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Shadow of Control**

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# Paranoia is Real: Algorithmic Governance and the Shadow of Control

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## Abstract

An epistemic horizon of neo-positivism conditions the legitimacy of post-truth – fake worlds in which the analytical capacity to decide and distinguish is subordinate to the power of affect, coupled with the vulnerability of subjectivity parsed with algorithmic machines. Knowledge has submitted to regimes of measure and calculability that are the techno-ontological core of the digital. This paper develops a method of paranoia as a diagnostic device to assist our political and subjective orientation in worlds of algorithmic governance and data economies. Consider this to be a form of shadow-knowledge.

**Keywords:** Fake news, paranoia, algorithmic governance, post-truth politics

In his economic history of the present, Philip Mirowski (2013, p. 331) writes the following:

In the topsy-turvy world of neoliberalism you may think that you are busily expressing your innate right to protest the cruel and distorted state of the world; but in most cases, you are echoing scripts and pursuing an identity that has already been mapped out and optimized beforehand to permit the market to evaluate and process knowledge about you, and convey it to users with the deepest pockets.

Let's unpack this statement a little more. What are the scripts that predetermine our action in the world? Well, most immediately, they are socially acquired behaviour that we learn and reproduce across a range of institutional, cultural and political settings. We rehearse and perform various identities throughout our life. But what of the algorithmic dimension to such scripts? What are the rules and parameters by which our gestures – political or otherwise – are signalled to people and machines, animals and things? Can a distinction be made between real or true gestures and their fake equivalents? All gestures and actions are necessarily rehearsed and performed. Even spontaneity has its precedents. There is never an original to which a reproduced gesture may refer back. Rather, we inhabit what Baudrillard (1981) impressed upon readers of so-called postmodern theory a couple of decades ago as *the simulation of the real*. Baudrillard was never a believer in fakes. Neither was Warhol. Or rather, fake for them was the new orbit of reality.

So why, now, have notions of post-truth politics and fake news gained a renewed currency? Of course, the immediate reference here is to Donald Trump. One can also point to the ways in which platform capitalism organises our experience of the world through parametric

architectures predicated on the logic of the filter. But it seems to me that the post-truth, fake news world is more symptomatic of the return of positivism and the pervasive reach that it holds across disciplines that should know better. Knowledge has submitted to regimes of measure and calculability that are the techno-ontological core of the digital.

In other words, an epistemic horizon of neo-positivism conditions the legitimacy of post-truth, fake worlds in which the analytical capacity to decide and distinguish is subordinate to the power of affect, coupled with the vulnerability of subjectivity parsed with algorithmic machines. To orchestrate a foundation of legitimacy, discourses, practices and imaginaries are correlated with technologies of extraction and calculation. Subjectivity is modulated in ways that gravitate toward collective self-affirmation and the promise of security. The modern history of fascist movements demonstrates this process well, as does the popular story by George Orwell (1949), which is why Trump is so easily drawn into that trajectory of control.

The call to this event invites us to explore fake tactics as a mode of intervention. I would like to flip this proposition around and consider strategies of coping. I'm less interested in therapies of the self here than what I would call *paranoia as method*. This is an idea and analytical proposal to which I only gestured in my book on logistical media theory (Rossiter, 2016). So, I thought I would take this opportunity to develop a method of paranoia as a diagnostic device that might assist our political and subjective orientation in worlds of algorithmic governance and data economies. Consider this to be a form of shadow-knowledge.

With the Snowden revelations of the United States National Security Agency's (NSA's) PRISM surveillance machine, the scale and scope of paranoia is grafted to the modulation of affect, intensity and uncertainty to the extent that new techniques, methods and tactics are required if political movements, corporate secrets and government communiqués are to design cryptographic systems that are robust enough to withstand the analytic reach of NSA surveillance programs and their kin.

The British filmmaker Adam Curtis is probably one of the most consistent practitioners of paranoia as method. Helped along by repetitive strains of eerie Brian Eno soundscapes that tie Curtis's tantalising editing of archival news and documentary footage, his series of films exploits the verisimilitude of the documentary genre in an analysis of geopolitical power and the manufacturing of a society gone to the dogs. Key titles include: *The Century of the Self* (2002), *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), *The Trap: What Happened to Our Dream of Freedom* (2007), *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011) and *HyperNormalisation* (2016). This last film in particular homes in on the systemic production of fakeness.

