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The Multiple Narratives of Post-Truth Politics, Told Through Pictures

In western culture today we are incessantly presented with an abundance of divergent political narratives, portrayed through an unprecedented volume of images, experienced at an unrelenting pace. As the conditions of our post-truth era continue to allow emotional interoperation to win over veracity, binary narratives thrive in the refuge of their own filter bubbles and echo chambers. We can identify prominent forms of right wing populism, which ensure that quests for rationality and truth are consistently outmanoeuvred - cast aside as needless, over-sincere and time-consuming pursuits. Advocates of a veracity of information are accused of seeking to reimpose the values of the political class and economic elite, which such forms of populism claim to aim to overthrow. Within this context, we are challenged to constantly question the multiple, fragmented and often conflicting political narratives, to which we are exposed through pictures.

This essay seeks to explore the relationship between **contemporary modes of image production and dissemination, the construction of political picture narratives, and the role and nature of our understanding of veracity today**. Structured around two central arguments, this discussion will first reflect on the consequences of a distinct lack of online responsibility and accountability within the development of big tech in recent years. This will focus on the absence of robust regulation within global social media platforms, specifically in relation to image orientated political messaging. Key to consider, is the extent to which this has been seized and capitalised upon by right wing groups and populist political figures, across both Europe and the US. It can be argued that a profound disruption and manipulation of western political narratives, has served to benefit the advancement of populist and right wing political ideals and structures of power. Ultimately, this questions the role that a disregard for veracity has played in the erosion of trust in our western democratic systems.

The second prominent area this essay seeks to address, is the role of creative practitioners in response to the context described above. Artists and activists as makers of images, can play a critical role in countering the dominance of right wing political narratives, with a distinct ability to contest the conditions defining our post-truth era. This is to consider the importance of both conceptual and philosophical interoperations of the role of creative image makers, but crucially to also focus on pragmatic practical considerations.

Thus, examining what today's modes of *digital* intervention and resistance might actually look like. Furthermore, I will explore how strategies and tactics developed by artists could emerge as shared and transferable, with the potential to enact broader cultural and societal change. Proposing a methodology to navigate through the multiple narratives we are continually exposed to, through offering ways to decipher authentic, moral, ethical and rational debates, in amongst the easily digestible persuasion of high impact images.

Key to the broader critique, as well as central in the discussion of both of these two main areas of focus, is to examine the role and nature of the digital architectures we inhabit, specifically in relation to issues of digital (in)equality and (in)justice. Issues increasingly scrutinised in recent years through the prominent critical media theory of writers such as Cathy O'Neil¹, Virginia Eubanks² and Safiya Umoja Noble³. Exploring the role of emerging technologies in relation to the potential for proactive and effective creative responses, illuminates artistic practices which share common aims of countering the dominance of big tech. Critically questioning the role of the complicity of commercially run global platforms, in the polarising of political narratives, as well as the subsequent facilitation and dissemination of right wing views and attitudes. In many cases, this reveals the relationship between the unseen, and hidden practices of digital injustice and discrimination such as

¹ Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016), discusses the societal impacts of big data algorithmic processes, particularly highlighting how these reinforce pre-existing inequalities.

² Virginia Eubank's, *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (2018), addresses and extends arguments established by O'Neil, through examining the role algorithms and automation play in the development of new Governmental systems which perpetuate economic injustice and poverty. These include modes of economic suppression within the privatisation of public services, as well as in judicial and legal cases in the US.

³ Co-Founder and Co-Director of the UCLA Center for Critical Internet Inquiry, Safiya Umoja Noble's book *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*, (2018), looks specifically at the Google search engine, and the political implications of biased structures embedded in its search patterns and results. Noble challenges the idea of the internet being a fully democratic or post-racial environment. As noted by Emily Drabinski the critique of Google's search engines as explored by Noble, can be applied to many other aspects of the digital infrastructures we frequently inhabit. In Drabinski words, 'What emerges from these pages is the sense that Google's algorithms of oppression comprise just one of the hidden infrastructures that govern our daily lives, and that the others are likely just as hard-coded with white supremacy and misogyny as the one that Noble explores'. Emily Drabinski, 'Ideologies of Boring Things: The Internet and Infrastructures of Race', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, (Feb 13, 2018), Para 12. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/ideologies-of-boring-things-the-internet-and-infrastructures-of-race/>

algorithmic bias, and the very much seen (and felt) cultural and societal inequalities, which in many ways define our times.

