can severely impact a person to the level that neurochemically “mirrors” the addiction process (Simi et al., 2017). Therefore, similar to Bosworth’s assessment, declaring hate and extremism as “addictive” may indeed be debated. However there are nonetheless neurochemical triggers and responses for hate-based stimuli, which against Bosworth’s skepticism, have been proven to be substantially influential on behavior to a degree where it's been utilized as a tool to deter defectors wishing to leave the movement (Simi et al., 2017).

QAnon content seems to work in a similar way, as while no one knows who “Q” is exactly and many people may join QAnon without necessarily being targeted by a “recruiter” for the movement, QAnon propaganda has been utilized in the narratives of other forms of alt-right extremism (and even by the Trump Administration) in order to fortify us-versus-them mentalities for their own agendas (Bigea, 2018)(Martineau, 2018)(“QAnon”, n.d.). Then once someone falls into the Qult, they very much do appear to be engulfed into a dependency on the content that overrides their previous priorities much like other addiction-patterns (Carrier, 2021). For example, despite the devastating losses of former interests and aspirations, careers, and loved ones due to the extremities of the “Q believer” identity, QAnon content for many became the only thing many QAnoners would to dedicate their time to even if it cost their jobs, loved-ones, and livelihoods (Carrier, 2021). Understanding how severe and life-threatening such forms of “addictions” can be, it can then be seriously examined what exactly social media is contributing to these “addictions” (or at the very least influential neurochemical processes) used in hate-based organizing and activity.

To this point, a study on the relationship between online information exposure and support for radical actions (such as vandalism and assault as opposed to peaceful demonstrations) found that support for radical actions was stronger when mediated by Internet addiction and depression (Tang et al., 2020). So not considering the possible influence of the content itself such as how persuasive “fake news” may be, these findings demonstrated the psychological process of addictive Internet use leading to depression leading to people supporting radical actions (Tang et al., 2020). In other words, it is not the exposure to content itself that directly will make people adopt radicalization, but it is how that exposure positively

correlates to internet addiction which results in depression that positively correlates with support for radicalism (Tang et al., 2020). Without the online addiction and depression, the study found that exposure of content itself had no relationship to support for radicalism but instead very strong correlations to support for peaceful protests (Tang et al., 2020).

Therefore, the concept of social media being a platform to share information does not seem to have any direct relationship to radicalism per se, but when you introduce the purpose of the attention economy and its addictive features to that information sharing, then the content becomes part of a dangerous process where people can become radicalized - potentially into conspiracy. Similarly, exposure to slot machines may not necessarily lead someone to become a gambling addict, but those with depression can become more susceptible to slot-machine tactics to maximize user-time, leading users to become addicted to the “high” of the dissociated “dark flow” state that grants the user a mental escape (Dixon et al., 2018). Moreover, these same vulnerabilities of feeling isolated and depressed are the same criteria that radicals target in recruitment campaigns. For example, white supremacists have been seen as targeting teens with depression or who feel like they lack a sense of belonging that they then can manipulate into fostering an identity and purpose in their radicalized community (Martineau, 2018)(Keneally, 2018)(Kamenetz, 2018)(Blout et. al, 2021). Christian Picciolini, a former neo-nazi who co-founded the peace advocacy organization Life After Hate, also explained how these vulnerability-targeting recruiting tactics not only common, but systematically enforced,

“[The recruiters] are actively looking for these kind of broken individuals who they can promise acceptance, who they can promise identity to,” Picciolini continued, “Because in real life, perhaps these people are socially awkward — they're not fitting in; they may be bullied — and they're desperately looking for something. And the ideology and the dogma are not what drive people to this extremism, it's in fact, I think, a broken search for that acceptance and that purpose and community.”(Martineau, 2018).

Poorly regulated digital spaces have created many opportunities for these radical communities to develop, which is also an important factor, as the same study that found that depression can make it more likely for individuals to participate in radical actions also found that perceived social isolation would be discouraging for radical participation (Daniels, 2019)(Tang et al.,2020). What these findings mean together is that individuals may be more

likely to participate in radical action if they experience depression, but they are not likely to act alone as feeling a sense of belonging in a larger radical community seems to be a key factor – which online platforms can provide space by offering broad access to other radicals and their reinforcing collective-identity content (Daniels, 2019)(Tang et al., 2020). Especially when considering how dangerous, hateful content can have addictive qualities in itself, all of this can add supporting context to the experiences of QAnoners who became consumed in spending all of their time in conspiracy content and behaviors after being faced with challenges to their psychological well-being onset by the pandemic and its lockdowns (Carrier, 2021). While it should be noted that QAnon can be traced back to 2017, when the pandemic extended to much of the world in early 2020 is when the conspiracy movement experienced explosive, global growth (Nauman, 2020). One former QAnoner summed up the process of joining the Qult by stating QAnon, “offers simple explanations for a complicated world and creates an online community that provides escape and even friendship” (Klepper, 2021). Considering many people fall into social media addiction originally due to the fact that they sought out social media as a means to escape depression or find group acceptance, this dangerous cycle paired with unchecked content and communities and the malicious actors within them can be devastating (Saikia et al., 2019).

Yet this unchecked content is no accident, as it has been reported numerous times that these issues are intentionally not fixed due to the ways in which social media companies profit from its engagement (“White Supremacist...”, 2020)(Kotch, 2019)(Levin, 2019)(Wong, 2021) (Tobin et al., 2017). This is because, as stated earlier, maximizing engagement is equivalent to maximizing profits because it maximizes access to users’ attention and data necessary for the surveillance capitalism model to function (Zuboff, 2019). Roger McNamee, early mentor to Mark Zuckerberg and investor in his company who later warned of Facebook’s damages in his book *Zucked*, explained this process as “growth hacking” (Harris, 2019). McNamee states, “In the world of growth hacking, users are a metric, not people”, referring to the pursuit of building up the addictive attention economy by any means necessary (Harris, 2019). So despite Facebook’s statements that it does indeed work to remove harmful content, McNamee argues this is fundamentally against their business logic explaining, “If you take out hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories, engagement with these platforms goes down – and with it their economic value” (Tucker, 2020). Consequentially, political and non-political actors alike have been observed to be utilizing Qanon-related hashtags as an established tactic for boosting engagement with their brands (

Goodwin et al., 2020). This of course then creates profit not only for themselves as individuals, but also for anyone employing them as influencers for a larger cause and/or company, and ultimately for the social media companies that profit from any and all engagement (Goodwin et al., 2020).

So in sum, this section has reviewed how contrary to Bosworth's assessment, content-based addictions can not only be legitimate, but severe and effective enough that they have been used as extremist recruitment and mobilization tools. So while social media addiction may not directly be the cause of radicalization, this section reviewed the relationship between social media addiction and depression and how these are both factors for being targeted for and influenced by radicalization. Moreover, as long as the attention economy actively preys on people's desire for a sense of community by working to addict people to online engagement - all while not considering the real dangers of some of those extremist communities and their content - the attention economy does seem to provide ideal opportunities for linking radicals and potential recruits/followers. This activity creates market opportunities for those looking to capitalize on this radical activity, which in turn allow social media companies to turn a profit from all the stimulated engagement.

Therefore, in consideration of all of the above, this section will conclude that the attention economy does appear to be an aggravating factor to QAnon and other forms of political extremism due to the ways in which it actively seeks to perpetuate both the access to radical content and spaces, and the ideal conditions for radical mobilization. This perpetuation, or "growth hacking", can thereby demonstrate a relationship between the economic imperatives driving social media platforms and Trumpist political extremism.

4.2 Choice Architectures Analysis:

Section Objective: The concern of the Choice Architecture feature is that it works to steer users to towards platform objectives, including nudging towards invasive data acquisition. This section will therefore examine what, if any, role this data nudging has in Trumpist political extremism.

One of the most popularized accounts of manipulative online choice architectures is the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal (Lev-Aretz, 2018). While both firms deny any wrongdoing, The data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica was accused of using Facebook-harvested personal data to uniquely personalize targeted advertising towards individuals to influence their decision-making (Kleinman, 2018)(Lev-Aretz, 2018). The decision-making in

question was in reference to the outcomes of the US 2016 presidential election and the UK Brexit referendum (Kleinman, 2018). Cambridge Analytica was hired by the Trump campaign for their digital campaign strategy, and the firm claimed to have up to 7,000 data points on the entire U.S. electorate approximating 240 million people (Lomas, 2019). This data was supposedly used to develop personality profiles of voters, who then received content that was tweaked in a way that the voter would most likely resonate and engage with (Hern, 2019).

