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BEMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH: PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

In 1985, Neil Postman published *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a McLuhan-inspired critique of the transformation of public discourse from 19th-century print culture, with its depth of reading, thought and debate, to the contemporary era of television 'show business'. Developments since then, most notably the digital revolution, allow us to update Postman's thesis, to explore the digital age that succeeds the electric broadcast era and its contemporary transformation of culture and politics. This paper argues that digital personalisation has exploded the mass-media world, bursting its mainstream bubble into a foam of individual life-worlds, empowering everyone as the producer of their own realities. Arguing that the key thinker of this era is Philip K. Dick (with his exploration of fictive, split, and personal realities), the paper explores the cultural impact of this new post-truth era of 'me-dia' realities and the 'bemusement' it produces.

Keywords: Postman, McLuhan, Baudrillard, reality, hyporeality, social-media, Dick

> What about the world of a schizophrenic? Maybe it's as real as our world. Maybe we cannot say that we are in touch with reality and he is not, but should instead say, his reality is so different from ours that he can't explain his to us, and we can't explain ours to him. The problem, then, is that if subjective worlds are experienced too differently, there occurs a breakdown in communication […] and there is the real illness.
>
> *Philip K. Dick*

THE AGE OF AMUSEMENT

In 1985 media theorist Neil Postman published *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, a McLuhan-inspired critique of the transformation of 'public discourse', contrasting 19th-century print culture, with its depth of attention, reading

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and debate, with the 'show business' of the contemporary television era (Postman, 1987). Postman adopted here McLuhan's periodisation of media as moving from the Gutenbergian print era to the world of electricity and electronic media, but he added a clear critical position. Eschewing McLuhan's analytical nuance, Postman's work constitutes a polemical excoriation of the televisual age and its mode of discourse. Now, at several decades remove and with the subsequent digital transformation of the media ecology, it is worth returning to Postman's work, to reconsider its critique, to see how digital technologies have transformed media again and to ask: What is the state of public discourse in the Age of Social Media?

Following the McLuhanist dictum that 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan, 1994, p. 7), Postman's starting point is 'the forms of human communication' and how these have 'the strongest influence on what ideas we can conveniently express', and consequently on the content of our culture (1987, p. 6). As such, he says, the real impact of media is 'epistemological': in creating our knowledge of the world and 'definitions of truth' our mediations are constitutive of reality itself (1987, pp. 16–30). When, therefore, media change, so too do our ideas, expressions, culture, and reality. For Postman, the most important contemporary change was the mid-late 20th century's 'decline of the Age of Typography and the ascendency of the Age of Television' (1987, p. 8).

Postman's explanation begins with an exploration of the print epistemology of 19th-century America, tracing the rise of printing, the explosion of publications, an oral culture based on the printed word (1987, pp. 31–44) and the 'typographic mind' these produced (1987, pp. 45–64). His chapter opens with a remarkable discussion of political debates in the 1850s, and the example of one between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas in 1854 where, after Douglas had spoken for three hours, the crowd went home for dinner before voluntarily returning for Lincoln's three-hour response and Douglas's one-hour rebuttal. This was a time when political speech and 'extended oratorical performances' were common (1987, p. 46) – could you imagine an audience today enduring seven hours of talk, Postman asks (1987, p. 47). However, this was not just about attention span, as the listeners would have had 'an equally extraordinary capacity to comprehend lengthy and complex sentences aurally' as well as a grasp of the issues and a knowledge of historical events and political matters (1987, p. 47).

These were speeches with 'serious, logically-ordered content' requiring of all participants an understanding and use of critical reason (1987, pp. 51–53). As such they evidence the existence of a detached, analytical, logical, reasoning 'typographic man' (1987, pp. 58–59), whose reading was both a means of connection to the world and its 'model'. As Postman says: 'The printed page revealed the world, line by line, page by page, to be a serious coherent place, capable of management by reason and by improvement by logical and relevant criticism' (1987, p. 63). Hence his conclusion, that throughout 18th and 19th-century America one finds 'the resonances of the printed word' and 'its inextricable relationship to all forms of public expression' (1987, p. 63).

