The War Itself: Cornelia Parker's Official Election Art, Post-2016 Democracy and the Weaponisation of Social Media

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[ABSTRACT]

Since 2001, Britain's Parliament has appointed an official election artist to document UK general elections, echoing the century-long British, Australian and Canadian tradition of official war artists. Cornelia Parker, whose work often addresses conflict and democracy, covered the 2017 UK general election. Prime Minister Theresa May called the election less than a year after the historic Brexit referendum in the hope of breaking the deadlock in Parliament that was stalling any possibility of a Brexit deal with the European Union. The 2016 Brexit campaign was a divisive moment in UK political life, marked by misinformation, rising ethno-nationalism and violent political assassination. Parker has expressed her concern about the outcome of the Brexit vote, and the election of US President Donald Trump only a few months later. Parker's election-artist works *Left Right & Centre* and *Election Abstract* address these deep political divisions and the polarisation of the British press and the election through social media. However, some key forces underlying these recent electoral shocks occurred *invisibly*, through microtargeted campaigns, fake news and voter suppression. This article considers the perhaps inevitable gap that occurs within an artist's attempt to visualise democratic tensions in which some of the most influential forces are purposely invisible.

[KEYWORDS]

Election artist; Political conflict; Cornelia Parker; Brexit; Social media

Introduction

When a snap general election was called in the United Kingdom in 2017, Cornelia Parker, one of that nation's most prominent and celebrated contemporary artists dealing often in war and conflict, was appointed as the official British election artist. The 2017 election followed less than a year after the 2016 Brexit referendum, as the Conservative government, committed to making good on the outcome of the 2016 referendum, hoped to have elected more pro-Brexit MPs into the House of Commons in an attempt to push through Prime Minister Theresa May's deal with the European Union. The plan backfired, forcing May into leading a minority government, the second in a decade. This further prolonged and intensified the political turbulence and eventually led to May's tearful resignation in 2019 and yet another general election later that year, called by the new prime minister, Boris Johnson. The 2016 Brexit referendum is commonly recognised as one of the most fierce and toxic votes in modern British history. Its campaigns were marked by widespread and blatant disinformation, overt ethno-nationalist politics, and the violent assassination of the pro-Remain MP Jo Cox.

With the election following barely one year after the Brexit vote, and being triggered by the political impossibility of delivering the outcome of the referendum, Parker may well have felt more like an official war artist than an official election artist. Parker created two significant video works as the 2017 election artist. The first was *Left Right & Centre* (2017) a haunting and aesthetically rich work shot mostly by drone in the chamber of Britain's House of Commons, the democratically elected lower house of government. The work depicts the dispatch boxes at the centre of the Commons chamber stacked with various British daily newspapers, representing the left, right and centre of British politics. The drone's rotors stir up the pages of the newspapers until the entire chamber is chaotically littered in drifts of newsprint. Parker's other work, *Election Abstract* (2017), on the other hand, focuses on social media and, by contrast, is fast-cut and frenetic. The words 'LEFT' and 'RIGHT' flash before our eyes. Parker's election-artist works clearly capture the post-2016 zeitgeist of UK politics and tacitly implicate the usual suspects—the British press and social media.

In this article, I will contextualise Parker's election-artist works, *Left Right & Centre* and *Election Abstract*, within their social and political context. In attempting to address the 2017 election within this context, Parker's works demonstrate something of the broader ongoing struggle in much critically engaged contemporary art to grapple with, and make visual, the fundamental *invisibility* of the forces at play in post-2016 democracy. The stakes are high: liberal democracy is under direct threat, as A.C. Grayling says, reflecting on Brexit and that other electoral shock of 2016, the US presidential election of Donald J. Trump, through 'manipulation of elections by interests employing big money, "Big Data", hacking, partisan press controlled by powerful and wealthy non-citizens'.[1] Paradoxically, in the post-2016 political landscape it is elections themselves, the seemingly vital pillar of liberal democracy, that are central to the undermining of democracy. 'Elections today', says Arjun Appardurai, 'have become a way to "exit" from democracy itself, rather than a means to repair and debate politics democratically.'[2] Indeed, since 2016 the pressures on liberal democracy have only intensified, with the groundless accusations by the outgoing US president that his resounding defeat in the 2020 presidential election was the result of a massive electoral fraud. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic magnified the post-2016 assault on democracy, mutating into hyper-individualistic Sovereign Citizen movements, anti-maskers, 'Plandemic' conspiracy theories and the mainstreaming of QAnon pseudo-politics and eventually leading to a violent insurrection led by Q supporters, Proud Boys and Boogaloo Bois at the US Capitol Building on 6 January 2021.