Ultimately this essay seeks to ask vital questions about how we might understand the range of narratives of images we are exposed to online, while also considering our own personal positions, roles and responsibilities as both individual and collective narrative and truth makers, as well as guardians of those truths. As already touched upon, the extremities of our current moment prompt us to question the political narratives we are exposed to more than ever. But more importantly, to also question our ability to challenge the authority and motivations of both big tech and the main stream media, in assuming the right to determine the narrative of images we are offered to consume. Both arguably preside over an ultimate ability to limit or expand our knowledge, understanding and experience of the world. Who better to push back, to ask these questions, make these challenges, and offer means by which to address and act on them, than creative visual practitioners?

Context - a sea of images, compete for our attention

Every day - a sea of images compete for attention in a fierce and ruthless image hierarchy. This has contributed to an environment in which the relationship to veracity as experienced through images, has become an ever increasingly complex one. Many of the images experienced digitally and online, exist within a composite network of multiple and divergent image economies, with equally tortuous associated structures of distribution and dissemination. Navigating the sheer volume and range of images we are exposed to, while also considering their constantly conflicting agendas, means we find ourselves at the centre of an insurmountable struggle to understand the multiple narratives we experience through pictures. While we might have previously assumed that the vast availability of images and information online would result in us seeing more clearly, we have in fact discovered the opposite to be true. As we grapple with image overload - notions of originality, truth and knowledge, all seem to become more distant and distorted, with every further image we are exposed to. As James Bridle points out:

‘The more images we see, the less we know. The result is fear, confusion, and often anger - the dominant tenor of our present politics’.⁴

The relationship between hierarchies of images, and socio-political structures of power forms the centre of Hito Steyerl’s research. The German academic, writer and artist has written and lectured extensively about the nature of the contemporary image dominated reality. In a 2013 lecture at the *Photographic Universe and Political Agency* conference, Steyerl stated that ‘images are not objective or subjective renditions of reality, of pre-existing conditions - but they are rather nodes of energy and matter, which migrate across different supports - which shape and effect people, landscapes, social systems, and whole political systems’.⁵ Here Steyerl describes our contemporary post-truth experience, as one in which images fluidly travel as mobile fragments of data which are constantly being reordered and reconfigured. We realise that images can of course be configured to be seen - to tell a particular story, to portray a particular narrative. But they can also be reconfigured to **not** be seen, or indeed to distort or obscure, making narrative threads we may attempt to follow through pictures, impossible to decipher.

History tells us that strategies of distortion, deflection and misrepresentation, are amongst the most powerful tactics of any populist movement.⁶ When we consider the operational modes of right wing populism today, we can quickly recognise key characteristics of our post truth environment, which have facilitated and enabled populist picture narratives to thrive. We know that many political memes are made to demand and assume our attention. But more importantly, we also know that in many cases they act to purposefully mislead,

⁴ James Bridle, *New Ways of Seeing*, ‘Machine Visions’, BBC Radio 4, (April 24, 2019). <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0004f3h>

⁵ Hito Steyerl in conversation with Victoria Hattam, conference untitled *Photographic Universe and Political Agency*, The New School - Parsons New York, (April 10, 2013), <https://player.vimeo.com/video/64842531>

⁶ A comparative analysis of the key populist assertions of recent years, with the rise of far right movements and leaders across Europe throughout the 1920’s and 30’s, illuminates echoing populist tactics of misrepresentation and manipulation, through disinformation. This can be seen in the rise of the fascist movements between the World Wars, such as those of the Blackshirts in Italy and the Nazis in Germany, which culminated in the dictatorships of Mussolini and Hitler. Both were strongly nationalist movements, playing on people’s fears and resentments about the crippled economic situation in Europe, in order to create scapegoats through prejudice and othering. This was a means to justify the silencing of opposition. In both cases, pseudo democratic support (populism), was based on myths dispersed through the media, progressively synthesised to espouse only one *truth*, personified by their respective leaders and cohorts. These dictatorships then assumed the ultimate validation to exercise total control, and take military action against all foreign *enemies*. The success and dominance of this model of conflict (fuelled by disinformation), catalysed and influenced similar movements, such as the Nationalist and anti-communist movements of Austria (Engelbert Dollfuss installed himself as a fascist dictator), António de Oliveira Salazar’s Estado Novo regime in Portugal, Finland’s Lapau Movement, the Ustasha movement of the Greater Croatia ideals. Through these historical examples of right wing dictatorships, we can clearly identify Populism as a phenomenon consistent across cycles of history, and contemptuous right wing political ideologies. Recognising the same psychological tools, reinforced through consistent and repeated messaging. Strategies and tactics of cultural coercion and mass control, with the ultimate objective of challenging traditional or pre-established structures of power.