For Postman, the roots of later changes lay in the same era, with new developments in media. The electric telegraph brought instantaneity and a new, abbreviated, discontinuous, fragmented, and impersonal discourse (1987, pp. 66–72), whilst photography created a world of imagery that would become central to our experience of the real (1987, pp. 72–78). The result,

by the early 20th century, he says, is a new 'peek-a-boo world' where things appear briefly before vanishing; a world asking little of us, but which is 'endlessly entertaining' (1987, pp. 78–79). This world would be fully realized with the rise of television, 'the command centre of the new epistemology', which would completely remake our 'communications environment' (1987, pp. 79–81) such that today, Postman says, 'we have so thoroughly accepted its definitions of truth, knowledge and reality' (1987, p. 81).

The key impact of television on public discourse, Postman argues, is the transformation of culture into 'one vast arena for show business' (1987, p. 81). His argument is not that television is entertaining but 'that it has made entertainment itself the natural format for the representation of all experience' (1987, p. 89). Whatever the topic, everything is presented as entertaining, with the presumption that 'it is there for our amusement and pleasure' (1987, p. 89). Its dominance now means that it rules all discourse and 'becomes the model for how the world is properly to be staged' (1987, pp. 94–95). This is a model of 'now [...] this…': a speeded-up world of communication designed purely to grab the attention, to distract and amuse, without order, meaning, reason, connection, context, or coherence, and without the need to carry any thought or feeling on from one moment to the next (1987, pp. 101–102). Complexity, nuance, and qualification are replaced by brevity, visual stimulation, and entertainment in a new form of 'anti-communication' (1987, p. 107). The result, Postman argues, is that 'Americans are the best entertained and likely the least well-informed people in the western world' (1987, p. 108). Or rather, they suffer from 'disinformation' – not false but misleading information: 'information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing' (1987, p. 109).

Postman's primary example of how television 'pollutes public communication' (1987, p. 29) is the transformation of politics into a branch of 'show business'. Political communication, he argues, is modelled today on the form and logic of the 'television commercial', with politicians appearing as polished celebrities, presenting not arguments for rebuttal but simple imagery and 'instant therapy' and solutions (1987, pp. 133–134). With no coherence and presented at the speed of light, there is no ability to integrate information into a whole such that 'in the Age of Show Business and image politics, political discourse is emptied not only of ideological content, but of historical content as well' (1987, p. 140). George Orwell's *1984* is thus mistaken, as the past does not need to be erased by the state: Our 'seemingly benign technologies' can accomplish this 'without objection' (1987, p. 141). Instead of state-controlled information, we experience instead a 'television glut', but in a form that presents information as non-substantive, non-historical and non-contextual and as entertainment (1987, p. 144). We do not need Orwellian censorship, Postman concludes, 'when all political discourse takes the form of a jest' (1987, p. 145).

For Postman, the science-fiction dystopia that best describes this 'Age of Show Business' is not Orwell's but instead Aldous Huxley's 1932 *Brave New World*, in its prophecy that western democracies would 'dance and dream themselves into oblivion [...] narcotized by technological diversions' rather than march into it manacled (1987, p. 113). As Postman says, with the 'soma' of television, 'Big Brother does not watch us, by his choice. We watch him, by ours' (1987, p. 160). We reached 1984, Postman says, and discovered something more

dangerous than Orwell's state. Whilst we can at least see when a prison encloses us, no-one sees or takes arms against 'a sea of amusements' (1987, p. 161). We did not need Big Brother, Postman argues, as people came to love their oppression and 'to adore the technologies that undo their capacity to think' (1987, p. vii). The result of a public discourse dominated by the need for diversion, distraction, and entertainment, he concludes, is a public 'on the verge of amusing ourselves to death' (1987, p. 4).

THE DIGITAL POST-BROADCAST ERA

The Fordist world of mass-produced, narcotizing entertainment satirised by Huxley in 1932, and critiqued in practice in Adorno and Horkheimer's 1940s attack on 'the culture industry' (1997), was still recognisable for Postman in the 1980s. Though Neo-Liberal post-Fordism was beginning to create a more fragmented media ecology, the 1980s nevertheless represented the height of the 'broadcast model'. In the centuries after Gutenberg's invention of mechanical, movable-type printing, a model had developed of the mass-reproduction, mass-distribution and mass-consumption of information. By the early 20th century, this had evolved into huge structures of communication embedded in and producing messages for society: into large corporations and public organisations employing huge numbers in vast industries – print, radio, music, cinema, television – organised in a factory-style system, dedicated to crafting standardised, uniform content. This was a world of 'big media', still extant in 1985: of top-down, one-to-many production, pushing out a vast quantity of media products at receptive, consuming mass audiences (Merrin, 2014, p. 61–76).