I will briefly discuss some aspects of this new political paradigm that are more relevant to issues of visuality, which in turn mount a particularly vexing challenge to Parker, an artist who confesses to being ‘really pissed off with the world as it is: with Brexit and Trump’ and whose work attempts to grapple with the downward pressures at play in Western democracy today.[3] Through discussion of Parker’s election-artist works, this article provides less of an analysis of her practice and focuses more on the larger issue of why exactly it is so vexing to contemporary artists, working primarily within the realms of visuality and aesthetics, to address the present political paradigm. To do this, we need to grasp some of the important ways that the very character of politics—and, importantly, the media—has rapidly shifted in the short time since the beginning of this century.

Left Right & Centre

The British election artist scheme began in 2001 and, not surprisingly, has been compared to Britain’s official war artist scheme, which began during the First World War and, alongside similar schemes in Australia and Canada, still continues after more than a century. After Parker was appointed as Britain’s fifth election artist, critic Michael Prodger saw a parallel: ‘And what is an election but a form of war by other means?’[4] Another way in which the election artist scheme is similar to the work of UK, Australian and Canadian official war artists is that, despite the tendency in each of these schemes in this century towards appointing well-established contemporary artists to the role—such as Steve McQueen (UK), Shaun Gladwell (Australia), Gertrude Kearns (Canada)—the work that these artists produce tends to be regarded as an ‘inset’ to their main oeuvre, as an ancillary facet of their artistic careers that can be critically omitted without any significant impact on our understandings of their overall practice. This has certainly been the case with the British election artist scheme, which has received little attention from the media until the appointment of Parker and, even, very little critical engagement by art theorists and critics since. Possibly one reason for this lack of engagement is the often documentary-oriented approach of previous artists, such as Simon Roberts, whose photographs of small Parliament Square protests, urban rallies and suburban door-knocking echo news media images, only with almost a God’s-eye-view detachment. Election artists are asked to represents the British public’s engagement with the democratic process, while remaining politically impartial. As I will argue in this article, in the post-2016 political landscape—in the UK and elsewhere in the world—democracy itself has, paradoxically, been politicised. So, in some important ways, being plainly *for* democracy is no longer seen as being ideologically neutral. Perhaps, then, given the combative tenor of elections in Western liberal democracies in the last five years, it is very fitting, as Prodger suggests, that a contemporary artist whose works frequently address conflict and destruction was approached to become the British election artist for the 2017 general election.

Within the UK context, Fleet Street, the synecdoche for the British national press, has long been instrumental in swaying the outcome of general elections. Infamously, and not without justification, following the 1992 election victory for Conservative John Major, the front page of Rupert Murdoch’s *The Sun* read, ‘IT’S THE SUN WOT WON IT’.[5] Parker’s filmic *Left Right & Centre* focuses on the still persistent electoral influence of Fleet Street, installing copies of the *Financial Times*, *The Sun*, *The Daily Mail* and other British newspapers in Britain’s House of Commons. The newspapers are stacked high on the clerks’ table, a space occupied by copies of the Bible and the Queen’s ceremonial mace during Parliamentary sittings. Obliquely, the work suggests something of the privileged access afforded to an official election artist appointed by the Parliament, utilising the very seat of British representational democracy as its set. The work begins by establishing its context with low-lit images of the worn green leather benches of the House of Commons, with, eventually, a drone moving into view in the centre of the chamber. The only sound in the work is the mechanical whirring of the drone, at first sounding like a military helicopter and then more like a swarm of flying insects. We then see through the ‘eye’ of the drone, looking down upon the dispatch boxes at the centre of the chamber and the stacks of newspapers. The downdraft of the drone’s rotors slowly blows the pages around, until the entire chamber is littered with ‘trash’: ‘a tale of two titties’ reads one page, ‘sponsors of terror’ reads another. The suggestion that the political mess in the now-dissolved parliament is the work of the toxic British press is clear.