Whistleblower and former Cambridge Analytic employee, Christopher Wylie, demonstrated this process by explaining how to use the idea of “jobs” (something that resonates positively with everyone across the political spectrum), into pulling in clicks from specific people, “If you’re talking to a conscientious person, you talk about the opportunity to succeed and the responsibility that a job gives you. If it’s an open person, you talk about the opportunity to grow as a person. Talk to a neurotic person, and you emphasize the security that it gives to my family.” (Hern, 2018). These qualities were based on the data from the personality tests Facebook users completed, and Wylie explained that when paying attention to these qualities, “... one of the things that we found was that actually when you unpack what is a job for different people, different people engage with constructs with different motivations and value sets that are interrelated with their dispositions.” (Hern, 2018). In other words, the idea was that the same content could be manipulated into emotional connections with users who would then have curated impressions of a candidate (Hern, 2018). These personally manufactured impressions would then be reflective of the user, and not necessarily the candidate themselves (Hern, 2018).

These qualities Cambridge Analytica used to target individuals was derived from personality quizzes on Facebook that followed the Ocean Model (Each category’s question indicates what exactly is trying to be measured)(Ian, 2017):

Openness: How open are you to new experiences?

Conscientiousness: How much of a perfectionist are you?

Extroversion: How sociable are you?

Agreeableness: How considerate and cooperative are you?

Neuroticism: Are you easily upset?

The Trump campaign used this OCEAN model following Cambridge psychologist Michal Kosinski's method for personality targeting (Ian, 2017). This targeting was more individualized than traditional demographic targeting as opposed to the traditional demographic targeting, and through a series of bots the Trump campaign would send approximately 40 - 50,000 variants of social media ads every day that continuously measured and adapted to responses to maximize engagement (likes, shares, and retweets) (Illing, 2018). Kosinski's study of his method at Stanford demonstrated, "the effectiveness of personality targeting by showing that marketers can attract up to 63% more clicks and up to 1,400 more conversions in real-life advertising campaigns on Facebook when matching products and marketing messages to consumers' personality characteristics" (Ian, 2017).

However, it is worth noting the Kosinski is quoted here studying his own method, and the full, true effects of Cambridge Analytica's personality targeting methods are still debated - with the scandal leading to numerous claims within the Trump campaign to skepticize the usefulness of Cambridge Analytica's methods to begin with (Lev-Aretz, 2018). The Trump campaign was also quick to point out that they only used Cambridge Analytica during the summer and primaries for the 2016 election and not during the general election (This distancing is somewhat misleading and will be further touched on below) (Major, 2018). Bosworth commented to this point,

"In practical terms, Cambridge Analytica is a total non-event. They were snake oil salespeople. The tools they used didn't work, and the scale they used them at wasn't meaningful. Every claim they have made about themselves is garbage. Data of the kind they had isn't that valuable to begin with and worse it degrades quickly, so much so as to be effectively useless in 12-18 months." Bosworth added to this further stating, "So was Facebook responsible for Donald Trump getting elected? I think the answer is yes, but not for the reasons anyone thinks. He didn't get elected because of Russia or misinformation or Cambridge Analytica. He got elected because he ran the single best digital ad campaign I've ever seen from any advertiser. Period." (Lecher, 2020)

Trump did invest in his digital campaign at an unprecedented rate using his digital strategy as his primary method of reaching his base, largely attributed to his election success

(Myrow, 2020)(Ian, 2017)(Kleinman, 2018). Although, while there is research to suggest a contrast to Bosworth's claims that seem to demonstrate that Cambridge Analytica's methods may indeed have been influential, this section will not be focused on the relationship between content exposure and influence (Crain et al. 2018). The Misinformation and Disinformation section further below will examine that issue further. Instead, this section will be concerned with the choice architectures for data extraction on platforms and how they make it possible for such campaigns to operate - and what that means in relation to political extremism. So while one of the biggest talking points of the Cambridge Analytica scandal was concerned with content encroaching voter agency, the foundational role of Facebook in the scandal was the design choices they made to manipulatively acquire user data ("Facebook...", 2019). Specifically, Facebook was fined for their violation of a 2011 agreement that they would have to clearly notify users and gain "express consent" in order to share their data ("Facebook...", 2019). This was violated when personality quizzes on Facebook harvested data from users without their clear consent, as well as for every person that took the quiz, the quiz also harvested data from every person on their friends list without their knowledge as well ("Facebook...", 2019)(Hern, 2018).

However, it should be reiterated that instead of the vague privacy terms within the Cambridge Analytica scandal is more than an isolated incident, but instead many social media platforms rely on such vague privacy settings and other choice architectures to allow for the mass acquisition of data to support their business model ("Deceived...", 2018). So despite some new policy updates following the scandal, Facebook has still been observed to impose privacy-intrusive default settings and use "dark patterns" to nudge users towards the least privacy-friendly options ("Deceived...", 2018). It is this nudging towards privacy-invasive options for mass data acquisition that is necessary for the surveillance capitalist model to generate profit. As stated above, this is the primary choice architecture examined in this section – specifically in the context of if it links with the scope and scale of Trumpist political extremism.

One event demonstrating such a link can be observed within the Cambridge Analytica example. As in addition to the aspect of the scandal revolving around strategically targeted ads, the data insights from those ads also served as a barometer for Trump's administration to interpret and reach its base (Illing, 2018). For example, if Cambridge Analytica reported to the Trump Campaign that a certain county in a state had spikes in resonating with anti-

immigrant rhetoric, the Trump campaign would shape Trump's travel schedule accordingly and prepare him to deliver an immigration-focused speech (Illing, 2018). By strategically using verbal and textual themes of hostility like this, Trump adapted his speech patterns with the effective intent of “provoking his audience into action, including violence” (Illing, 2018)(Valcore et al., 2020). In other words, the ad insights purchased by the Trump campaign allowed them to not only target individuals likely to resonate with hate content, but also allowed them to follow-up with those engagement insights to magnify and mobilize hate via targeted rallies (Illing, 2018).

The aftermath of this data-collection and response process was that these counties experienced consistent spikes of crime and hate incidents after the rallies, one study observing hate crimes up 226% (Feinberg et al., 2016). In explanation of these spikes, referred to as the “Trump Effect”, the study argued, “The presence and efforts of White Nationalist and hate groups coupled with candidate Trump’s political message served to activate attentive Whites’ sense of threat and prejudice toward racial, ethnic and religious minorities and emboldened a significant number of these persons to act on that threat.”(Feinberg et al., 2016). This coupling of hate and Trump rallies is a result of the insights that the Trump campaign had access to due to data nudging and harvesting models that upheld the rest of the process (Illing,2018). Without any kind of intervention or safeguards for how choice architectures organize to obtain personal data for whoever pays for it, the Trump campaign was able to buy the in-depth precision of user-data they needed to strategize around, and thereby reinforce, extremist groups and their interests as they evolved in real-time (Illing, 2018).

While this example is specifically in regards to an account of the Trump Campaign’s Cambridge Analytica partnership, it should also be noted that the Trump Campaign did not stray away from similar data analytic strategies at the end of their partnership despite statements made to disregard the firm (Ian, 2018). Instead, the Trump Campaign switched to other more extensive data vendors, including building their own database called Project Alamo (Major,2018)(Ian,2017). Much of the vast quantities of user data from other vendors also included certified marketing partners of Facebook, such as Experian PLC, Datalogix, Epsilon, and the Acxiom Corporation for similar practices (Ian, 2017). So while the “snake oil” tools of data-targeting, as Bosworth calls them, used in Cambridge Analytica have been criticized, it is important to recognize the deployment of those same tactics elsewhere. For instance they can be observed in the “Determining User Personality Characteristics from

Social Networking System Communications and Characteristics” 2012 patent by Facebook, which states, “Stored personality characteristics may be used as targeting criteria for advertisers ... to increase the likelihood that the user ... positively interacts with a selected advertisement” (“US...”, 2018). Distancing from the Cambridge Analytica firm can then be somewhat misleading to the Trump campaign’s tactics when Facebook data vendors and tools such as Custom Audiences, Audience Targeting Options, Lookalike Audiences, and Brand Lift allowed for a continuation of highly specific campaign targeting (Ian, 2017). This seems to challenge Bosworth’s notion that the campaign's success was independent of similar data-nudging and targeting methods.