Yet the question of fake news seems to me predicated on the logic of representation. But if we are in general agreement that, following Félix Guattari (cited in Hörl, 2017, p. 16), our epoch is one that has moved from a logocentric world to a machinic world, a world of 'complex assemblages of individuals, bodies, materials and social machines, semiotic, mathematical, and scientific machines, etc., which are the true source of enunciation', then the critical question today becomes how to register fakeness when meaning is no longer tied to representation but rather to the algorithmic production of subjectivity and the politics of sense and sensation, or what more frequently goes by the name of affect (Hörl, 2017, p. 15). Probing just one component of media-ecological regimes of governance and control takes us to the operation of

algorithms. Governance within the general ecology of our media condition is orchestrated by algorithmic calculations of anticipation and pre-emption.

For German media philosopher Erich Hörl, the ‘general ecology’ of the technosphere analyses the contemporary condition of governance and cybernetic control in a technical world. Hörl (2017, p. 9) maintains that we are in an ‘environmental culture of control that, thanks to the radical environmental distribution of agency by environmental media technologies, ranging from sensorial to algorithmic environments, from bio- to nano- and geotechnologies, renders environmentality visible and prioritises it like never before’. Yet environmentality understood as a new idiom of control is only visible inasmuch as it manifests on a scale of perceptible transformation.

If we adopt the paranoid precept that everything is open to inspection, then our next move would be to ask what, then, is made visible and knowable? And, who cares? The infrastructural and technical components of environmental media are more often highly secluded and inaccessible data facilities, or computational systems operating in the background of routine transactions, processes and practices. The political question of power goes beyond a philosophical politics of sense, theory and concepts (Hörl, 2017, p. 14). To attribute a politics to such struggles of thought we would need to identify the institutional and geocultural terrains in which conceptual dispute is materialised. And that’s when paranoia begins to set in.

I agree with Hörl that a techno-environmentality paradigm succeeds and displaces the primacy of human agency and bind of reason. There’s an embarrassing juvenility that attends the human pretence of control, although I would side-line the question of politics as a problem for theory (‘decision design’) and instead ask how environmental media relate to the organisation and politics of movements. This is a question that I have been addressing with Geert Lovink in our writings on organised networks (or orgnets) over the last decade or so (for example, Lovink & Rossiter, 2005). In terms of a program for orgnets operating within these sorts of parameter, one critical question concerns how to organise in ways that are responsive to new infrastructures of distribution and to new agents of power.

A techno-ecology of robots and automation receives a steady stream of reporting in the mainstream press and in tech-magazines. The eradication of jobs is the common narrative across these reports. The displacement of the human as the primary agent of change in the world is thus coincident with the increasing extension of technical environments that manage social and economic life. Why don’t we switch our attention instead to architectures of inoperability? One tiny (unknown) disruption and the robot falls silent – that’s the new certainty of our age, where ‘the “assembly life” [has] replaced the assembly line’ (Lotringer, 2003, p. 194).

With this idea of assembly life in mind, and in pursuit of paranoia as method, I will now briefly look at some security aspects of logistical media and cloud software services, particularly the enterprise resource planning software (or ERP) used to organise human resources, staff productivity, student activity and general organisational matters relating to the management of universities and the optimisation of performance.

The worry over back-end access is a common one for adopters of ERP software. SAP, one of the largest developers of enterprise software, are also known for their back-end access to

organisational operations. Like other players in this sector, they justify it on the basis of customer support services, though it is not hard to envisage instances where such access is exploited for purposes of insider trading, jumping trades in the stock market, and so on. I mean, why not?

Microsoft Office 365 claims not to do it: 'Microsoft builds no back doors and provides no unfettered governmental access to your data' (Pietrzak, 2016). But, a well-known feature of enterprise software, including Office 365, is telemetry, which enables organisations to collect usage data about documents and software. These data are stored in a central database and accessed via dashboards to provide 'comprehensive analytical and reporting capabilities' (Sheldon, 2014).