Parker arranged the left-wing papers on the left side of the table and the right-wing papers on its right side. As Parker notes, these are the newspapers that are actually provided by the Parliament and are read by the Members and Lords: ‘There were far more right wing papers than there were left: big stacks of *Daily Mail*, all this despicable press that had been read by MPs’.[6] However, as influential as Fleet Street remains in British politics, more broadly, over the last twenty years and across the globe, print and broadcast news media have been gradually but surely losing their purchase on electoral influence. Voters are, of course, no less ideologically influenced by the media they consume; but the characteristics of that media and of its consumption by voters has radically shifted. Parker is clearly aware of the inherent limitations of *Left Right & Centre*’s focus on the press, and in her second election-artist work, *Election Abstract,* she attempts to address the shifts in mediated political discourse. However, as I will argue, the dialectical difference between the two works ultimately speaks to the invisibility of much political discourse today and, as a direct result, the extent to which it evades visual representation. To a significant extent, liberal democracy is now played out in media that is ambient and ubiquitous and yet narrowly targeted and largely unseen. I will discuss these conditions in more detail before coming back to Parker’s *Election Abstract*.

Ambient and Ubiquitous

In the days following the attacks on the US of 11 September 2001, 90 per cent of Americans learned about the attacks from TV. Pew Research found that even 88 per cent of ‘internet users’—a category in itself that speaks volumes about the novelty of the internet in 2001—said TV was their main source for news, while 8 per cent said they got most of their news from the internet.[7] In 2001, the internet was *some other place*, a virtual entity separate from the real world, which we consciously chose to access, if we wanted to. In the US, dial-up internet access was at its peak in 2001: 87 per cent of internet users were accessing the internet by making a deliberate choice of disconnecting their landline, plugging a modem cord into their phone line socket and dialling into the internet.[8] The World Wide Web was still very much in its infancy, primarily a nascent mass publishing medium, not a social network. Social media simply did not exist. Globally, only 513 million people (8.6 per cent of the world’s population) had internet access.[9] When broadband internet began to take over in the mid-noughties—enabling high-speed continuous connectivity—it radically changed the ways in which people engaged with the internet, becoming more likely to create, manage and share content, more likely to turn to the internet for information, particularly news.[10] Constant connectivity led to the internet absorbing everyday behaviours, such as going to the bank or reading a newspaper. The introduction of the smart phone (iPhones arrived on 29 June 2007) brought with it ubiquitous connectivity with mobile internet. In 2006, Adam Greenfield predicted that:

> A mobile phone is something that can be switched off or left at home. A computer is something that can be shut down, unplugged, walked away from. But the technology we’re discussing here – ambient, ubiquitous, capable of insinuating itself into all the

> apertures everyday life affords it – will form our environment in a way neither of those technologies can. There should be little doubt that its advent will profoundly shape both the world and our experience of it in the years ahead.[11]

The internet became ambient and ubiquitous at the same time that it became a social medium: with YouTube in 2005, Twitter and Facebook in 2006.[12] As Greenfield predicted, 'Computing has leapt off the desktop and insinuated itself in everyday life'.[13] In 2005, 5 per cent of American adults used at least one social media site; by February 2019, it was 72 per cent—with Facebook used by 69 per cent of Americans. In late 2008, 100 million people worldwide were using Facebook at least monthly; that figure reached 1 billion by 2012, and 2.701 billion by 2020, around one third of the world's population.[14] In terms of daily use, 70 per cent of US Facebook users now use it every day[15]—that is about half of all American adults; globally, in 2021 1.91 billion people use Facebook daily[16]—that is about 25 per cent of the world's population. Despite scandalous breaches of privacy and trust, and the platform's functionality not evolving significantly in the last ten years, Facebook's regular usage continues to grow at a steady rate. Facebook states altruistically that its mission is:

> to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.[17]

Facebook's role as a conduit for what is going on in the world, and for the sharing of that content, has become a central purpose for its regular users. By 2018, 68 per cent of US adults were getting news through social media, with 43 per cent specifically getting it through Facebook.[18] At exactly the same time, the much smaller viewership in the US of news on major TV networks, such as ABC, CBS and NBC, was decreasing at the rate of 7 per cent per year.[19]