Long past the Cambridge Analytica partnership, the Trump 2020 Campaign led by Brad Parscale explained his strategy, “The campaign is all about data collection...If we touch you digitally, we want to know who you are and how you think and get you into our databases so that we can model off it and relearn and understand what’s happening” (Smith, 2020). Another example of how data nudging intersected with extremism can be examined during Parscale’s led “Trump Army” campaign. This campaign, as well as the 2020 Trump campaign narrative as a whole, was dominated by militarized rhetoric embodied by multiple Trumpist extremist groups, who notably were integral to the promotion of the “Trump Army” recruitment process (Maly, 2020) (Cohen, 2020). Particularly the militarized language can be seen where the Trump Army campaign actively called on people to “enlist” to “fight for president Trump” through activities including policing spaces such as “poll-watching” (Maly, 2020). On polling days, the forefront of this volunteer “army” frequently included hate groups such as the Proud Boys and Bungalow Boys intimidating (namely minority) liberal voters, which Trump's campaign would then retweet and repost footage of in a reinforcing loop for Army members against “the Liberal MOB” (Maly, 2020). This familiar process of ad targeting and follow-up response featuring content from extremist groups exacerbated an online and physical presence of violence for voter deterrence (Maly, 2020)(Hughes, 2020). This cycle has been observed as characteristic of the Trump strategy:

“Previous Republican presidents dominated and invested in their party for the explicit purpose of building a new majority in American politics. Reaching out to new demographic groups and trying to persuade them to join the party was integral to this project. Trump, in contrast, has (thus far) predominantly pursued a base-mobilization strategy. Rather than fan out horizontally in search of new groups to join the party

coalition, Trump’s strategy drills down vertically to penetrate and deepen his base. Instead of trying to diversify the GOP and extend its reach, his strategy aims to swell the number of like-minded supporters who are active in electoral and party politics (while suppressing, demobilizing, and delegitimizing the opposition party). By setting into motion a mutually reinforcing cycle of party domination and base mobilization, and amplifying its effects through organizational investment, Trump has turned his party into a formidable vehicle for advancing his personal purposes and augmenting his power – while raising troubling questions about the stability of American democracy.”(Galvin, 2020)

However, this vertical strategy of targeting and reinforcing is not entirely new, with an example being the white-supremacy smear campaign to demonize Black people and suppress their votes leading up to the 1898 Wilmington Massacre (Tyson, 2005). Leading up to the Massacre, Democrats in North Carolina purchased white-supremacist propaganda ads and followed up in those areas with in-person events, recruiting “Riders” to take any violent action against Blacks attempting to vote on election day (Tyson, 2005). These newspapers have been largely accredited as enabling the massacre due to how they worked with Democrats as primitive data-collection tools for gauging the sensibilities of white readers and responding by weaponizing those matters with a mix of fact and fiction to effectively mobilize their fear into violence (Tyson, 2005). This campaign that also took a vertical strategy, can demonstrate how on a smaller, low-tech level, campaigns and their channels have an inseparable relationship (Tyson, 2005).

However, in present times, the data-nudging of social media platforms allowed for the Trump campaign’s data barometer to have real-time surveillance capabilities (Illing, 2018). This undoubtedly allows for this eerily similar strategy to have an exponentially deeper scope and scale than what was possible for the data channels of the 1890’s to have accomplished (Tyson, 2005). Trump surveillance examples include geo-targeting individuals who regularly attend church to reach other lookalike demographics in their congregation, or sending specific incentivizing/disincentivizing content to users when they are identified to be near polling stations (Woolley, 2020). All of which is possible if you simply open an app while forgetting to disable default app permissions like Bluetooth or location tracking permissions (Woolley, 2020). As well as “forgetting” may not necessarily be the problem, as many people depend on such permissions for daily activities – for example using location permissions for getting

directions to polling booths. In such cases, data collection becomes practically unavoidable. Moreover, it is not just politicians dogwhistling to extremists that can pay for these detailed insights and intimate access granted by mass data acquisition, but also political extremists themselves (Kotch, 2019).

Trumpist extremist groups have also paid Facebook to run their own political and social advertisement campaigns, in what was estimated to be a 1.6 million dollar revenue from mid-2018 to late-2019 by just 38 tracked hate groups (as identified by SPLC)(Kotch, 2019). With crowdfunding or crowdsourcing being the most significant new type of funding for these groups along with e-commerce, online donations, and cryptocurrencies options, targeted campaigns to redirect users towards their online revenue sources are also a critical part of the apparatus for these groups to financially sustain themselves (“Funding...”, 2017). As well as other non-directly-related companies have been able to profit from targeting Trumpist demographics, such as Facebook compounding gun and gun accessories ads next to election-misinformation and White house insurrection content (Rodgers et al., 2021). Advertisers have also been cited to be able to target hate-demographics very specifically, such as groups interested in ““Jew hater,” “How to burn jews,” or, “History of ‘why jews ruin the world.’” on Facebook and “transphobic”,”white supremacists” and “anti-gay” on Twitter (Tobin, 2017)(Tidy, 2020).

So in consideration of all of the above, it may be difficult to see how manipulative data acquisition can relate to political extremism. However, reaching out to, reinforcing, and amplifying political extremism has been demonstrated to be a successful vertical campaign strategy of targeting and reinforcement (Galvin, 2020)(Panagopoulos, 2015). This use of this strategy via social media platforms is far from an isolated Cambridge Analytica incident, and relies on the vast surveillance and targeting features the platforms have been able to provide not only to political campaigners who weaponize hate, but also the hate groups themselves, and anyone else looking to make a profit from the hate-based circumstances. Then ultimately, social media companies profit from taking payments from any and all of these “advertisers”. Moreover, as this section reviewed, these strategies are not necessarily new but could not exist at this scale and scope without actively data-nudging, or pushing users towards privacy-intrusive features. So essentially, this is not to say that data nudging creates political extremism, but it does demonstrate how political extremism can leverage off of nudged data when choice architectures are designed solely for the pursuit of profit despite who is paying

for it and for what purpose. For this reason, this section concludes that choice architectures of social media platforms have been an enabling factor in Trumpist political extremism manifesting to the degree that it has. The data-nudging for any paying “advertiser” can therefore demonstrate a relationship between the economic imperatives driving social media platforms and Trumpist political extremism.

4.3 Algorithmic Content Curation Analysis:

Section Objective: The concern of the Algorithmic Content Curation feature is that the way automated processes organize users through customized echo-chambers can result in intellectual isolation, or “filter bubbles”, that skew user’s views. This section will therefore examine what, if any, role these automated organizational processes have in Trumpist-political extremism.

In the declaration of his presidential candidacy on June 16th, 2015, Donald Trump declared “We need somebody that literally will take this country and make it great again” (“Here’s...2015). The next day, Dylann Roof, self-proclaimed white supremacist who stated his intentions were to start a race war, opened fire at the historic Black church Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in downtown Charleston South Carolina killing nine people (“Deadly...”, 2015). In Roof’s manifesto he stated, I believe that even if [white people] made up only 30 percent of the population, we could take [America] back completely.” Roof concluded, “Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.” (Hersher, 2017).