In one tech-vert spruiking the benefits of Office 365 and data loss prevention technology (DLP), Sean Gallagher (2013) – 'a former Navy officer, systems administrator, and network systems integrator with 20 years of IT journalism experience' – tell us that:

Exchange 2013 and Office 365 (O365) include a new feature that can peek into e-mail messages and enclosed documents and then flag them, forward them, or block them entirely based on what it finds. This sort of data loss prevention technology has become increasingly common in corporate mail systems, but its inclusion as a feature in Office 365's cloud service makes it a lot more accessible to organizations that haven't had the budget or expertise to monitor the e-mail lives of their employees.

But really, we already knew that our email was open to inspection, even before the Snowden leaks. So, what are some of the core problematics that we face as researchers, teachers, artists and activists when it comes to the digital production of knowledge? And how does the question of fakeness play into them? One key issue at stake here is epistemological, the other is infrastructural. Both are political.

As Noortje Marres (2017, p. 182) observes in her recently published book, *Digital Sociology*:

... when social researchers take up online instruments of data collection, analysis and visualization they enter into highly troubling relations of dependency with the infrastructures and organizations that make them available. As social researchers take up online tools, we too sign up to the terms of use stipulated by digital industries, whether we are aware of it or not.

So what's to be afraid of here? Data extraction and financialisation are central to the economies spawned by digital infrastructures of communication. Noortje's focus is on the ethical implications that attend the generation of data and knowledge from online tools that are integrated with technologies of capture that seek to extract value from populations under scrutiny. There is also the political question of how to organise in ways not dependent on the digital infrastructures of platform capitalism. But who's got a plan? Over the past decade the geopolitical shift to global markets and centres in East Asia has impacted enormously on the economic and social fabric enjoyed in North America, Australia and Europe for a few decades following World War II. With new technologies of automation now impacting on employment prospects across the world, what happens when 20%, 40% or 60% of the population is written off, without a job, and sliding into a life of destitution below the poverty line? Democracy as

an orchestrated ensemble of the elites falls apart. Even the seeming stability of authoritarian capitalism in countries like China will rapidly struggle to govern populations in conditions of mass crisis.

The creation of new institutions will only happen once the old ones have gone. Foucault's criticism of revolution was that, inevitably, the new guard simply ends up occupying the warmed up seats of the old guard:

In order to be able to fight a State which is more than just a government, the revolutionary movement must possess equivalent politico-military forces and hence must constitute itself as a party, organised internally in the same way as a State apparatus with the same mechanisms of hierarchies and organisation of powers. This consequence is heavy with significance (1972, p. 59).

While an element of structural determinism lurks within Foucault's response to his Marxist interlocutors, his statement, nonetheless, invites the question: what is the difference between revolution (as a reproduction of the same) and taking control of the infrastructures of those in power? Neither results in an invention of new institutional forms. When movements organise as a party the possibility of alternatives is extinguished. This is the brilliance of Foucault's analysis, and a position that Jodi Dean (2016) reproduces in her valorisation of the party as the primary vehicle for political articulation. In both cases, however, there is nowhere left for radical politics within organisational apparatuses of equivalence.

The issue that I raised earlier around the correlation between neo-positivism, data analytics and the epistemological status of knowledge as either fake or true also requires a little more fleshing out. We have invested so much epistemological weight in the power of numbers and the calculability of things that fake power is now super-hegemonic, it is the norm, and this was years before Trump came on the scene. Much of what counts in assessments of research impact rests on the ability to persuasively mobilise statements supported by statistics. Preferably, a researcher is able to justify their claims with reference to rankings and citation statistics produced by the major commercial entities who confer legitimacy upon university declarations of quality and excellence.

What, then, are some techniques and tactics that we might deploy to combat the regime of fakes that command and insist authority over the world, in our jobs and over our lives. How do we tell fake power to fuck off? As bitcoin critic Brett Scott (2017) recently tweeted:

The world is not data. The world is soil, sun, water, bodies, communities, sweat & oil. Data is an echo of these. It is not 'the new oil'.