This would all change in the decade and half after Postman's book, with the digital revolution. Lev Manovich explains this as the development of two traditions in the 19th century – computing and mass media – and their meeting and merger at the end of the 20th century (Manovich, 2001), but this underplays the key element. Because digital technology did not simply merge with the analogue, it violently *absorbed* it. Becoming a computational meta-medium, it *ate* every previously separate form, turning them into types of digital content. First, personal computing found a new life with the development of networking and the creation of the World Wide Web. Made available in 1991, the software, when combined with the rise of graphical browsers, led to the popular take off of the internet from the mid-1990s, with 'the web' becoming a key part of domestic and work life by the end of the century. The same decade saw the rapid commercial digitalization of cinema, newspapers and print, music, home-video, photography, video-camcorders, telephony, radio and television, such that, by the millennium, every broadcast medium had been transformed by digital technology in some or all aspects of its production, distribution and consumption.

Developments in the early years of the new century propelled this revolution. Cheap home broadband, more powerful and cheaper computers, and increased interoperability between devices helped create 'Web 2.0'. Coined by Tim O'Reilly in 2005 (O'Reilly, 2005), the term describes the rise of mostly free, web-based applications and platforms that left behind the read-only world of 'Web 1.0' in favour of new 'architectures of participation', 'rich user experiences', 'user-generated content' (UGC), information sharing and personal networks.

These Web 2.0 sites included social media such as Myspace (2003) and Facebook (2005), UGC hosting and sharing sites such as Flickr (2004) and YouTube (2005), Micro-blogging sites such as Twitter (2006), collaborative sites such as Wikipedia (2001), and aggregation sites such as Reddit (2005). Together with other UGC phenomena such as blogging, podcasting and easy-to-create websites, these developments would produce a cultural revolution that transformed the broadcast era of mass media. The final key to this revolution was the end of the 'desk-top' in favour of domestic and public wi-fi and smart-phones and tablets, a move aided by Apple with their transformative iPhones (2007), iPads (2010) and app store. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, therefore, the broadcast world described by Postman in 1985 had been definitively left behind.

So, to return to Postman's question, what is the nature of 'public discourse' in this very different age of digital technology and social media? That appears easy to answer – we only have to look at the *content* of social media. The main problem is clearly the *toxic* nature of the contemporary internet and public sphere, due to the structural revolution in communication that has empowered everyone as a producer of information and opinions. Web 2.0 ushered in a new era where the voices of everyone were unleashed, and at first this was accompanied by an optimism in the new, pro-democratic ability of everyone to connect and share and to hold authorities to account, especially in authoritarian nations (see Benkler, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; Leadbetter, 2008; Shirky, 2008). This optimism declined after 2012 once it was realised that authoritarian countries could exert strong controls on their national internet, that social media 'revolutions' could fail, and once it became obvious in the west that the open and accessible nature of the net meant its real threat was to democracies, through the publication of politically extreme opinions, the spread of trolling, hate speech, abuse, deliberate disinformation and state-based information warfare, as well as the misuse of personal data (e.g., the Cambridge Analytica scandal) and the failure of platforms to moderate their content.

The key problem of public discourse today, according to this perspective, is the content of unleashed speech. Anger, abuse and the polarisation of opinions leads to an inability to conduct that rational-critical typographic, Enlightenment ideal of debate and agreement Postman had described. Of course, that Liberal 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1989) was only ever a performative simulacrum of communication amongst a bourgeois class that was always-already in agreement with itself and, as Postman (and indeed, Habermas) has shown, it was an ideal already superseded in the era of commercial television's 'show business'. Nevertheless, the contemporary moral panic around the unleashed, irrational voices of the masses has been useful for authorities, in pointing to simple solutions such as increased internet regulation and (especially in the UK and Europe) expanded legal punishment for individual speech (Merrin, 2021a).

But this explanation of public discourse today is too simple, with the focus on content blinding us to deeper issues relating to form. Now, we could perform here, like Postman, an extended analysis of the digital form of social media, as a hyper-extension of electronic technology, and we would find much of value to discuss. Here, however, I want to focus on just one aspect of form and its impact, one that is central to understanding where we are today. I want to explore the question of the real.