While Roof’s crimes may not have had any direct association to Donald Trump himself, his manifesto has frequently been compared to Trump’s rhetoric and is rooted in the same ethnonationalistic ideologies of Trump’s extremist base who romanticize a return to the U.S’s even less equal past (Hersher, 2017)(Levits, 2018)(Graham,2020)(Kytile et al., 2016). Roof’s manifesto and testimony have also emphasized the role he perceived the internet in having in his ideologies and crimes. In his manifesto he wrote:

“The event that truly awakened me was the Trayvon Martin [Black 17-year old murdered by (now former) police officer George Zimmerman in 2012] case. I kept hearing and seeing his name, and eventually I decided to look him up. I read the Wikipedia article and right away I was unable to understand what the big deal was. It

was obvious that Zimmerman was in the right. But more importantly this prompted me to type in the words “black on White crime” into Google, and I have never been the same since that day. The first website I came to was the Council of Conservative Citizens [White supremacist organization]. There were pages upon pages of these brutal black on White murders. I was in disbelief. At this moment I realized that something was very wrong. How could the news be blowing up the Trayvon Martin case while hundreds of these black on White murders got ignored?.” (Hersher, 2017)

Roof’s starkly incorrect assessment of systematic racism in the United States can demonstrate how algorithmic content curation can work through confirmation bias. As stated in the literature review, algorithms are the automated processes that organize information based on factors like the user’s former behaviors and presumed preferences, with the intention of showing the user information they will find most relevant. Therefore what happened when Roof input “black on White crime” (a common yet gravely misinformed counter-argument to the well-established presence of police brutality against people of color) into Google, algorithms brought him to “relevant” content that mirrored the same dialogue with those particular aims (Hersher, 2017)(Daniels, 2018). This led him to the Council of Conservative Citizens, and so on deeper into an interlinked network of information that reinforces the originally inputted content (Daniels, 2018). This confirmation bias process is then said to create what was earlier explained as “filter bubbles”, which refer to the intellectual isolation people experience when they fall into echo-chambers that make it nearly impossible to be challenged with opposing views, and in Roof’s case - empirical facts (Daniels, 2018).

However, “filter bubble” logic has been challenged, including by Bosworth who stated,

“The focus on filter bubbles causes people to miss the real disaster which is polarization. What happens when you see 26% more content from people you don’t agree with? Does it help you empathize with them as everyone has been suggesting? Nope. It makes you dislike them even more. This is also easy to prove with a thought experiment: whatever your political leaning, think of a publication from the other side that you despise. When you read an article from that outlet, perhaps shared by an uncle or nephew, does it make you rethink your values? Or does it make you retreat further into the conviction of your own correctness? If you answered the former, congratulations, you are a better person than I am. Every time I read something from Breitbart I get 10% more liberal.” (Lecher, 2020)

Bosworth's quote relies on two assumptions. One assumption, again covered further in the Misinformation and Disinformation section, is that exposure to content does not necessarily mean that a person will be influenced. The other assumption is that polarization is reinforced solely through exposure to opposite views. Bosworth's logic therefore assumes that linking people to the content they want to see already is merely a reflection of their pre-existing tendencies as opposed to a process that is actively broadening social divisions. In fact, he emphasizes this reflective point elsewhere in his memo stating, "What I expect people will find is that the algorithms are primarily exposing the desires of humanity itself, for better or worse." (Lecher, 2020). However, this logic seems to miss a couple of key points.

Firstly, he is right in a way that there is a tendency for people to develop their own "filter bubbles" (Geschke et al., 2019). The echo chambers that develop the bubbles have been observed even in regards to "traditional" forms of one-to-many mass media communication structures, such as television (Geschke et al., 2019). This evidence demonstrates that this happens as people themselves have a tendency to set out to consume information that confirm their already held ideologies - separate from the medium of communication's influence (Geschke et al., 2019). This form of a filter-bubble refers to "individual filters" of individuals verifying self-views, avoiding cognitive dissonance, and boosting social identity (Geschke et al., 2019). However, while the introduction of social media platforms did not invent echo chambers, simulations have demonstrated that they add or enhance existing filtering mechanisms that increase the "polarization of society into even more distinct and less interconnected echo chambers". These filters have been referred to as "social" and "technological" filters (Geschke et al., 2019).

Social filters may also already occur without many-to-many social network structures, referring to the tendency of people to form relationships with people whom they share "sociodemographic, behavioral, and intrapersonal characteristics" (Geschke et al., 2019). Yet in social media communities, users are further able to self-categorize their communities in their spaces through "un/following" and "un/friending" other users in a way that cannot likewise be done in a physical space (Geschke et al., 2019). This creates a network structure that is even further homogenous, further isolating the width of information the network members are exposed to (Geschke et al., 2019). This "homophily tendency" has also been demonstrated to be stronger among social media users holding "conservative or more extreme views" (Geschke et al., 2019). Additionally, there is the addition of new "Technological

filters” on social media platforms, which refer directly to algorithms and how they filter spaces on a technological level (Geschke et al., 2019). Online media providers that compete for user attention, i.e. the attention economy, will consequently organize information in a way that will maximize the time users spend on their platforms resulting in a space tailored to the user and not necessarily reflective of the world as it is (Geschke et al., 2019).

So when considering the case of Dylan Roof, he may very well have already held a particular viewpoint that led him to type “black on White” crime to begin with. His assessment of the Wikipedia page and not finding Zimmerman to be at fault seems to be representative of his previously held misconceptions. However, when trying to learn more about this topic, Google’s algorithm’s objectives were not to inform him of factual information but instead of the information he was most likely going to resonate with based on his personalized input-output mechanisms (Geschke et al., 2019). It should be stated that this sorting process is important to understand because it works the same way on social media platforms, such as Facebook (Longman et al., 2018). As well as while “Google Search” itself may not be a social media platform, Google Search data does personalize searchability on its own social media platform, Youtube, which will be discussed further throughout this section (“How...”, n.d.).

So in regards to Bosworth’s claim above - yes polarization does begin with the biases of users themselves - but his logic ignores the fact that algorithms actively work to not just reflect that particular bias back at them but also develop entire spaces and communities where that and other “relatable” biases appear to exist regardless if that reflection matches reality (Geschke et al., 2019). It therefore is not solely a question as to whether or not users have the empathy to consider opposite viewpoints, but also if they have the ability to type in the same viewpoint and get the same result to consider. Which as of right now is not at all the case, as everyone’s search for “black on white” crime will vary based on their presumed preferences (Geschke et al., 2019). This custom spatial organizing of information via algorithms has also been mapped in studies of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, where the polarization was pre-existing, but became more fragmented with the introduction of social media platforms (Geschke et al., 2019).

Not only is fragmenting happening to a greater degree, but social media algorithms seem to also affect the speed of polarization (Geschke et al., 2019)(Daniels, 2018). Not only because social media in itself allows for quick information access, but because algorithms can

route users to confirmation-bias due to the immense amounts of bots and other auto-generated content that amplify content in the online space (Daniels, 2018).

Bot algorithms for example use mass amounts of information to make decisions about content generation based on maximizing human engagement (Howard et al., 2018). Usually maximizing human engagement plays to heightened emotions, sometimes referred to as “outrageous content” (Dizikes, 2018). Tendencies for bots to lean towards outrageous content can have dangerous consequences, such as in a study of the 2020 US election, where bots were found to disproportionately favor conspiracy-related hashtags (All of which seemed related to Trumpism: Qanon, “-gate”, and COVID) at higher rates than human operated accounts (Ferrara et al., 2020). Therefore, with more nodes in the network churning out conspiracy content, conspiracy content was able to spread faster and have more extensive reach than it would typically have had travelling through a nonautomated space that would have relied exclusively on humans to believe and then relay those messages (Ferrara et al., 2020)(Stella et al., 2018).

Another example of increased automated funneling has been documented regarding auto-generation of pages, specifically white supremacist pages on Facebook (“White Supremacist...”, 2020). More than half of the identified U.S. based hate groups have been identified as having active Facebook Groups despite Facebook’s policy banning them, some having been active on the platform for at least a decade (“White Supremacist ...”, 2020). The majority of white supremacist pages, measured at 64%, were identified as being auto-generated by Facebook (“White Supremacist...”,2020). Auto-generated pages can occur when Facebook users list a job in their profile that does not have an existing page. So for example, if someone types into their Facebook page that they are a “soldier” at the “Universal Aryan Brotherhood Movement” - then Facebook will create a “Universal Aryan Brotherhood Movement” organization page (“White Supremacist...”, 2020).