Of course, Scott is right to remind us that the spectrum of life cannot be subsumed by technologies of metricisation. There is, indeed, life beyond data economies and parametric architectures. But, regrettably, data have become the new oil. So, the trick is to learn how to live with data. One strategy is to raise the stakes of the fake. This would be a Baudrillardian gesture, I guess: to amplify the fake and foreground the limits of phoney regimes of governance and control by showing how all-too-real they are. There is a long history in theatre and performance that undertakes this work, and we have a prime example of that with us today in Simon Hunt's anti-hero of Pauline Pantsdown. The Yes Men would be another. Years earlier,



renegade philosophers, pranksters, artists and activists associated with Guy Debord and the Situationists were among the many who belong to a tradition of unsettling perceptions of the given.

In search of antecedents for paranoid methods, one exemplary cinematic text is John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962). Featuring a remarkable performance by Frank Sinatra, who embodied so well the disturbing intensity of the paranoid subject, Wikipedia (2017) tells us that this 'neo-noir Cold War suspense thriller ... concerns the brainwashing of the son of a prominent right-wing political family, who becomes an unwitting assassin in an international communist conspiracy'. The film navigates the tension between refusal and capture, between situation awareness and the clawing intuition that things are not what they seem, but you're not really sure why. The latter most closely approximates paranoia as method.

We know, or at least are told often enough, that algorithms increasingly govern our encounter with the world. But most of us have no idea how they do that, nor the extent to which our tastes and predilections, our desires and fantasies are shaped by machinic operations devised by some sweaty-palmed nerd strapped to his console. At least that's the general imaginary that we draw on to explain alienation in the age of algorithmic control.

Paranoia need not be treated exclusively as a personality disorder. In the assessment of social normativity, disorders of many kinds are situated on the edges of bell curves that index the distribution of personas. But rather than cage paranoia as a condition of psychotic illness, self-grandeur, conspiratorial fears or, as William Burroughs put it, 'delusions that your enemy is organized', my preference is to unleash paranoia as a widespread sensation of impending disaster. How might we 'program the sensory order' as McLuhan (1964, p. 517) asked in his review of Burroughs' (1959) *Naked Lunch* and 'the new electric environment'? Here's McLuhan's elaboration:

The central theme of *Naked Lunch* is the strategy of by-passing the new electric environment by becoming an environment oneself. The moment one achieves this environmental state all things and people are submitted to you to be processed. Whether a man takes the road of junk or the road of art, the entire world must submit to his processing. The world becomes his 'content'. He programs the sensory order.

The idea of 'reprogramming' the sensory order is not something new to do with code and scripting, but is fundamentally about repetitive and ritualistic exposure of self/others to the same variables over time. It is a cybernetic operation that lies at the core of human society and the technics of modelling the world in ways that produce sensory regimes specific to the arrangement of technical devices, social systems and the generative force of contingency. The exploration of sensory order is a topic of investigation for many artists. They produce environments in which the technics of perception and experience, sense and sensation are tested in ways that signal the media-technological horizon of the future-present.

Before moving to a conclusion, I would like to briefly survey the work of a few artists engaging with the paranoid logic that underscores contemporary modes of orchestrating experience. Some of these works take us back to the fundamentals of vision. Light in James Turrell's work (ABC News, 2014), for instance, is explored for its properties – not as that which illuminates

things, but for the thingness or spectral properties of light itself. The earlier work of Olafur Eliasson (2000; 2010), which is about ‘seeing yourself seeing’, explores a similar theme of over-exposure. Examples such as these prompt us to ask how the quality of light produces regimes of vision that inflect knowledge within a particular spectrum.

Other works such as Sophie Calle’s *The Detective* (1980) have a kind of Douglas Sirk quality to them, where an interior world of daily routine is peeled open to expose the banal melodrama of suburban life. Vitto Acconci’s (1969) *Following Piece* explores a similar theme, as do countless films of suspecting wives and cheating husbands (or cheating wives and jealous husbands). In the case of Calle’s work, she asks her mother to hire a detective to report on Calle’s daily activities, providing photographic evidence of her existence. The artwork consists of a series of photographs taken of Calle in the street, in a park, at a café, and so on. The photographs are accompanied by a ledger reporting briefly on both the detective’s and Calle’s activities across the hours of the day. We read that at 8pm ‘The subject returns home. The surveillance ends’. Unbeknown to the detective, Calle has requested that François M., a friend or acquaintance of Calle’s, wait outside the Palais de la Découverte at 5pm and follow whoever appears to follow Calle.