THE CAMBRIAN EXPLOSION OF REALITIES

What McLuhan and Postman teach us is that the broadcast era did not simply mass-produce entertainment. They teach us that media are *epistemological engines*: they create our experience, knowledge, concepts of truth and horizons of thought. Hence, we can see that what was mass produced in the broadcast era was reality itself. This was an idea also understood by thinkers such as Daniel Boorstin (1992) and Guy Debord (1994) and especially by the McLuhan-inspired, French media philosopher Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's early work on the post-war semiotic consumer societies explored how electronic mass media transform 'the lived, eventual character of the world' into signs that are combined to produce the real (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 123). 'Over the whole span of daily life', he says, 'a vast process of simulation is taking place', with the semiotic media assuming 'the force of reality', obliterating the real in favour of its own model (1998, p. 126). The media modelled and presented an efficacious reality.

For Baudrillard, what increasingly characterized these simulacra was their 'hyperreality' – their excessive, close-up, high-definition, 'pornographic' technical semio-realisation of the real (1990a, pp. 11, 50). By the late 1970s-early 80s, Baudrillard had grown to see this *excess* as central to our system. This is a culture, he argues, devoted to 'production' – understood not as industrial manufacture, but in the original sense of 'to render visible, to cause to appear and be made to appear: *pro-ducere*' (1987, p. 21). Hence his furious description of our productive society – our 'orgy of realism', 'rage [...] to summon everything before the jurisdiction of signs', to make everything visible, legible, rendered, recorded and available, with everything passing over into 'the absolute evidence of the real' (1990b, pp. 29, 32). Ours, he says, 'is a pornographic culture par excellence' (1990b, p. 34).

Though Baudrillard died in March 2007, on the cusp of the release of the iPhone and the take-off of Web 2.0, and though much of his work described the world of electronic mass-media, there is one way in which he may be one of the key thinkers of the Age of Social Media, because the digital revolution represents the continuation of that *society of production* he describes. This theme continued throughout his work. His 2004 book *The Intelligence of Evil* returned to the western drive for 'integral reality', explained as 'the perpetuating on the world of an unlimited operational project whereby everything becomes real, everything becomes visible and transparent, everything is "liberated", everything comes to fruition and has a meaning' (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 17). The digital revolution, therefore, represents the extension of this process, achieving the final liberation – that of production itself.

We will, one day, find it remarkable that for centuries, during the Gutenbergian broadcast era, we limited and controlled the ability to produce the real. For so long you needed permission, licenses, skills, qualifications, employment, key positions within communicational hierarchies, expensive and complex equipment and more before you were able to create and share information. There were, of course, options for individual production, but the tools were limited, distribution was difficult and there was little cultural interest in the amateur; for centuries, it was an elite of professional creators that made our real. What the digital revolution accomplished was the liberation of the power of production and distribution. Now anyone with a smartphone has become an empowered producer of content, messages, and information.

As smartphone possession has increased – by April 2022 there were claimed to be 6.64 billion people (83.72% of the world's population) with a smartphone, with 10.57 billion mobile connections surpassing the world's population of 7.93 billion people (Bankmycell, 2022) – so too has the personal production of the real. Using an array of devices, technologies, apps, platforms, services and software we now devote ourselves daily to the recording of our lives, experiences, movements and thoughts, in a *self-paparizzization* for our friends, families and subscribed global followers. Looking back too, one day, we will be surprised how much of the real went unrecorded; how much we allowed to disappear. Today, in contrast, we have crowd-sourced the creation of the real to all the world's population such that, in theory, not a single moment, activity, relationship or experience escapes potential capture or being added to the pornographic hyper-visible, hyper-intimate personal collection of the museum of the real.

One of the key ideas Baudrillard takes from McLuhan is 'reversal' – the idea that at 'the peak of performance' technologies can reverse their effects (McLuhan, 1994, pp. 30, 33, 182), and the same can be seen with our production of the real. Following the economic law that over-production leads to devaluation, so our devotion to the over-production of the real leads to a crash in its stocks. We move from the excessive hyperreality of the broadcast era where huge organisations gathered and deployed vast stocks of media materiel to create the real, to a digital world of personally produced *hyporeality* where so little is now required either to craft and share the real (a phone, an angle, a filter, scenery) or to believe in it.