deceiving and misdirecting us from truth. An extreme surge in rogue material coming from a myriad of sources and positions produced for political purposes, can very effectively complicate our understanding of the relationship between the picture narratives we experience, and notions of veracity and truth. We might reasonably therefore summarise, that the conditions which Steyerl refers to as our image dominated reality, and those of a **surveillance capitalist logic** which ensures our constant and consistent online activity - have collided with our post-truth experience, to catalyse the power agendas of right wing populist politics.⁷

Images prioritising impact over veracity

This analysis is certainly affirmed and re-enforced when we consider the over-arching political conditions of recent years in the US, as well as certain European counties such as the UK. Binary and protectionist political environments have given rise to some of the most assurgent populist movements and figures of this century. These conditions have also arguably facilitated two of the most profound western political earthquakes of our times. The election of President Trump in the US, and the Brexit vote in the UK, which both took place in 2016. It is important to recognise that at the heart of the success of both the Trump and Vote Leave campaigns was not written words, not lengthy nuanced or convincing texts, nor articles addressing different viewpoints or balanced arguments.

At the heart of the success of both campaigns was the immediate sway of emotionally driven narratives, portrayed through pictures. Narratives fuelled by attention grabbing images, often presented through the most covert, complex and deviant means. Images predominantly prioritising impact over veracity.⁸ Political propaganda presented as memes

⁷ Surveillance Capitalist Logic is a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff in her recent publication, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, (PublicAffairs, 2019).

⁸ One of the most notable examples would be a poster image unveiled in the UK by Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party in June 2016, in association with the Leave Campaign which preceded the EU referendum. *Breaking Point* presented on a series of billboards, was reported to the police by Dave Prentis of Unison, complaining that it incited racial hatred and breached UK race laws. This poster understood as political propaganda, clearly insinuated an imminent threat of an influx of economic migrants into the UK (particularly in reference to the potential of Turkey joining the European Union). The image was both divisive and inaccurate in its portrayal of a completely unverified, and exaggerated potential increase in migratory numbers. But more importantly, specifically demonised people of colour, through its depiction of a non-white demographic, through the use of an unrelated image, taken out of its original context. The photograph used was of migrants crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015, with the only prominent person of Caucasian origin obscured by a text box. Dave Prentis, quoted in the Guardian newspaper said of the poster, 'This is scaremongering in its most extreme and vile form. Leave campaigners have descended into the gutter with their latest attempt to frighten working people into voting to leave the EU', Heather Stewart and Rowena Mason, 'Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to police', (Guardian Online, June 16, 2016), Para 2. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants>

with the ability to go viral instantly, aided by algorithms which favour images and videos, over text posts or links to credible news articles. Of the Trump campaign, American far right political activist and notorious internet troll, Charles Carlisle Johnson,⁹ was famously quoted as saying, ‘we memed the president into existence’.¹⁰

Images, digital data breach and (in)justice

To discuss the circumstances which led to these political paradigm shifts in any great detail, would be another essay entirely. But in order to further qualify suggestions made around the role image narratives played in their conception, as well as to underline the central argument of this part of the essay, I will briefly refer to two very specific and significant elements of these political campaigns. First is the nature and scale of the data breach which was central to both. Secondly, and perhaps even more significantly, the construction of picture narratives through tailored material made *in-house* specifically for the respective campaigns, by the data analytics companies they employed. These two elements both orientate around a now widely acknowledged post-truth reality, in which we know that mainstream political campaigns have the potential to work with largely unknown tech start-up companies, in unregulated ways and through manipulative means.

The role of data analytics tech start-up’s, as well as the nature and scale of the data breach of both campaigns, was first illuminated through the media coverage of the activities of Cambridge Analytica (initially through the Observer and Guardian Newspapers in the UK, and New York Times in the US).¹¹ Principally in relation to their involvement in the US presidential elections, but additionally in the work carried out on the Vote Leave campaign by Canadian company AggregateIQ, during the UK’s EU referendum. Equally well documented are the roles and motivations of the various companies already mentioned, as

⁹ Charles Carlisle Johnson is believed to have instigated the connection between Julian Assange/Wikileaks and the Trump campaign with his 2016 article on GotNews (online), about the impending launch of an anti-Trump website called PutinTrump.org.

¹⁰ Stephanie Mencimer, ‘The Left Can’t Meme: How Right-Wing Groups Are Training the Next Generation of Social Media Warriors’ (*Mother Jones*, April 2, 2019), Para 3. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2019/04/right-wing-groups-are-training-young-conservatives-to-win-the-next-meme-war/>

¹¹ The activities of Cambridge Analytica have been widely reported (particularly by The Guardian) since an interview with whistleblower and ex-employee Christopher Wylie were simultaneously published on the same day, 17 March 2018 - in both the *Observer* in the UK, and the *New York Times* in the US.

well as individual actors such as Dr Aleksandr Kogan, Steve Bannon and Robert Mercer - to name just a few who played a major role in the initial data breach, as well as being central to the overall success of both campaigns.