In the early years of social media, the newly found capacity for users to communicate through peer-to-peer connections was met with wide-eyed optimism around the possibilities that could arise from these new democratic media. In 2011, Brian Loader and Dan Mercea suggested that the rise of Facebook, YouTube and Twitter had brought about a new age in participatory politics and wrote of social media's 'virtual public sphere'.[20] Social media seemed to have potential to realise Jürgen Habermas's democratic ideal of the public sphere. According to Habermas, the public sphere has been diminished in modernity because of the imperatives of corporate interests, which ultimately control the public discourses that dominate the media.[21] As Lisa Kruse, Dawn Norris, and Jonathan Flinchum summarise it, a true public sphere 'requires unlimited access to information, equal and protected participation, and the absence of institutional influence, particularly regarding the economy'.[22] On the face of it, social media initially appeared to satisfy these criteria, with, as Loader and Mercea describe, its 'focus upon the role of the citizen-user as the driver of democratic innovation through the self-actualized networking of citizens engaged in lifestyle and identity politics'.[23] Social media, they optimistically predicted, would mean that citizens would no longer be mere passive consumers of mass media, government propaganda and corporate spin, but rather 'are instead actually enabled to challenge discources [sic], share alternative perspectives and publish their own opinions'.[24] At that time, Heather Brook wrote optimistically about a 'New Enlightenment' and 'discovering truths about the way we live, about politics and power'.[25] The key role of social media in facilitating communication among participants in the 2011 Arab Spring, Anonymous, Wikileaks and the Occupy

Movement seemed to prove the democratising force of social media.[26] Angela Nagle characterises that heady moment ten years ago as 'the leaderless digital counter-revolution'.[27]

At the same time, Eric Schmidt, Google's then CEO, foresaw that 'Most people will have personalized newsreading experiences on mobile-type devices that will largely replace their traditional reading of newspapers'.[28] Shortly after, Elie Pariser predicted that while news was once delivered within an entire newspaper or TV program, it would become broken into individual stories and searched and filtered algorithmically.[29] However, Pariser also warned that the automated algorithms would deliver the news and opinions that we are likely to want to see. We would become in danger of existing in a 'filter bubble': 'personalization filters will get better and better at overlaying themselves on individuals' recommendations'.[30] Similarly, like-minded people within a social group are more likely to share political affinities and thus may amplify each other's political positions, creating 'echo chambers' and making it 'ever less likely that we'll come to be close with people very different from us, online or off—and thus it's less likely we'll come into contact with different points of view'.[31] In 2015, Facebook introduced its 'Trending News' functionality, which meant that news would be delivered into our Facebook newsfeed from sources we have liked, as well as according to our preceding engagement with posts and comments.[32] Megan Knight argues that 'In the interests of keeping you on the site, or making it a comfortable place to hang out, Facebook doesn't challenge you, it doesn't make you think or make you uncomfortable, and it will deliberately shield you from things you disagree with'.[33]

Election Abstract

Until recently, *The Wall Street Journal*'s now defunct 'Blue Feed, Red Feed' site provided a striking visualisation of how American liberal and conservative news feeds differ, displaying two live news feeds from Facebook side by side, with the 'liberal' news feed on the left (from sources such as MSNBC, Occupy Democrats, and The Raw Story) and the 'conservative' news feed on the right (from sources such as Fox News, Breitbart and National Review).[34] However, there have been significant challenges to the filter bubble thesis in recent years, such as Alex Brun's well-supported *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, which concludes that the idea is 'thoroughly untenable': 'in a hyperconnected and deeply polarised world, the most important filter remains in our heads, not in our networks: it is the cognitive filter that makes us reject some ideas out of hand, even despite the evidence'.[35] Either way, it is this less visible dimension of political discourse, which blurs the lines of public and private space, that is the focus of Parker's second election-artist work. *Election Abstract* is a vastly contrasting work to the pace and atmosphere of *Left Right & Centre*. Focusing on social media, this second video work is a fast-cut montage of images and sounds curated from Instagram.

Parker says, 'I've never done social media before and it was required for this job, so I became an Instagrammer at the age of 60. Photographing things for my daily posts was like keeping an election diary, a way of recording where I went.'[36] As such, the form of *Election Abstract* is much more fragmented, in a fast-paced montage of images, often (as is the case with many Instagram images) cropped, filtered, and framed to appear quite flat and abstracted. In the images that rush past, the same newspapers appear as those seen in *Left Right & Centre*, but this time cut with TV news coverage of the election campaign and results. Frequently, the stencilled words 'LEFT' and 'RIGHT' flash across the screen, reinforcing the way in which British politics since Brexit a year earlier polarised the UK in a seemingly irresolvable political rupture. *Election Abstract*, perhaps much more than *Left Right & Centre*, captures something of the emotionality that has dominated British political life since Brexit. This, in turn, is symptomatic of a deeper condition in Western liberal democracy, specifically the rapid decline in the widespread faith in a range of civic systems of representative democracy and record keeping, which has resulted in populistic suspicion of mainstream politics, science, banking, journalism, academia, and experts in general, and most recently has manifested in distrust of COVID-19 vaccines and protests against government mask mandates and lockdowns.