This argument chimes with the claimed contemporary crisis of 'truth'. In recent years, fears of online disinformation, 'fake news', state-trolling and conspiracy theorism have led some to argue we live in a 'post-truth' world (Ball, 2018; D'Ancona, 2017; Davis, 2017; Fuller, 2018; Kakutani, 2018; McIntyre, 2018). One explanation for this crisis is Pariser's idea that today we are locked into personalised, online 'filter bubbles', created by our own curation of our networks and information and by algorithms feeding us more of what we like in order to increase our engagement (Pariser, 2011). This idea has merit but it is worth expanding upon it and projecting the concept backwards. For then we can understand that the entire broadcast era comprised a similar 'bubble', albeit a singular one encompassing all within broadcast reach. This was a 'mainstream bubble', filtered for the entire population through the use of market demographics, editorial decisions, professional codes of conduct, government regulations and the need to retain the goodwill of advertisers and consumers. A careful control of production and distribution ensured nothing dangerous, extreme, offensive or too different ever appeared. There was no room here for Goatse, 'Two Girls One Cup', ISIS videos or white supremacist propaganda.

Our world of individual bubbles, therefore, is the direct result of the digital bursting of this mainstream bubble and its mass-filtered and mass-distributed, collectively shared *mass-consensual reality*. Digital technologies have exploded our informational sources into the fractal fragments of everything we can see or find – every friend, follower, message, DM, link, webpage, forum thread, post, comment, group-chat, gif, meme, photograph, video, 'like' or 'story' and into anything we can think, do, explore and enjoy, however far outside the mainstream. This is, therefore, about more than 'filter bubbles': The explosion of the single reality-bubble has created an infinite body of individual monadic bubbles. Except they are not

atomised and separable. They are always in motion, continually connecting and reforming as *foam*: They join and build with other bubbles, to form what Sloterdijk in other circumstances has called 'foam cities' – comprising millions of bubbles which are 'not simply an agglomeration of neighbouring (partition-sharing) inert and massive bodies, but rather multiplicities of loosely touching cells of life-worlds' (Sloterdijk, 2016, p. 565).

This is the primary effect of the digital revolution, and understanding it is the key to understanding public discourse today. In contrast to the 'Age of Typography' and the 'Age of Television', both of which connected and unified their audiences as a shared public, what characterises the 'Age of Social Media' is the radical disconnection from any shared public, except that chosen and created by the self. The foam of bubbles is a foam of personally created and connected life-worlds. What we are experiencing now, therefore, is a *Cambrian explosion of realities*. The problem is not that we are post-truth and lack truth today. The problem is the opposite: it is the exponential hyper-production of truths. There have never before been so many truths, so many realities. The hyper-equipped, hyper-empowered, hyper-productive hyper-distributed and shared digital self creates its own spin-off reality with every action.

Digital technologies, therefore, have radically decentred *the engines of reality-creation* to each of us and so we need to properly understand what the 'social' in 'social media' really means. This is not the 'social' of modernity – that 'social' theorised by Liberalism, or by Durkheim, Weber or Marx. It is not the contract that founds government, nor the nexus of norms, values and laws, nor the division of labour or the superstructure that arises from it, nor the shared, collective experience of cities and crowds, nor the individual's position within the organic whole, nor the interconnected economic, legal, political, cultural, aesthetic and religious relationship of 'total social facts' (Mauss, 1990, pp. 78–79). Instead, the individual bubble forms its own worlds, continually connecting with others and breaking and reforming these foams on every topic, making worlds out of their own thoughts, interests and networks, replacing the 'social' of modernity with a very different and opposing 'social': the social of *social life*. This a radically, personally centred network of friends and contacts within their individual life-worlds. With it, the social of modernity is reduced to the zero degree of heat – to the banality of *my social life*.

This has significant implications for our discussion of 'public discourse', for what does 'the public' mean? 'Public' comes to us from the Latin '*publicus*', meaning 'of the people; of the state; done for the state', being derived from the Old Latin '*poplicus*', 'pertaining to the people' (from '*populus*', meaning 'people'). By late-14th-century Europe, the word 'publike' was also being used to refer to that which was 'open to general observation' (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2022). All these meanings point to the collective, the shared bond, the organising institutions and their openness and visibility. And it is these that *our social* threatens.

Because today we live not in the shared, broadcast-era world of top-down communication and authority but instead in personalised bubbles and chosen-foams: in radically individually curated and created realities. The minor differences in the mainstream broadcast bubble (which newspaper or channel you consumed) have exploded into fractal worlds of informational difference. The moment I wake up and engage with the world, what I open, what I see, what I read and what I share *is utterly unique to me*, as the product of my own choices and algorithmic curation. Little or nothing binds us all today, and, in taking place on

platforms and apps and messenger services, much of what we see, consume and share does not even count as openly, visibly 'publike'. Do we even have a 'public discourse', therefore, in the Age of Social Media?