The methods of data mining and harvesting used to psychologically profile and target individual users by both Cambridge Analytica and AggregateIQ had been adopted from those developed by big tech, and a surveillance capitalist logic which has infiltrated every aspect of our online experience. This has proved without any doubt, that this economic logic developed to direct web-based consumer interactivity, has seamlessly transitioned from the commercial, into the *political arena*. In doing so, seizing the ability to affect the political choices we make, and in turn the ability to profoundly manipulate our democratic processes. But of most significance in relation to issues of digital injustice, is the volume of data that was unknowingly extracted via Facebook (in the case of the Trump campaign, this was as many as eighty-seven million profiles), as well as how that data was then used in the micro targeting process.

As already suggested, the role of images in the construction of cogent political narratives was crucial to both campaigns. This is why Cambridge Analytica did not only micro target individuals with material that already existed online, or even material they commissioned to be made. Rather they used material they produced themselves *in house* for mass dissemination.¹² So in addition to employing data scientists, psychologists and strategists, they also had an entire team of creatives, designers, videographers and photographers etc, producing their own tailored content of images and videos. The priority of this content was to persuade people towards the cause at any cost, with truth and veracity of information of little or no significance. This approach is one learnt, appropriated and upscaled from a bedroom and basement industry which has emerged out of the US, now rampant

¹² In July 2018, after substantial media and political pressure, Facebook provided the UK Parliament (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee), with the digital material used in the micro targeting process during the EU referendum campaign. This had been requested by Parliament as part of its enquiry into fake news and the impact of online disinformation on democratic processes. This included nearly 1,600 advertisements, and over 130 artworks, (seen more than 169 million times overall), made by Cambridge Analytica (SCL Group), disseminated through AggregateIQ's tailor made software. Various Brexit campaign groups (including BeLeave, Brexit Central, and DUP Vote Leave) cumulatively paid these two companies £3.5 million, to make and distribute this material via Facebook. A significant proportion of the specifically made graphics, imagery, text and slogans focused on issues relating to immigration. Much of this disinformation claimed the UK was paying countries such as Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro and Turkey to join the European Union, and as members, these countries citizens' would flock to live and work in the UK. Gaining open access to the UK's services, healthcare, jobs, and financial support.

worldwide. It is possible to make a considerable amount of money generating fake political news and meme content on a basic home computer, which can then be disseminated through fake social media accounts, predominantly funded through right wing political groups.

New era of the collective coherence of the far right

This is both continuous with the history, and reflective of current tactics, employed by the far right across the US and Europe. Many studies into how misinformation is both generated and spread, reveals that those with right wing views are far more likely to share unverified and fake information, than people of a left wing leaning. For example, a comprehensive study undertaken by the (OCCC) found that 'Conservative supporters and social media users with right-wing ideological beliefs, were more likely to spread news they knew to be fake, while Labour supporters and left-wingers were more likely to try to correct it'.^{13, 14} The ability of right wing organisations to generate and share material which has no basis in fact or truth, was of course not new when the revelations around data breach and political micro targeting were first revealed through the Cambridge Analytica scandals.

But what both the Trump and Vote Leave campaigns did demonstrate was the transitioning into the dawn of a new era, which perhaps no one outside of the companies involved saw coming. This new era has awoken us to the ability of previously fragmented and marginal right wing groups to unite. Through bringing networks together, rebranding and renaming existing social media accounts where necessary, far right groups have been able to mobilise under singular cohesive and unified large scale campaigns. As we have experienced increasingly intensely over the last three to four years, this has in turn led to a more widespread tolerance and legitimising of right wing opinions and values, both in the political sphere, and wider society at large.

¹³ This study was undertaken by Loughborough University's 'Online Civic Culture Centre' (OCCC) in July 2018, led by its director Professor Andrew Chadwick.

¹⁴ Andrew Woodcock, 'Nearly half of social media users who share articles have passed on fake news', (*Independent*, May 10, 2019), Para 4. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/fake-news-facebook-twitter-share-misinformation-survey-a8908361.html>

The small scale, low impact and fragmentary nature of right wing groups, has in the past always been a major challenge to their potential momentum and societal impact.

The far right has recognised that the way social media works, mimics the key tactics and methodologies of populism, enabling unelected political narrators to speak and appeal directly to the people (the social media users), shunning establishment politics at every possible opportunity. Prominent far right figures, with the support of very wealthy business people (such as Steve Bannon and Robert Mercer), have now found a very effective set of strategies to overcome the previous problems presented by the dilution and dispersal of their central message.¹⁵ We are now in a new era of the collective coherence of the far right.