William Davies observes that ‘democracies are being transformed by the power of feeling in ways that cannot be ignored and reversed’.[37] That is, in the new populism that now dominates, feeling has taken over the world.[38] Facts and statistics are seen as having been created by technocrats and globalists to serve a privileged cultural elite;[39] while emotion, instinct, feeling, and opinion are in ascendency. Objective scientific facts, such as the science behind anthropogenic climate change or vaccination, have become politicised. Davies argues that this rise in feeling over fact is a dismantling of the European Enlightenment thinking that arose following the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century and drove the establishment of the civic state-level bureaucratic systems of record that characterise Western representative democracy. He argues, ‘traditionally, it is through these systems, which are grounded in written testimonies and public statements, that we have learned what is going on in the world’.[40] The internet—initially the World Wide Web, and then social media—has effectively decentralised and fragmented these systems, as information has become multifarious. While this has democratised and empowered information, it has also transformed the status of empirical evidence.[41] ‘Once people stop trusting systems of representation in general, and especially in the political system,’ argues Davies, ‘they become less interested in what counts as “true” and what as “false”. Liars can become tolerated or even admired, once the very foundations of a political system are no longer viewed as credible.’[42] Parker’s *Election Abstract* plays in an intersection of a loss of trust in systems of representational democracy and a more conceptual loss of trust in symbolic systems of visual representation.

However, while Parker’s *Election Abstract* articulates the dizzying ambience of politics on social media and *Left Right & Centre* addresses the remaining influence of Fleet Street in forming British political opinion, another dimension remains beyond the reach of Parker’s work. Indeed, and this is my overarching point, this dimension remains vexingly invisible across the board, rendering it difficult, if not impossible, for the visual media of contemporary art to address. Arguably, the greatest threat to liberal democracy is not so much the confirmation bias of social media’s filter bubbles or algorithmically generated news content; rather, it is much more nefarious and invisible than that. The core of the issue is the exploitation of the very different approach to advertising within the search engine and social media ecosystem. When placing an advertisement in a search engine or in social media, an advertiser is given options that are simply impossible within preceding forms of media advertising. Social media ads are not only microtargeted to geographic locations and demographics, but build upon profile modelling using several thousand data points for each individual. In advertising in print or broadcast media, an advertiser has a target audience in mind, yet hits a wide audience; only a small percentage of people driving past a billboard, or turning the pages of a magazine, or watching a TV commercial break will be interested in what is being advertised. And even when *we* are not the intended audience, we still see that billboard or TV ad and get a sense of the public discourse. However, social media and search engine advertising means that only very specific eyes will see an ad. For a well-funded organisation with budgets of millions of dollars, the potential to target communication is breathtaking. And it can function outside of the purview of any regulatory body or reach of electoral legislation.

This capacity to intensively target social media advertising was a significant issue in the 2016 US presidential election. During that year, the internet was flooded with low-quality misleading pseudo-journalism published on URLs that mimic legitimate sites, such as bloomberg.ma, abcnews.com.co, breaking-cnn.com and washingtonpost.com.co—that is, the ‘fake news’ of false information, hoaxes, noise, and confusion. Much of this bogus content was driven by straightforward commercial rather than political motives. From 2012 to 2016, Veles, a small town in the Republic of Macedonia, became notorious for creating low-quality plagiarised websites. Advertising space on these sites could be sold by the hosts, using services such as Google AdSense and Appnexus. In essence, a service like Google AdSense tracks what we search on Google and will place advertisements on web pages that host AdSense ads. As many of the young people of Veles quickly discovered, masses of internet traffic—and thus, ad revenue—could be driven to their sites by baiting readers to click on social media ads carrying sensationalistic clickbait headlines. It proved so lucrative for the young people of Veles that many dropped out of school to create similar plagiarised and fake clickbait sites, which were advertised and organically shared on social media. As contemporary artist and technologist James Bridle says, ‘in early 2016, the same kids discovered that the biggest and most voracious consumers of news – any news at all – were Trump voters, who gathered in large and easily targeted Facebook groups’, and created a stream of seemingly legitimate news stories claiming that the Pope had declared support for Donald Trump, or that Hillary Clinton had been indicted.[43]