This process is intended so that others who work for an organization will be able to find each other and the content related to them (“White Supremacist...”, 2020). So this means after this “Aryan Brotherhood Movement” page is made, it will be suggested as an option to other Facebook users who type in a similar text for their job and/or employer, which generates further connections to the auto-generated page (“White Supremacist...”, 2020). Also if someone on Facebook searches for “Universal Aryan Brotherhood Movement” or something similar, they will find the page which may itself not be actively operated by a

hate group but can still generate engagement (sometimes gaining thousands of “likes”) (“White Supremacist...”, 2020).

Yet perhaps the primary danger of being linked to the auto-generated pages is that these pages link users to actively operated hate groups (“White Supremacist...”, 2020). These referrals happen through algorithms matching “Related Pages” suggestions onto the auto-generated page (“White Supremacist...”, 2020). However it does not only have to be referrals within the Facebook platform, as auto-generated Facebook pages can also auto-generate content to describe and reach the organizations elsewhere (“White Supremacist...”, 2020). For example, the Council of Conservative Citizens (cited in Roof’s Manifesto) Facebook page was auto-generated, but still included an autogenerated description of the group’s white supremacist affiliations and direct link to their real website (“White Supremacist...”, 2020) (Hersher, 2017). So without any input of their own, this algorithmic amplification has allowed for significant networking benefits that many hate groups have shifted towards relying on in recent years as digital organizing becomes more crucial for their mobilization (“White Supremacist...”, 2020)(“Funding...”, 2017).

Mobilization for the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville in particular has also been said to have been enhanced by Youtube’s algorithmic connecting (Daniels, 2018)(Kaiser, 2018)(Van Der Vegt et al., 2020). The 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville Virginia, the largest and most violent public assembly of white supremacists within the U.S. in decades, marked what many white supremacists saw as a significant and unifying moment for their movement (Daniels, 2018)(“Two...”, 2019). Hundreds of far-right extremists (many armed, as Virginia is an open-carry state) traveled to participate in the rally following the proposed removal of a Confederate Robert. E. Lee statue and park name change from “Lee Park” to “Emancipation Park”(“Two...”, 2019). The ensuing violence escalated to the Virginia governor declaring a state of emergency, and hours later a white supremacist purposefully drove through counter-protesters killing Heather Heyer and injuring 19 others(“Two...”, 2019).

Leading up to the event, white supremacist organizers strategized up to 3 months in advance developing propaganda to fortify a more unified identity among diverse far-right, including, not only white supremacist identifying groups, but other Trumpist militias, Christian identity, eco-terrorism, and neoconfederate clusters (Blout et al., 2021)(Kaiser, 2018)(Bigea, 2018). This propaganda was disseminated through a few key far-right Youtube

influencers, linking a wide network of filter bubbles together, which algorithms then reinforced into a more cohesive network (Blout et al., 2021)(Daniels, 2018). So despite the characteristic chants of “White Lives Matter!”, many participants stated what originally brought them to the rally was not the supremacist agenda per se but other intersecting interests they had such as “gun rights” and “freedom of speech”(Kessler, 2020)(“Two...”, 2019)(Van Der Vegt et al., 2020). However after the event, multiple studies that assessed the text of these groups found that they had a more solidified alt-right identity against the progressive groups after the rally (Van Der Vegt et al., 2020)(Bigea, 2018). The language of the progressive groups before and after were also were mapped to have a more solidified identity against the alt-right, but their information dissemination was observed to come from a much wider spectrum of source information as opposed to the alt-righters who were tending to disseminate information only from a few sources, primarily right-wing social media personas (Tien et al., 2020). White supremacists had successfully been able to connect these various networks through a few strategic nodes to create a more unified network that revolved around more centralized information sources (Tien et al., 2020). This network then continued to reinforce itself, as unlike the progressive groups following the rally, alt-right groups increased their Youtube advertising to further engage with and boost their content, furthering their vertical organizing (Van Der Vegt et al., 2020). Therefore without Youtube’s algorithms, it seems that it would not have been possible for the depth and pace of the alt-right filter bubble to have manifested in this way.

Another example of inorganically inflated engagement should also be noted in the intentional manipulation of algorithms, such as the example of the r/the_donald subreddit in 2016, right before the 2016 election (Shepherd, 2020). Not by hacking or tampering with how the sorting algorithms worked, but simply by understanding how they already worked, users and moderators of this pro-Trump subreddit thread were able to manufacture virality and dominate the dialogue on Reddit's website, the 9th largest social media website in the U.S. containing millions of other subreddits and counting, with Trump content (Shepherd, 2020). Similar manipulations of sorting algorithms have also been documented on Twitter, Facebook, Google, and YouTube (Shepherd, 2020).

Yet without any kind of manipulation – but just with how the algorithms are intentionally designed to function by social media companies – Roger McNamee further

emphasizes that they are still economically driven to polarize users due to how this feeds back into the attention economy and eases advertising, stating:

“The most important tool used by Facebook and Google to hold user attention is filter bubbles. The use of algorithms to give consumers “what they want” leads to an unending stream of posts that confirm each user’s existing beliefs. On Facebook, it’s your news feed, while on Google it’s your individually customized search results. The result is that everyone sees a different version of the internet tailored to create the illusion that everyone else agrees with them. Continuous reinforcement of existing beliefs tends to entrench those beliefs more deeply, while also making them more extreme and resistant to contrary facts. Facebook takes the concept one step further with its “groups” feature, which encourages like-minded users to congregate around shared interests or beliefs. While this ostensibly provides a benefit to users, the larger benefit goes to advertisers, who can target audiences even more effectively.”
(Longman et al., 2018)

Therefore when reviewing the above, this section has demonstrated how algorithms can skew worldviews via confirmation-bias, as well as the number of ways in which non-factual, radicalized spaces can be created and evolve when algorithms only organize spaces exclusively for the purpose of personalized engagement-maximization. This section therefore concludes that algorithmic content curation does aggravate political extremism because it offers immense capabilities for political extremist networking, enabling the reach and reinforcement that extremists either are advertently or inadvertently benefiting (growing and profiting) from. As well as it offers financial value to social media companies both in terms of engagement and effectively connecting advertisers to target demographics. These enhanced access capabilities can thereby demonstrate a relationship between the economic imperatives driving social media platforms and Trumpist political extremism.

4.4 Misinformation and Disinformation:

Section Objective: The concern of the Misinformation and Disinformation feature is that false content can be convincing, influencing people to believe in and act on harmful propaganda, systematic lies, and conspiracy theories. This section therefore will examine what, if any, role content exposure can have in Trumpist political extremism. In so doing, the

focus will be on false content, but the section will also broadly examine the ability of content exposure to influence in general.

The COVID-19 pandemic has a multitude of severe, far-reaching consequences, mixed influences on political extremism among them. As stated by INTERPOL Secretary General Jürgen Stock, “Terrorists – like all criminals – have sought to profit from COVID-19, to make money, strengthen their base and to fuel division.” (“INTERPOL...”, 2020) Jihadists for example, have portrayed the virus to be a “divine punishment” against disbelievers in order to rally their base through fear (Marone, 2021). As well as jihadist groups have also used the opportunity to create propaganda to demonize their enemies, such as spreading the conspiracy that the West manufactured COVID-19 as a bioweapon (Marone, 2021). Disinformation in the west has similarly spread as extremists use the pandemic as an opportunity to exploit divisions (Marone, 2021).

Within the United States, there have been reported spikes of anti-Asian hate crimes, cyberattacks (largely towards hospitals), and a surge of protests that have broken out into violence (Marone, 2021). Part of the protest surge during COVID-19 is not only far-right groups protesting lock-downs, but also Black Lives Matter protests against racism and police brutality (Bates, 2020). These protests were particularly spurred by the police shootings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, though the protests also were also in retaliation against the many other murders of Black Americans that preceded and followed them. The Black Lives Matter movement is also intertwined within COVID-19 matters within the United States due to the pandemic's financial and healthcare system fallouts highlighting systematic challenges for people of color in the United States (Gaudiano, n.d.)(Jones, 2020). To be clear, the Black Lives Matter movement is a movement for equality and therefore not a political extremist movement, but political extremist groups on the far-left and far-right have been present during the time of peacefully-intended demonstrations. However, while far-left extremism made up 20% of 2020's political extremist attacks in the United States, right-wing extremism made up 67% of all those attacks and were often white supremacist in nature, using vehicles, explosives, and firearms to target individuals due to their racial, ethnic, religious, or political makeup (Jones, 2020). The Center For Strategic and International Studies identified that roughly 18% of violent far-right terrorist attacks and plots from January to August 2020 were on individuals based on these factors, with 50% being demonstrators predominantly from the Black Lives Matter movement (Jones, 2020). These attacks largely reflect those of Sphere 1

Trumpist Groups, while another significant 18% reflected Sphere 2 Trumpist Groups with attacks aimed at government, military, and police specifically (Jones, 2020). This 18%, more associated under Sphere 2, not only encompasses anti-establishment attacks protesting lockdowns, but also the anti-vaxxer groups with more anti-science, and conspiracy motives and followings (Jones, 2020). These groups also contributed to violence during this time, including direct attacks on government officials in addition to healthcare officials and others carrying out COVID regulations (Jones, 2020).