The response of Artists and Activists

Through its rich and varied contributions, *Dada Data* recognises the arc of history from the early 20th century through to the present, considering a broad range of forms of cultural and artistic representation. Cumulatively these illuminate that the counter-cultural strategies of the Dada movement have been adopted by a range of avant-garde and sub-cultural movements, before more recently being employed by far right groups and populist narrators. Considering that these strategies were originally artistic responses to the aggression, nationalism and rising fascism of the time. It seems appropriate to envisage the further trajectory of this arc as one in which contemporary artists and activists could reclaim such strategies, in order to resist and contest the binary and polarising conditions defined by the populist politics of our post truth era. As suggested in the introduction to this essay, here we look to counter-cultural movements led by creative practitioners addressing some of the most defining inequalities of our times. Practitioners challenging where and how the digital architectures we inhabit facilitate and perpetuate bias and injustice.

Artists thinking both critically and responsively about our relationship to emerging technologies, offer both new critical models of working, as well as progressive frameworks

¹⁵ Cambridge Analytica secured a fifteen million pound investment from US billionaire and computer scientist Robert Mercer, while working on the US presidential election campaign.

of thinking, which in turn create access points to nuanced and diverse discourses. Contemporary practitioners such as Stephanie Dinkins and Joy Buolamwini, who work both transversely and subversively with new media, *do* believe in the emancipatory, empowering and democratising capacities of the digital environments we traverse. But equally they feel it is vitally important to challenge the assumptions these technologies impose upon us. When we consider not only the major Facebook data and privacy breeches already discussed, but also the current developments in AI and 5G infrastructures as we move toward the smart home, and the smart city. It couldn't be a more pertinent time for artists to be asking who runs our digital ecosystem? Who is it serving, who it is able to represent, and crucially, who is invited to participate and help shape its future?

Diversity, equality and digital (in)justice

Examining the work of Stephanie Dinkins and Joy Buolamwini reveals that such questions are central to their respective practices. Both share interests and motivations in ensuring technological advance can both involve and represent as broad a spectrum of people as possible, and be as ethnically diverse as the societies within which we live. Both practitioners principally address such issues through prioritising the importance of intervening into the way machine learning, data sets and algorithmic processes are being developed. This is to recognise at this important juncture, that one of the biggest challenges we face, is to ensure that pre-existing human biases do not seamlessly transition into the digital sphere, resulting in exclusionary and discriminatory experiences for so many.

In discussing the importance of ensuring that the largely invisible practices of digital injustice are *not* hard wired into the new technologies of the future, it is crucial to acknowledge that for more than thirty years, the world of coding has been dominated by well-educated white males. It is essential for this to be constantly contested and re-evaluated, and for the tech sector as a whole to address why so many women, and people from non-white demographics, are so desperately under represented. According to Google's most recent Annual Diversity Report, despite some improvements in recent years, sixty eight percent of Google's tech workforce remains male, and less than four percent are

black.¹⁶ Within this context, it is reassuring to learn that some of the most prominent artists and thinkers alert to how our future is being encoded, are non-male, people of colour. People often drawing on their own personal experiences of prejudice, in order to develop effective critical and creative responses.

Looking more closely at the work of self-proclaimed Poet of Code, Ghanaian-American computer scientist and digital activist Joy Buolamwini, reveals that probing questions about the future of coding, is central to her work as founder of the *Algorithmic Justice League*. Similarly to organisations such as Black Girls Code,¹⁷ AJL proposes a new inclusive encoding movement, which Buolamwini refers to as *in-coding*. Through positioning social change a central priority in the making and testing of data sets, practices of *in-coding* ensure full spectrum teams are responsible for monitoring co-workers' inconsistencies and blind spots. Buolamwini believes inclusive training sets have the potential to unlock immense levels of digital equality, as the foundations for making 'algorithms that represent the fair and equal societies we want for the future'.¹⁸

The work of US based artist and researcher Stephanie Dinkins specifically draws our attention to marginalised groups and communities disproportionately impacted by data-centric technologies. Described by Dinkins, the work acts as a vehicle for developing 'platforms for dialog about artificial intelligence, as it intersects race, gender, aging, and our future histories'.¹⁹ In practice, her work asks us to deeply consider how we as citizens can best understand and shape our relationship to big data, and the digital environments created by big tech. In doing so, Dinkins focuses on *grass roots* strategies for technological intervention and resistance, which in distinction to the work of Buolamwini, (which is rooted in software and coding innovation), uniquely develops from very personal experiences, and human interactions.

¹⁶ Google Annual Diversity Report (2020), <https://diversity.google/annual-report/>

¹⁷ Black Girls Code is a New York and Oakland based *not for profit* organisation, providing technology education for African-American young women.