We have barely begun to even recognize this problem, let alone think through its radical implications. It is a world that is already here, however, in our swipe-yes-or-swipe-no, friend-follow-like-and-comment informational ecology where Postman's mass media has given way to the digital cockpit of 'me-dia' (Merrin, 2014, pp. 77–92), where my personal control and curation of the real means entire worlds slide past me without my noticing. We might begin to understand it better, however, if we realise that what we think of as the online fringe – the world of extremists and conspiracy theorists – is now (at least at the level of form) our mainstream reality.

AND… *BREATHE*

It is easy to dismiss conspiracy theorists as cranks who have left reason behind, but we have more in common with them than we might think. Walter Lippmann's 1922 book *Public Opinion* explains how individuals have always tried to make sense of the world beyond their experience, forming pictures in their mind – 'mental images', 'symbols', 'fictions' and 'stereotypes' of the world to create a coherent reality to live within (Lippmann, 2007). Lippmann was critical of our ability to do this in a complex world; hence he suggested an elite 'manufacture' this worldview for us using the mass media. In effect, though without the explicit organisation, 20th-century mass media did, indeed, create that mass-consensual reality.

Within that reality, conspiracy theorism had a limited purchase. This was not through censorship – indeed, the paranormal, UFOs, cryptozoology, spiritualism, conspiracism, extremism, etc. remained a profitable niche publishing area – rather it was due to the unilateral, top-down nature of broadcasting that meant you consumed this material alone. The revolutionary impact of the internet was that it gave you friends: it allowed you to connect with others, to share, to build and grow and organise. Hence the far-right and conspiracism adopted the internet early on, recognizing its value for them, and through the 1980s-90s their worldviews began to meet and merge. Eventually, in October 2017, the 'QAnon' conspiracy would develop out of far-right ideas, Trumpism, and Chan-culture, metastasizing extremist and conspiracist ideas, absorbing existing conspiracies, and moving beyond its focus on Trump to become an international phenomenon (Merrin, 2018; 2021b).

COVID-19 and global governmental restrictions made conspiracism even more popular, with fears of government control, a global elite, 5-G technology and vaccine nanotechnology all feeding into right-wing and libertarian ideas and the QAnon story. QAnon and conspiracism soon degenerated into violence, from anti-lockdown protests confronting police to arson attacks on 5-G masts and arson and bomb attacks on governmental, pharmacist and vaccine centres. The 25th of December 2020 vehicle-bomb in Nashville was part of this new movement of conspiracist violence. Unlike earlier forms of religious and political terrorism that wanted to re-align the real with their values, this was a new form of *reality terrorism*, taking aim at the officially produced and sanctioned reality-principle, with the intention not of causing

terror, but of alleviating it for the imprisoned, reality-washed population. Unlike ordinary terrorism, its target was not the political elite and its order, but *the real itself* (Merrin, 2021c).

Many have watched these developments with concern, trying to separate themselves from the irrationality of the conspiracists, but we are closer to them than we think. Lippmann noted how we have always tried to make sense of our world, and broadcasting helped us do that well, albeit with a limited and tightly controlled range of sources. The internet changed this, allowing unchecked informational sources to proliferate, but the Web 2.0 world of platforms, services and personal technologies has super-charged this process. Freed from the mainstream bubble, with the fractalization of information sources and the Cambrian explosion of personally created and curated me-dia realities, we are now free to form foams with anyone and any source we like.

Just like the conspiracy theorist, therefore, with their exhortation to 'do your research!' we are all looking to make sense of our world, responding to each new calamitous event – climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ukraine War – by trying to become instant self-experts on it. We are all, by necessity, *researchers of the real* and reality itself has become an individual ludic process, as we search for, discover, select, combine and play with ideas. *The world is a puzzle*, and we deploy whatever information we can, extracted from multiple sources and recombined, to form a coherent picture – a vision that we can then re-assert back onto the world and onto others. If the conspiracists choose (what we see as) irrational, unscientific and baseless sources, this is a difference in content, not form, where we are all playing the same game of 'self-investigation' and 'research'.