As this section will explore, a great deal of the above circumstances of violence and extremism has been traced back not only to the lack of response and outright denial of the pandemic by the Trump Administration, but also the false rhetoric Donald Trump created and/or spread about the pandemic and its effects (Shear et al., 2020)(Shalvey, 2021)(Hatcher, 2020). One notable example was the fake disinfectant “protective measure” Donald Trump stated at a press conference on April 23rd 2020 (“Coronavirus:...”, 2020). In his statement, he dangerously suggested that injecting disinfectant may help treat COVID-19 (“Coronavirus:...”, 2020). Following his statement, various chemical companies and government officials (including those from Trump’s own administration) scrambled to announce the lethal implications while a wave of phone calls came into Emergency poison control hotlines across the country (“Coronavirus:...”, 2020). Multiple states reportedly received hundreds of calls regarding the injection and/or ingestion of cleaning products and sanitizers (“Coronavirus:...”, 2020). While exact numbers are unknown, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a report a few months later on August 5th stating that at least 4 people had died and 12 were hospitalized after drinking hand sanitizers, with complications such as seizures and losing vision (Yip, 2020). Moreover, dozens of other deaths and hospitalization have been reported for other fake remedies such as consuming chloroquine phosphate (a common aquarium cleaner), bleach, Lysol disinfectant, Pinesol cleaner, and more (“Georgia, 2020)(Shepherd, 2020)(Glatter, 2020). Trump later called his statement a “sarcastic” prank posed to reporters “just to see what would happen”, and his press secretary Kayleigh McEnany further countered that the media were the ones who “irresponsibly” took Trump’s comments out of context (Cathey, 2020).

However, what Trump and his supporters tried to downplay as a “joke” or on-the-spot musing was actually a pre-existing conspiracy that had been circulating on social media, as The American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene also reported that at least 800

people globally had died from similar methanol or alcohol-based fake “cures” with at least 5,800 hospitalized before Trump even had made his statement (Cathey, 2020)(Islam et al., 2020). Moreover, in addition to Donald Trump’s anti-vaxxer views and statements surrounding COVID-19, he also has a long-standing track-record of spreading other (false) anti-vaxxer views including linking measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccinations to autism diagnoses (Einbinder, 2019). Yet while the first president in modern history to support anti-vaxxer and other related conspiracy health claims can clearly be demonstrated to be providing a platform for such misinformation, was that really all it took to make people poison themselves? In other words, the correlation between Trump’s irresponsible rhetoric and COVID-related violence and/or extremism can be made, but it still circles to the same plausible deniability of causation between content exposure and true influence.

The previous section about algorithmic content curation referred to Bosworth’s skepticism on this relationship. The full quote can be found above as it was also referred to in the algorithmic content curation section, but the sum of his point is essentially as follows: “What happens when you see...content from people you don’t agree with?... It makes you dislike them even more.” (Lecher, 2020). Bosworth’s skepticism, along with others like him, tend to dismiss the possibility that misinformation has any true capacity to change the views of the general population . This touches again on a statement granted in the introduction, where Cory Doctorow stated that the threat of the surveillance economy is not mind control through the ability to influence people through targeted content exposure, giving the example that ads for a cheerleader outfit is only going to interest people who already had an interest in cheerleading to begin with (“New...”, 2020).

The problem with this logic assumes that just because someone has a disposition to consuming certain content, that the exposure has no real, significant effect. At the very least, this dismisses the possibility that the exposure can make a measurable difference among groups with dispositions.

Although, an analysis of vaccine concerns across Trump voters and non-Trump voters was able to examine this possibility. To which it found that along the lines of Bosworth’s assumptions, non-Trump voters experienced no measurable difference in their concerns after exposure to Trump’s negative vaccine tweets (Hornsey et al., 2020). Yet when Trump-voters who already were “prone to anti-vaccination” attitudes were exposed to the tweets, their concerns increased after exposure to the negative tweets (Hornsey et al., 2020). In other

words, Trump's tweets were demonstrated to have measurably exacerbated the group's propensities (Hornsey et al., 2020).

Moreover, measuring the relationship between content exposure and influence on people can be further understood when you consider the method of how that content is delivered. The phenomenon of cult indoctrination has been investigated to this regard, demonstrating that people can be pushed into delusions and ever-increasing toleration of mass danger and destruction through the repetitive bombardment (Benjamin, 2020). In other words, a single exposure of content to the general population may not be enough to sway someone into recruitment, but through a consistency of themes and reinforcement of "us-versus-them" polarized mentalities and identities, such techniques have been observed to be extremely influential to everyday people hardly expected to be "susceptible" at all (Benjamin, 2020). Once these mentalities are established, a dependency is created on this false reality and identity, mirroring addiction (Benjamin, 2020). These same concepts have been brought up in the above sections, as all of the core features overlap somewhat in contributing to the conditions manifesting in Trumpism. "Bombardment" of information to manufacture addiction for example, is a signal that the attention economy is meeting its objectives in time-maximization. While social media users may not be aware of the effects of these features, Donald Trump and his administration on the other hand seem to strategize around them (Benjamin, 2020). In fact, leading cult expert Steve Hassan authored the book, "The Cult of Trump" detailing the administration's active use of indoctrination techniques to build a fanatical, devoted base in this way, explaining:

"Through his barrage of daily tweets, Trump sows confusion and distorts reality, and has ultimately called into question the foundations of national institutions. . . . "Repeat your message over and over and over again. Repetition makes the heart grow fonder and fiction, if heard frequently enough, can come to sound like fact." Trump appears to have taken this advice to heart, not just in the way he states and restates fabrications and falsehoods, but also in the way he tells, over and over again, self-serving, often inaccurate versions of his own life story-stories that blur the line between myth and reality" (Benjamin, 2020).

Hassan continues to assert how our new communication mediums have allowed for this stating:

“The 24/7 digital age has made us wired for manipulation-literally. . . . With the internet and 24/7 streaming of images and messages from anonymous, often ill-meaning sources, the opportunity for harm has greatly increased. The Russians who manipulated social media during the 2016 presidential elections clearly knew how to use hypnotic techniques and other methods of persuasion. Almost all politicians use persuasion techniques but Trump has used them in a way that is both brazen and insidious. Clearly, they have been effective—he was elected president” (Benjamin, 2020).

Not only by Trump, but Hassan also shared his expertise on how other destructive cults have used digital techniques, explaining:

“I cannot overstate the impact of the digital world on the whole area of undue influence and mind control. People no longer need to be physically isolated to be indoctrinated by destructive cults. Digital technology has provided access and a powerful set of tools for destructive groups and individuals to indoctrinate, control, and monitor believers day and night. When cult members go home for family visits, they are often receiving multiple texts every hour to keep them connected and faithful.” (Benjamin, 2020).