¹⁸ Joy Buolamwini, Ted Talk Online 'How I'm Fighting Bias In Algorithms', (16 Nov, 2016). <https://www.ailunited.org>

¹⁹ Stephanie Dinkins own website, 'Biography' section, (nd), Para 1. <https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/about.html>

Through projects such as *AI.Assembly* and the ongoing *Project al-Khwarizmi (PAK)*, Dinkins has developed a community engagement model in order to facilitate discussion and exchange around key issues of digital injustice. Workshops within her local community in Brooklyn, New York for example, focus on empowering a proactive and questioning level of understanding about how the complexities of computational systems work, and crucially how these effect people's day to day lives. Often this vital knowledge sharing leads to proactive application, as similarly to the aspirations of some of Buolamwini's projects, workshops often result in the collaborative designing of new models of inclusive data sets.

Through developing data sets in an autonomous and independent capacity, we can recognise that both Dinkins and Buolamwini are primarily focused on countering the dominance of the algorithmic processes developed and controlled by big tech. In doing so these practitioners contest the binary and polarising way in which online narratives are presented to us, offering a potential path towards experiencing both online information and image narratives, *outside* of overtly financialised structures. Instead guided by the moral and ethical frameworks inherent in striving towards digital equality.

As discussed, much of the work of both Dinkins and Buolamwini addresses the largely *invisible* practices of computational injustice. Although crucially important and hugely impactful, the ethical coding practices of digital activists often remain largely unseen. It may therefore be important to additionally illuminate ways in which creative practitioners are creating very *visible*, visual responses to the digital inequalities we face. This is to consider how material and images made by artists can communicate distinctly differently, to those we may experience more readily online. In addition, this is to turn our attention towards the potential for artists as innovators to develop independent, *visually led* networks and online initiatives, re-evaluating how we think about what it means to be part of an online community.

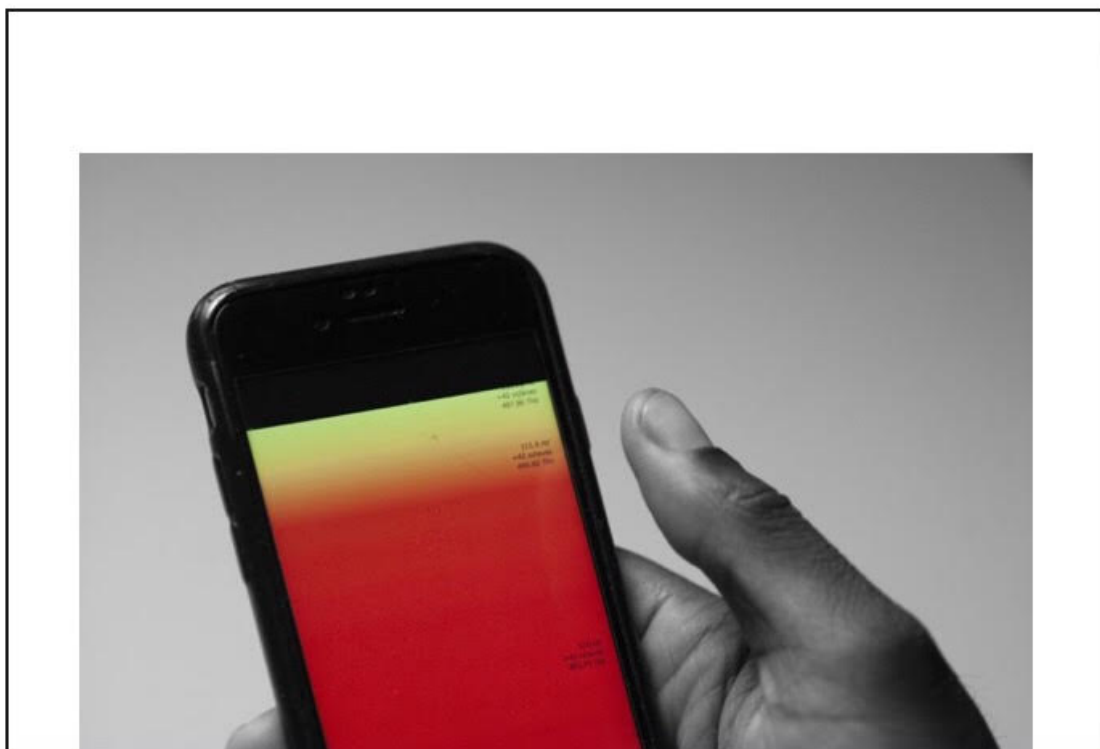
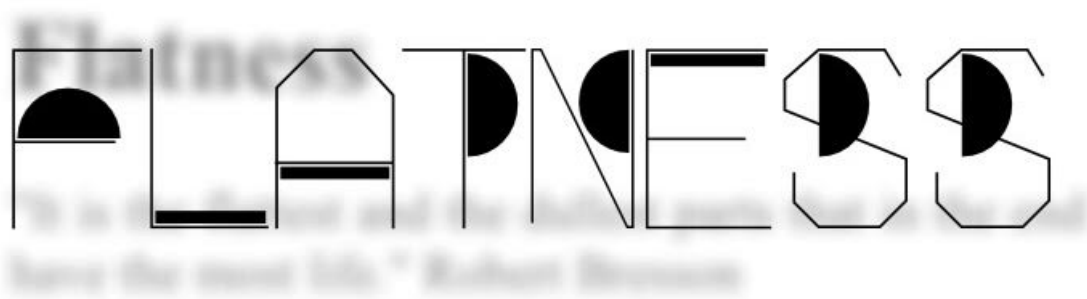
Visually led - alternative models of online communities