One of the most widely shared stories out of Macedonia carried the headline ‘Hillary Clinton in 2013: “I would like to see people like Donald Trump run for office; they’re honest and can’t be bought”’. On 17 October 2016, a site called therightists.com ran the bogus story,[44] which was then regurgitated by conservativestate.com in Macedonia.[45] On 28 October 2016, less than two weeks before the election, the bogus Clinton quote along with a link to the conservativestate.com article appeared on Twitter. The reliable fact-checking site Snopes.com debunked the article the same day,[46] yet it was still read 480,000 times a week later.[47] As this suggests, the most ironic, unlikely, provocative, outrageous, attention-grabbing fake stories are likely to attract the most views, and therefore the most ad revenue for their perpetrators. Beyond creating income for otherwise impoverished and disenfranchised youth in eastern Europe, and in the process propagating support for Trump, the flood of fake news in 2016 had other potentially deleterious effects on public discourse. Fake news inundated newsfeeds alongside legitimate journalism from proven, more reliable sources, leading readers, as *The New York Times* suggested in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election, to shrug at the truth, ‘creating confusion, punching holes in what is true, causing a kind of fun-house effect that leaves the reader doubting everything, including real news’.[48] And it is possible that the legitimate AdSense ads that appeared on those pages inadvertently lent the appearance of legitimacy.

Voter Suppression

However, politically motivated, targeted communications on social media in the 2016 presidential election were not simply about distributing propaganda or fake news, but involved outright manipulation and trickery. One example of an anonymous disinformation campaign was the Twitter campaign targeted at Democrat voters urging them to ‘Save Time. Avoid the Line’ and ‘Vote from home’ by texting ‘Hillary’ to 59925. The ads carried the ‘Hillary’ logo and were distributed with English and Spanish taglines that urged, ‘Vote for Hillary and be part of history’, accompanied by images of Latina and African American women—the targeted demographic.[49] Of course, it is not possible to vote in a US presidential election by texting a candidate’s name to a number, so anyone who chose this option for voting wasted their vote. Typically, electoral disinformation carries either false branding, such as with the ‘Vote from home’ campaign, misleading branding or nothing at all to even suggest the origin of the material. It is impossible to trace who is responsible for the content that is shared, so it can be massively influential without any accountability whatsoever. Brian Friedberg and Joan Donovan designate the approach of campaigns such as ‘Vote from home’ with the particularly military-sounding term ‘pseudoanonymous influence operations’: ‘wherein politically motivated actors impersonate marginalized, underrepresented, and vulnerable groups to either malign, disrupt, or exaggerate their causes’.[50]

One such pseudoanonymous operation was ‘Blacktivist’. From 2015, Blacktivist appeared across a number of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, and quickly grew to be a fully formed African American activist movement, even organising marches and rallies. On Facebook, Blacktivist attracted 4.6 million likes, meaning that each of those users would see its regular posts.[51] It created and shared content that mimicked that of the genuine Black Lives Matter campaigns, such as images and videos of police brutality and memes. Following the 2016 presidential election, it was discovered by Facebook that Blacktivist was the invention of a company with the unremarkable and innocuous name of Internet Research Agency, based in Russia. Blacktivist passed as a genuine online movement; but why would a Russian company be at all concerned for the politics and welfare of African Americans? Sam Levin suggests in *The Guardian* that the immediate intention was to add fuel to the potential for social unrest in the United States and to ‘promote overall distrust in the political system with the hope of depressing black voters’ turnout’.[52]

Perhaps even more troubling, as the date for the 2016 presidential vote approached, Blacktivist accounts encouraged their followers *not* to vote for Hillary Clinton, saying ‘no lives matter to Hillary Clinton’, and instead encouraged African Americans to *not* vote (‘not voting is a way to exercise our rights’),[53] or to register a protest vote by directing their votes to Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate with no chance of winning the presidency, thus diverting votes from Clinton.[54] Eighteen months before that election, the US House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing titled ‘Confronting Russia’s Weaponization of Information’, which warned of ‘troll farms, regime-funded companies who spread messages online in social media and comment sections’.[55] In 2015, this sounded like paranoid science fiction. Yet, when Facebook deregistered Blacktivist in 2018, along with other pseudoanonymous pages such as Secured Borders, Heart of Texas, Being Patriotic, LGBT United and United Muslims, the content of these pages had been shared a total of 340 million times on social media, with the largest spikes in interactions in the weeks surrounding the US election.[56]