Trump’s bombardment tactics have been compared to cult indoctrination by a multitude of other scholars, citing his consistency of daily tweets using extensive repetition, catchy themes and nicknames, all to “denigrate anyone who opposes him or who he sees as a threat” reinforcing us-versus-them polarization. In response, multiple accounts of the cultic behaviors and characteristics of his base have been recorded, including.:

“Followers report that they were taught the world is a dangerous place much more strenuously than most people are taught. . . .Accordingly, Donald Trump was well-placed to gain the support of authoritarian followers as he was a large and seemingly fearless, powerful man. All he had to do was say he saw the dangers the followers felt and he would fight to protect them. . . . Their brains shut down rather than accept anything that challenges what they have internalized. . . . Trump tells them what they want to hear— that they’re right—and in return they accept everything that he and those who repeat his messaging tell them”

“Like other authoritarian cultural movements Trumpism promises a national-cultural transformation, psychological uplift, group superiority, personal salvation, and a sense of membership and belonging in an exclusive community for its members and other supporters. . . . Like any cult leader, Trump demands complete loyalty and creates an alternate reality for his followers. His followers exhibit a deep, mindless, uncritical, loyal, emotional attachment to him. His pronouncements generate hostility toward anyone Trump brands “the enemy,” and he consistently provokes his supporters toward violence.”

“It is not unusual to hear that the base of Trump supporters displays cult-like activity in their adoring dedication to Trump, as they continue to ignore the enormous and continuous amount of ethically and legally disturbing accounts of Trump’s behavior. This includes Trump’s alleged numerous sexual affairs punctuated by his paying off a porn star and Playboy centerfold to keep them silent, ripping immigrant children from their parents and using teargas against immigrant babies, believing Putin over the United States Intelligence reports in regard to Russia tampering with our election, and the list goes on and on”.

“He used all the influence techniques in his arsenal—inflaming resentments and anger, drumming up fear, exaggerating his accomplishments, insulting and demonizing the “other.”. . . . White supremacist and nationalistic thinking has existed for centuries in the United States but Trump’s words and deeds—his America First sloganeering; his apparent excusing of, or failure to acknowledge, the violence; his racist remarks; his own bullying—have given it a legitimacy that hadn’t existed before. . . . Trump would both soothe and incite his audience’s fears with his repetition of the word “siege”—it’s all part of his influence formula: repetition, us versus them, and fear-mongering.” (Benjamin, 2020).

Due to this extreme behavior towards Trump, the “disinfectant” scandal along with other COVID-related actions and behaviors violating guidance of the nation’s Center for Disease Control - including not wearing masks and abiding other regulations, protesting regulations, and becoming violent towards those abiding and enforcing regulations - have all been connected Trump’s tactics (Benjamin, 2020). This can perhaps explain why the Anti-lockdown protesters, the prevalence of whom is unparalleled to other countries, are not only about the lockdowns per-se, but instead encompass a wide collection of Trumpist ideologies,

from abortion to immigration - with particular embodiment against the coinciding “Black Lives Matter” movement (Mudde, 2020). Against broadly supported scientific backing, Trump has seemingly established a collective identity among his deep base of followers that believe in an alternate-truth reality where matters of equality and science contradict loyalty to Trump (Mudde, 2020).

Hassan describes Trump’s intentional, systematic use of social media to gaslight and confuse people with false information to manufacture just this, explaining:

“Changing consists of creating a new personal identity—a new set of behaviors, thoughts, and emotions—often through the use of role models. Indoctrination of this new identity takes place both formally—through meetings, seminars, and rituals (or at Trump rallies)--and informally—by spending time with members, recruiting, studying, and self-indoctrination through the internet (watching Trump videos, communicating on social media with Trump supporters)” (Benjamin, 2020)

Trump methods were then also demonstrated to be amplified by targeted ads from Russian interference, who’s Russian military hackers were instructed to take the opportunity to create divisions in the United States by deploying a vast army of “bot” accounts that mass generated COVID-19 conspiracies which happened to resemble and thereby amplify Trump’s same rhetoric (Benjamin, 2020). In fact, one study showed that nearly half of the online voices advocating for the “reopening of America” were actually bot accounts (Benjamin, 2020). It noted that among these accounts, those that tweeted the most (bombarding users at more frequent rates) happened to be the ones that were the most influential (Benjamin, 2020).

These methods are not unique to Trump and Trumpism however, as a similar phenomenon was also demonstrated with Hilary Clinton’s bot accounts. In that particular study, Clinton had less accounts than Trump by leading up to the 2016 election, but were considerably more influential than his because the bots deployed for her campaign were churning out content at substantially higher rates (Hjouji, 2018). The study then made the conclusion that the higher the posting-rate of bots - the more influential they were observed to be (the scope of the study was for Twitter, but also explicitly notes how this may well be applicable to bots on other platforms (Hjouji, 2018).

Notably this conclusion can have significant implications for the travel of false news in general, as due to the ability for bot accounts to produce more content than human accounts, bot accounts were reported within the study to be disproportionately more influential (Hjouji, 2018). This was explained to be exacerbated by how people have been proven to organize themselves within online spaces in accordance to where other people are, meaning the accounts that posted more frequently tended to have the highest follower counts (Hjouji, 2018)(Howard et al., 2018). This phenomenon has therefore also been actively strategized around by human actors with set objectives and resources for bot deployment, including politicians who have paid for bots to purposely redirect users to their human-operated accounts to increase their human-account following and subsequent reach (Howard et al., 2018).

Furthermore, militaries, state-contracted firms, and elected officials have also all been identified as using political bots to spread mass amounts of content on users' newsfeeds, with the intention being to influence public opinion via flooding their online spaces with mass amounts of political propaganda (Howard et al., 2018). Bots like this that spread misinformation can therefore make a phenomenon appear to be more prevalent than it actually may be in the real world (Ferrara et al., 2020). As mentioned earlier, Qanon followers for example tend to have an inflated presence online (Ferrara, 2020). Yet this online large presence of radical content is so large that it becomes a de facto public conversation (Ferrara, 2020).

This opportunity has not been lost on hate groups, who have observed social media platforms' many-to-many gatekeeper-less network structure as a way to push the "Overton window" (Daniels, 2018). White supremacists refer to the "pushing the overton window" as shifting the range of the acceptable ideas to discuss amongst "normies", or non-radicalized individuals (Daniels, 2018). Essentially, they found that while traditional sources of media had too many gate-keepers for them to push their false, fanatical agendas, that they could much more easily escalate their narrative onto social media platforms until it intensified to a degree that traditional sources would address it (Daniels, 2018). So what previously were conversations that happened behind closed doors, with the help of social media the white supremacist agenda became common, daily discourse as traditional media began to legitimize white supremacy as a relevant topic, rendering frequent reporting due to the amount of content that had entered the general population's lives (Daniels, 2018). Jarod Tayler,

publisher of White nationalist site American Renaissance, comments on this shift being evident in the manifestation of the Unite the Right rally (which he also helped organize) stemming from him and others “making a racket” as part of an “ascendant social movement” (Daniels, 2018). Another self-identified white nationalist, @JaredTSwift tweeted further that, “In a sense, we’ve managed to push white nationalism into a very mainstream position...we’ve pushed the Overton window”, continuing, “People have adopted our rhetoric, sometimes without even realizing it. We’re setting up for a massive cultural shift” (Daniels, 2018).

Adopting this cultural shift “without even realizing it” refers to how white nationalists have been able to interject their agenda into other symbols and ideas that will then accelerate and amplify algorithms for their own agenda (Daniels, 2018). For example the once completely irrelevant to extremism cartoon character “Pepe the Frog” came to be a symbol of hate (Daniels, 2018). White supremacists decided to make a link between this cartoon and white supremacy, mixing the image in with Nazi propaganda on image-based social media platform 4chan (Daniels, 2018). Eventually a journalist tweeted an obvious connection with the repetitive usage of the image on Twitter, which was followed by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) adding it to their database of online hate symbols, which then proceeded by Hilary Clinton mentioning the frog in a public speech (Daniels, 2018). To supremacists, the Pepe example was an experiment to see if “normies” could be pushed to discuss a racist frog, and they were successful with the large attention payoff their ideas, which they channeled through the frog, got as a result (Daniels, 2018). In a report discussing these “Overton window” strategies, the thinking among white supremacists was explained as “if today we can get “normies” talking about Pepe the Frog, then tomorrow we can get them to ask the other questions on our agenda: “Are Jews people?” or “What about black on white crime?”” (Daniels, 2018). @JaredTSwift tweeted to this point writing, “In a sense, we’ve managed to push white nationalism into a very mainstream position,” (Daniels, 2018). This mainstream position is then amplified not only when white-supremacist manufactured content can seep into gate-kept media, but also exponentially so when government officials and other significant figures and groups holding positions of power push their content, such as Trump’s retweet of content that included #whitegenocide hashtags after the deadly Unite the Right rally (Daniels, 2018).