Whereas Baconian empiricism built the *weight* of evidence from the sensory weight of the world and the weight of repeated observation (Bacon, 2019), our reality is the product of our personal digital research, recording and posting. Lacking mass, weight, or anything to hold it down, this reality is a hyporeality. In this personally created reality, the hyperimaginary hyperinflates, floating free of the referential real of the terrestrial body-of-evidence, being given free rein in a hyperfalsity where the self can now assert anything as true and aggressively dare the world to escalate and deny it. This is why all attempts to combat 'fake news' with 'truth', 'verification' and 'fact-checking' fail. It is not just that a binary of 'truth' and 'falsity' does not fit the journalistic production of 'news', or that a public so suspicious of the mainstream would reject any organisation's claim to be an 'official' arbiter of truth (though both are the case), it is because the problem here is not a lack of truth but *its excess*. The problem is one of reality: of the epistemological proliferation caused by the digital revolution. This will not be solved with a 'rear-view mirror' nostalgia for a lost broadcast era when everyone respected their media betters.

Because we have shifted now to personal worlds and realities that cannot be reconciled with older visions of truth, the 'multiverse' – that popular science-fiction concept that supposes every action spins off a different time-line and universe, all existing parallel to each other – is realized today within our one universe which now holds within it an infinity of realities. Hence, Trump's inauguration crowd was or was not bigger than Obama's; Trump did or did not win the 2020 election; the January 2021 insurrection was or was not a legitimate response to 'the steal'; Covid was or was not created in a Chinese lab; masks are or are not effective; a global government is or is not attempting 'the great reset'. Choose your real.

We are not so different, therefore, from the conspiracists we jeer – they are just a hyper-parodic form of how we all live today. We all form our reality-bubbles and link with others that think the same, forming foam-realities that rise and fall as we breathe together. Because the word 'conspiracy' comes from the Latin 'conspirare' which means 'to breathe together' (hence its application to those who plot together, in breathing the same air). Today, therefore, *we all conspire: we all co-respire* and create our theories of the world. With the explosion of our own personalised realities and the connected foam of our bubble universes, we are all simultaneously co-respiracists.

THE AGE OF BEMUSEMENT

We are nearly a century now past Huxley's *Brave New World*, but his vision of a society dominated and controlled by entertainment is as close as ever. Far from changing this, the digital revolution has expanded its scale, scope and hold. Today, the distraction of the net and apps – of funny videos, gifs, memes, pranks, jokes, amusing cats, must see-Tweets, trolls and takedowns – is stronger than ever. What else is TikTok, other than an infinite-scrolling, variable-reinforcement ratio micro-engine of dopamine short-video 'hits'? But George Orwell's *1984* has also grown in relevance too. Given the scale of global, governmental mass-surveillance revealed by Edward Snowden and the emergence of an entire new model of 'surveillance capitalism' built upon the harvesting and use of personal data (Zuboff, 2019), there is a case for elevating him back to the position of dystopian prophet of the present. Except, there's a better case to be made for another author to have this position: Philip K. Dick.

Across dozens of novels Dick pursued the problem of the real and its subjectivity, uncertainty and proliferation. He describes the simulation of humans (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*), simulated presidents (*The Simulacra*), drug-induced realities (*Now Wait For Last Year*), personalised realities (*The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*, *Ubik*), splintered realities (*Flow My Tears*, *Not Exist*), live-in virtual realities (*Ubik*, Mercer in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, *A Maze of Death*, 'The Days of Perky Pat'), government-manufactured simulated realities (*Time Out of Joint*, *The Penultimate Truth*), alternate historical realities (*The Man in the High Castle*), altered realities (*The Cosmic Puppets*), alternate worlds (*The Crack in Space*), recreated childhood realities (*Now Wait for Last Year*), reversed realities (*Counter-Clock World*) and psychotic realities (*A Scanner Darkly*, *Radio Free Albemuth*, *Valis*). Dick's protagonists find themselves in splintered, incomprehensible worlds, left to themselves to reform the real, to make sense of what is and what is not and reach some coherent understanding. Today, in the Age of Social Media, we share their problem. The key issue we face today is how we – individually and in our foams – construct our realities and the danger that follows from this. That danger is no longer the danger of entertainment or amusement. Today, the danger we face is that of our confusion, our failure, our bewilderment, our puzzlement at the world and of our attempts to make it make sense. This is the new danger of *bemusing ourselves to death*.

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