The now-defunct Cambridge Analytica, which was contracted by the 2016 Trump presidential campaign to run its digital marketing, has a history of deploying pseudoanonymous tactics. Cambridge Analytica was a subsidiary of SCL Group, a UK-based defence contractor specialising in data mining and computational analysis. Paul Hilder claims that Cambridge Analytica interfered in the 2010 general election in Trinidad and Tobago with the ‘Do So’ campaign, quoting a recording of Alexander Nix, then CEO of Cambridge Analytica, discussing a campaign to increase apathy amongst young Afro-Caribbean voters concerning the election: ‘We came up with this campaign which was all about “Be part of the gang, do something cool, be part of a movement.” And it was called the “Do So” campaign’, based around the message to ‘Do So. Don’t vote. Don’t be involved in politics. It’s like a sign of resistance against – not government, against politics. And voting.’[57] According to Hilder’s article, Nix claims this caused a 40 per cent decrease in 18- to 35-year-old Afro-Caribbean voters, which swung the election by 6 per cent towards their client, People’s Partnership.[58]

Shitposting the Persuadables

In the 2016 presidential election, Cambridge Analytica spent US$85 million on advertisements on Facebook alone for the Trump campaign.[59] The company first came to public prominence after the UK’s Channel 4 broadcast *Data, Democracy and Dirty Tricks* in March 2018, which revealed that the company had, without consent, gained the personal information of millions of Facebook users. Cambridge Analytica had worked with an academic data scientist to develop a Facebook personality test app that would acquire the personal data of the 270,000 users that used it, *and* their Facebook friends—meaning 87 million users had their personal data stolen without consent.[60] If the theft of this data was not aggressive enough, Cambridge Analytica then used this dataset to microtarget Facebook content to certain people in specific precincts in swing states during the 2016 election. Their particular targets were what they termed ‘The Persuadables’. Brittany Kaiser, the company’s former director of program development, says, ‘We bombarded them through blogs, websites, articles, videos, ads, every platform you can imagine, until they saw the world the way we wanted them to. Until they voted for our candidate.’[61] The methodology works as a highly responsive, near real-time feedback loop: ‘It’s like a boomerang. You send your data out, it gets analysed and it comes back to you as targeted messaging to change your behaviour.’[62] This is not simply ‘filter bubbles’, political advertising or even propaganda; this is the capacity to use masses of personal data and computational algorithms to directly target messages to specific people with the intention of influencing voting behaviours, including suppressing turnout and promoting voter apathy.

Pseudoanonymous sites, Russian troll farms, and fake news have the sum effect of a global-scale ‘shitposting’, which, as Robert Evans says, is ‘the act of throwing out huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose of provoking an emotional reaction in less Internet-savvy viewers’.[63] One aim of shitposting is to flood any online discussion with low-quality content to the extent that it no longer functions discursively, creating such a level of background noise that it overwhelms authoritative sources of information. Christopher Wylie, a data consultant who had worked with Cambridge Analytica, says, ‘then you start to question, why is it that mainstream media isn’t talking about these insane stories that I’m seeing all over the place. And then you establish distrust. And once they stop trusting the institutions, the media being one of them, you’ve now captured them.’[64] Another aim of shitposting is to generate emotional responses with misleading information, so that it provokes an initial response, and then counter-responses calling out the misleading story, followed by arguments about its veracity. The bogus Hillary Clinton quote (‘I would like to see people like Donald Trump run for office’) is still being retweeted up to this day, despite being discredited almost immediately. The political leaders who have benefited from these undemocratic practices, of course, only compound the problem.