Whether or not people will seamlessly shift from discussing Pepe to @JaredTSwift's other topics can be debated. Yet what is so profound about this phenomenon is *just because of the discussion itself*, Pepe and all the content he was algorithmically associated became amplified even if the people were discussing their disgust with the association (Daniels, 2018). The Pepe incident demonstrates how the lack of regulation of misinformation even in a small social media platform can spiral tremendously across into other media network structures and online/physical spaces. Understanding this, it becomes clear that the travel of misinformation and its web of associated content can be significant despite to what degree that content is actually believable to begin with. As despite how people feel about the content, through these processes extremist ideologies nonetheless end up on platforms as inescapable topics in day-to-day lives of U.S. Americans, instead of being stuck within the "fringe" spaces they more traditionally were gate-kept to (Daniels, 2018). So instead of asking if malicious and/or false news are "influential" on the basis that they are believable or relatable to the general public, it is also important to question if they can be influential just in terms of inorganically shaping what the talking points of public engagement are as a whole.

So as mentioned earlier, it is well-established already that misinformation is an intentional tool of malicious actors to attempt to manipulate, as well as it was already stated that "outrageous" content can utilize emotion to spread said content faster and further (Dizikes, 2018). Yet while this section noted that the the intent and travel have been somewhat observed, whether or not measurable influence can come about from these intentions to manipulate has been continually skepticized arguing that most people will be generally unaffected. This skepticism thereby largely dismissed misinformation and disinformation as a legitimate concern for exacerbating extremism. Yet this section has seemingly demonstrated logical fallacies in the downplaying of the misinformation threat by questioning measurable influence with "who" is being influenced, "how" is the influence delivered, and "what" exactly is the "influence" which seem to all paint a bigger picture of how misinformation can have severe, expansive consequences regardless of our individual predispositions and cyber-literacy. Therefore, against Bosworth's pre-Covid statement that misinformation and disinformation on Facebook "[is] an area where we have made dramatic progress and [I] don't expect it to be a major issue for 2020.", this section concludes that the misinformation and disinformation feature aggravates Trumpist political extremism for the way it persists in having an active role in shaping both personal and societal conversations and experiences. Understanding how misinformation and disinformation effectively

perpetuate engagement in this way, this can demonstrate a relationship between the economic imperatives driving social media platforms and Trumpist political extremism.

Part 5: Conclusion

The degree to which social media is conceptualized as posing a potential threat(s) is often skepticized, but the structures for how people communicate and access information are fundamental parts of how societies operate. Therefore, in order to maintain safe societies, it is crucial to be able to ensure that those structures are operating safely as well. Yet presently social media companies are operating with little to no safeguards in place to ensure a healthy relationship with the societies they are integrated with. Instead, social media companies have often placed responsibility for their platforms onto the users themselves, portraying the platforms as merely reflective of the world as it is. As well as how those platforms expand and develop has been portrayed as an inevitable part of technological advancement that adapts in accordance to what users want. However, as this thesis has reviewed, this allocation of responsibility wrongly discounts the ways in which social media has its own active role in shaping global engagement and environments - which happens in accordance to the deliberate choices that companies make in pursuit of building profitable businesses. Given the rising concerns of domestic terrorism in the United States and how social media is becoming more characteristic to this extremism, an understanding of these business models and their capacities is critical to understanding the nature of extremist threats and assessing adequate responses.

Therefore, the intent of this thesis was to examine the relationship of Surveillance Capitalism and political extremism, specifically by looking at what, if any, role social media has played in recent cases of Trumpist-based political extremism. It did this by examining each of the four core influential features of digital technologies, as identified by an EU report on the influence of online technologies on political behavior and decision-making, and what, if any, role they had in the context of Trumpist political extremism events and activities. This role was determined by assessing what evidence exists that can demonstrate if social media had any enabling and/or aggravating roles in the circumstances, or alternatively is the more skeptic view of the relationship is more appropriate. However, if such a role was found, this would instead demonstrate a relationship between the economic imperatives driving social

media platforms and Trumpist political extremism – providing a case for a relationship between surveillance capitalism and political extremism.

The first feature that was assessed was the Attention Economy, the primary concern of which is that it works to addict users to maximize the time they spend on their device. Addictive features on social media platforms have been skepticized as not capable of forming severe addictions, but this section demonstrated that despite not being consumable substances, content-based addictions can not only be severe but they are actively used by extremists as tools for recruitment and mobilization. This is not to say that everyone who has social media addiction will become politically radicalized, but the section reviewed how the attention economy works to create ideal conditions for people be targeted for and influenced by extremism. This activity creates market opportunities for those looking to capitalize on this radical activity, which in turn allow social media companies to turn a profit from all the stimulated engagement and use it for “growth hacking”. Therefore, this section concluded that the attention economy aggravated Trumpist political extremism because it did not just uphold access to radical content, spaces, and the ideal conditions for radical mobilization - but that it actively perpetuated them in way that created financial value for social media companies.

The second assessment was of the Choice Architecture feature, the primary concern of which is that it could work to steer users towards platform objectives including nudging towards invasive data acquisition. This section reviewed vertical strategies that involve effective targeting and reinforcement methods that can amplify political extremism. While strategies are not new, it was explained how social media platforms have offered new scale and scope capacities for these strategies to be deployed. Yet the only criteria social media companies have set for who can have such capacities is whether or not the buyer can afford it. Therefore, this section concluded that Choice Architectures have enabled Trumpist political extremism to manifest to the degree that it has – as data-nudging for *any* advertiser despite their motivations thus maximizes revenue opportunities for social media companies.

The third feature that was assessed was Algorithmic Content Curation. The primary concern of this feature is the way automated processes organize users through customized echo-chambers, and how this can result in intellectual isolation, or “filter bubbles”, that skew user’s views. This section then demonstrated how algorithms can indeed skew worldviews via confirmation-bias. Furthermore, it covered the number of ways in which non-factual, radicalized spaces can be created and evolve when algorithms only organize spaces

exclusively for the purpose of personalized engagement-maximization without any regard for what is being engaged with. The section therefore concluded that algorithmic content curation does aggravate political extremism because it offers immense capabilities for political extremist networking, enabling the reach and reinforcement that extremists either are advertently or inadvertently benefiting (growing and profiting) from. This increased access capacity was economically valuable to social media companies for the ways it eased engagement and connections of advertisers to targeted demographics.

The fourth and last feature that was assessed was the Misinformation and Disinformation feature. The primary concern of this feature is that false content can be convincing, influencing people to believe in and act on harmful propaganda, systematic lies, and conspiracy theories. However, in assessing this concern it also had to broadly examine the ability of content exposure to influence users in general. This section demonstrated that despite skepticism that the general public likely cannot be easily swayed by content, there are logical fallacies in downplaying misinformation and disinformation as a threat because “who”, “how”, and “what”. In other words, beliefs of groups with propensities can still be measurably exacerbated, the frequency of exposure can make content more convincing to any group, and “believing” the content is not necessary for it to still influence a person’s day to day life. Therefore, this section concluded that the misinformation and disinformation feature aggravates Trumpist political extremism for the way in which it persistently shapes both personal and societal conversations and experiences. So again, despite false news perhaps not always being generally “believable”, it nonetheless *substantially* perpetuates engagement that creates revenue for social media companies.

So in consideration to how all of these features were examined to have aggravating and/or enabling roles in how Trumpist political extremism has developed and operated, this would indicate that social media platforms are significantly interconnected to and consequentially responsible for their substantial role in the current state of political extremism within the United States. By viewing this connection through how these features were intentionally designed by social media companies to maximize profits, this reveals an intimate relationship between the manifestations of political extremism and the system of surveillance capitalism.

In conclusion, social media companies are first and foremost companies. These companies have successfully designed their platforms to meet financial objectives that

currently do not coincide with - and sometimes outright contradict - conditions necessary for safe and equal societies. If governments are to ensure that these conditions are met for their societies, they must take necessary action to ensure that these basic human rights are more prioritized than the right of any company to pursue profit.

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