Independent curator, writer and educator Shama Khanna offers a substantial and rigorous critique in relation to issues of digital inequality and injustice, through long-term research and commissioning project *Flatness*. The complex remit and expansive scope of both the content and related discourses which *Flatness* encompass, are visually and aesthetically prioritised through the unique visual format of the online platform. These qualities are defined by its autonomous nature and structure. The content of the site centres the visual sensibilities of artists' moving image practices, through its continuous presentation of new works, as well as related material and texts by invited contributors. Content on the site is also developed through the invitation of guest curators, which underlines its ability and aspiration to develop networked cultures which have the potential to build new kinds of online communities. This is further emphasised through the interactive elements of the platform, such as the calendar and comments feeds – coupled with open access, no log ins or requirements to make payments in order to view works. This encourages an active exchange from a community built around, and in support of, the critical and social contextualisation of the work showcased.

In emphasising the priorities of interactivity, and the building of new online networks and communities, *Flatness* encourages us to see the potential of independent and autonomous forms of connectivity, within which issues of diversity and equality are both fundamental and embedded. Khanna's *Flatness* project demonstrates a distinct resolve to reflect on the challenges Western societies currently face as a result of the 'objectifications of racism, sexism and capitalism', and the extent to which this turns 'people of colour, those who identify as women, and workers into things and commodities'.²⁰ As similarly evident in the work of Buolamwini and Dinkins, *Flatness* is positioned within a framework of critique which

²⁰ Shama Khanna, 'About' section, *Flatness* website, (nd), Para 6. <https://flatness.eu/uncategorized/about/>

aims to challenge the well-established monopolisation of exploitative forms of technological development, by the white corporate elite.



COMMENTS

Flatness screengrab Feb 2019, showing artwork by Nikhil Vettukattil © Shama Khanna, 2021.
Image courtesy of flatness.eu, and reproduced with the permission of Shama Khanna.

With these guiding principles both firmly established and understood, we can turn our attention to the potential of what the *Flatness* model could offer; how might it be both adopted and progressed? Quickly we can envisage how *Flatness* could be developed into alternative forms of social media networking. In fact, in an interview with art critic and editor Henry Broome, Khanna refers to this ongoing project as a 'mouldable alternative' to the 'extractive and manipulative'²¹ business models of commercially run social media services. Through paying close attention to the critical framing of the *Flatness* project, we are reminded that any social media service run and controlled by global tech companies such as Google and Facebook, (or indeed new services such as Vero or MeWe)²², have the potential to expose their users to multiple forms of data breach, as extensively discussed in the earlier stages of this essay.

Crucially, Khanna additionally prompts us to remember that through the prioritising of both data harvesting and data surveillance in order to meet their corporate and capital accumulation demands, commercially driven services fundamentally exist to both conform to and serve the aggressive market economies of late capitalism. As such, they are embedded within the structures and priorities of a neo-liberal tech agenda, which as we are now fully aware, has grave consequences as a result of the dramatic scaling and expansion of prominent platforms, coupled with a distinct lack of online monitoring and regulation.