Within the first month of his 2017 inauguration as President of the United States, Trump himself adopted the strategic destabilisation of trust in the media—in a double stroke of diabolical genius—by co-opting the term ‘fake news’, firstly to bend it away from the corrupting phenomenon that had aided his election, and secondly to redeploy it to mainstream fact-based journalism, casting all unfavourable news coverage as ‘fake news’. As MSNBC journalist Rachel Maddow observes, Trump’s appropriation of ‘fake news’ took the term away from ‘a specific and legitimate use … using it this new way rendered mute, rendered linguistically impossible, any analysis of that very real, very specific, initial problem for which that phrase was coined.’[65] Trump’s administration quickly ushered in the notion of ‘alternative facts’ and a new ‘post-truth’ paradigm.[66] By the end of the year, the president was even claiming to have invented the phrase ‘fake news’: ‘the media is really, the word I think one of the greatest of all terms I’ve come up with, is “fake”’.[67] Trump’s stream of untruths and twists on facts are exhausting, if not impossible, to be met point by point, and after several years of picking over multiple rhetorical tweets each day until 20 January 2021, the press was unable to hold the president to account in a way that *The Washington Post*, *Time*, and *The New York Times* had in 1972. Burke’s Fourth Estate is drowned in shitposting.

It is impossible to know the real extent of the impact of this electoral shitposting—the psychographic targeting of disinformation, fake news, and pseudoanonymous tactics—on the outcome of 2016’s two most notable electoral shocks, the election of Trump and the Brexit referendum. In the US presidential election, the outcome of the Electoral College vote came down to 77,744 votes in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Michigan, so it is possible that these methods tipped the election.[68] Following Brexit, the UK’s 2018 Parliamentary Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s inquiry into disinformation and ‘fake news’ concluded that the UK’s ‘Electoral law is not fit for purpose’, that it still assumes campaign information consists of billboards and leaflets, rather than the deployment of psychographic data science to microtarget advertising. It recommended ‘absolute transparency of online political campaigning, including clear, persistent banners on all paid-for political adverts and videos, indicating the source and the advertiser’.[69]

Conclusion

It is the invisibility of much of today’s supposedly public sphere of political discourse, and near impossibility of its representation, that Cornelia Parker attempts to capture in the dialectic she sets up between *Left Right & Centre* and *Election Abstract*. And in some respects, the vexed conditions of today’s politics of liberal democracy fall into a disorienting void between the representationality of *Left Right & Centre* and the more abstracted and ambient *Election Abstract*. In these works Parker finds herself enmeshed in the twentieth-century modernist conundrum of attempting to represent the unrepresentable, or trying to visualise the invisible; but in a sense, that conundrum is absolutely grounded in the immediacy of everyday social and political realities. Ultimately, the effect of the invisibility of microtargeted political campaigns is an atomisation of any semblance of a public sphere. Where consensus is lacking and there is no common ground on which to debate, effective public discourse becomes near impossible. To the rest of us not within the targeted demographic of the 2016 Trump campaign, Cambridge Analytica’s data war was completely invisible. But, as Christopher Wylie says, ‘just because you don’t see this on the internet, doesn’t mean it’s not happening, because that’s literally what targeting is about. *You* don’t see it, *this* person sees it, *this* person sees it, but *you* don’t.’[70] For liberal democracy to function it is necessary to have agreement on the factual premises of any issue before any ideological debate can even begin; yet, as Wylie says, ‘If we’re living in different realities, we can’t talk to each other because we aren’t seeing and hearing any of the same things’.[71] Roger McNamee, an early investor in Facebook, says that the platform plays on base instincts, fear, and anger: ‘they created a set of tools to allow advertisers to exploit that emotional audience, with individual-level targeting. There’s 2.1 billion people, each with their own reality. And once everybody has their own reality, it’s relatively easy to manipulate them.’[72]

The difficulty for any contemporary artist attempting to intervene within this politics is how to even begin to approach this atomised and invisible discourse. Parker's 2017 election-artist works begin to understand the lacuna, but they do not quite resolve exactly how to grapple with it in a way that drags it into a common daylight. James Bridle says that 'This is a deeply dark time, in which the structures we have built to expand the sphere of our communications and discourses are being used against us – all of us – in systematic and automated ways'.[73] For Bridle, this 'New Dark Age' is characterised by regimes of invisibility, in which the systems of the military are infused within the civic structures of the state and of corporations, essentially hiding war within the very physical but often invisible structures of peace. In recent years, this has been termed the 'Gerasimov Doctrine',[74] referring to ideas in an article originally written by Russian Chief of the General Staff General Valery Gerasimov:[75] 'In the 21st century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared and, having begun, proceed according to an unfamiliar template.'[76] Fundamental to this idea is that these undeclared wars are fought through the subversion of civil and peacetime mechanisms, and that they are, as Mark Galeotti says, 'not the prelude to war, but the war itself'.[77]

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