Catalysed by the rampant acceleration of a prevalent disruptor culture which has migrated across our economic, social and political arena's - we have seen such consequences include the polarisation of viewpoints and entrenchment of binary arguments, which has led to the demonising of minorities and those with opposing views. These trends, coupled with the extreme digital injustices previously discussed, should indicate to us that many of the issues we are currently encountering in the western world are synonymous with, or at least

²¹ Shama Khanna, Extended version of an interview with Henry Broome originally published by Spike Art Magazine, *Flatness website*, (nd), Para 5. <https://flatness.eu/uncategorized/interview-with-henry-broome-for-spike-art-magazine/>

²² Vero and MeWe are two of many new social sharing platforms illuminated as viable alternatives to the larger, well known platforms such as Facebook. Both platforms make substantial claims in relation to issues of personal privacy in a post Cambridge Analytica scandal world. It may be important to point out that Vero and MeWe are both owned and run by individual billionaire corporate executives, in pursuit of monopolising on a new potential market place.

analogised by our relationship to, and dependence upon commercially driven social media services. This leads us to reasonably question whether such platforms are able to communicate and share the ideas of a potentially dramatically different future. We might ask whether platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, have the capacity or capabilities to deliver future thinking, facilitated through a revised approach to our digital architectures? Do they have the ability to become advocates for a digital ecosystem which ensures new models of knowledge sharing, centring revised moral and ethical frameworks which assume a rigorous relationship to veracity?

As suggested throughout this essay, in order to address such questions we again turn towards the innovations of creative practitioners, and by doing so we reach a final but crucially important point of discussion. Creative practices discussed throughout this essay seem to share a quality and emphasis, which commercially driven platforms seem unable to substantially address and prioritise. This is to understand that our experiences on and offline should not be portrayed as distant and disjointed, but in fact as intrinsically linked. Platforms of the future need to promote the important message that how we behave and interact online have very tangible moral, social and *physical* consequences within our offline existence. In reflecting on the political period of 2016 to the present, this message could not be more pertinent when considering the direct correlation we have seen between the rise in online/virtual abuse, and verbal and physical attacks on our streets.

New models, supported by appropriate funding mechanisms

As contemporary artists and activists constantly develop new and unique creative ways of working within the digital architectures we traverse, are we now beginning to see the emergence of genuine alternatives? A possible antidote to the proliferation of platforms which prioritise instant consumption and reaction, over sustained thinking, reflection and the progressive sharing of ideas. If so, then the next step might be to further realise the potential for creative practitioners to coalesce around new models of online communities, which seek to replace the divisive disregard for truth, characterised by our post factual era. This is to reinstate the authorities of veracity, sincerity and authenticity, coupled with values

of social, cultural consciousness and justice. A model of engagement which renders the right wing populist distortions of multiple narrative creation obsolete, in favour of a clarity of vision, of a strong and central narrative which can be believed in, invested in, and built upon.

This essay has continually discussed ways in which the development of commercially driven social media services, and the subsequent picture narratives they promote, have been capitalised upon by right wing political groups and campaigns, leading to an ultimate threat to our Western democratic systems. The two central critical framings of the essay, have orientated around the role of the capitalist structures and economic imperatives which mainstream digital platforms are embedded within. Secondly, a questioning of the role of the state and governments in developing an appropriate level of regulation, in response to the expedient growth and influence of such platforms. Through writing this essay, I have discovered that these questions now need to be extended beyond the role governments might take in assuming a greater level of accountability in order to protect citizens, as well as the vital voice which our democracies afford them. These questions need to be addressed through national and state wide campaigns to encourage the social consciousness away from commercially driven platforms, which as much discussed, both derive from and are wedded to the *modus operandi* of big tech, incorporating the failings of both late capitalism and neo liberal agendas.

A sudden and abrupt call for citizens to not use commercially driven social media platforms, such as campaigns we have increasingly seen in recent years encouraging people to delete their Facebook accounts, will not work. The structures of such platforms are simply too embedded into our lives, due to the fact that they derive from an economic model which has evolved into a surveillance capitalist logic, infiltrating almost every aspect of our online lives. Therefore, we first need to address and erode these economic structures, along with the social, cultural and political perimeters which such platforms have so forcefully co-opted people to adopt. Only by addressing these broader issues, will we truly be able to understand what makes it so difficult for people to 'opt out' of platforms such as Facebook, and in turn to best understand how to offer a supportive structure in order to allow them to do so. Mental health support should be a priority, in relation to the detrimental cognitive

and psychological affect the dependence on such platforms has led to, which has been so dramatically overlooked by big tech. The severity of these issues means a structure of state support needs to go far beyond Governments attempting to retrospectively regulate how platform's function.

We need to call for a state and Government led campaign *and* support package over a number of years, which enables citizens to move away from social media services run by big tech. Instead embracing well regulated, new and emergent equivalents, which can offer the vital online communities needed by so many, particularly those in disadvantaged and vulnerable positions. But through networks with different priorities, as well as appropriate means, and funding models. Platforms which can therefore function without the hidden and encrypted deviances of commercial platforms, which overwhelmingly value the monetisation of our predictive data, over the importance and potential of human relations, connection and sense of community. As demonstrated by this essay, creatives can be a vital driving force in a new online consciousness, with the ultimate aim of an ethical digital revolution. States and governments across the Western world should help, fund and support them to do so.