The artwork ends with a series of pictures of what is presumably the detective, camera in hand, and a short note reporting on what François has observed. This recursive instance is designed to reassure the viewer that the staging of Calle’s documentation by a detective really did happen. But it also has the effect of reiterating that the entire work may also be an exercise in the production of fake truth. What we read and see on display might just as well be a demonstration of expectations vis-à-vis the fidelity of convention with regard to the genre of detection and surveillance. The work is also highly media specific. Today the paradigm of control correlates more approximately to an algorithmic imaginary of the NSA surveillance machine that penetrates the depths of code to punish subjects who don’t conform.

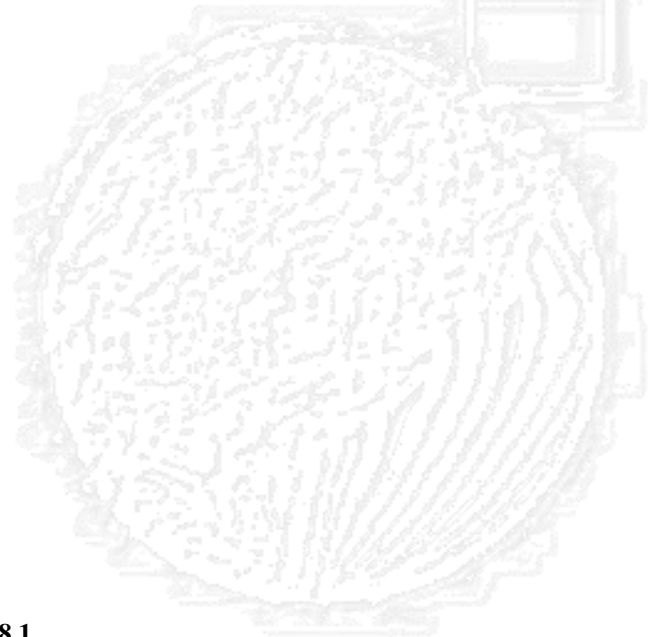
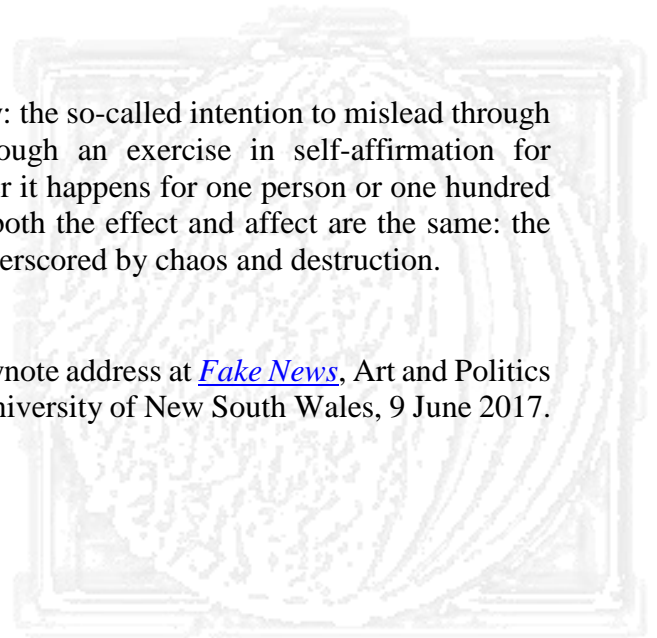
The repetition of experience, action, documentation and deduction across these various works has an algorithmic dimension inasmuch as algorithms are also repeatable routines executed with consistency over time. As Tarleton Gillespie reminds us, the term algorithm for software engineers ‘refers specifically to the logical series of steps for organizing and acting on a body of data to quickly achieve a desired outcome’ (2016, p. 19). While there is often nothing particularly quick about decision making within government institutions, the idea of governance beyond the state would, I think, overlap considerably with this computational definition of algorithms.

The fake news distributed through contemporary digital meme culture holds a temporality of the instant. The aesthetic keys in the works of Acconci and Calle register a mode of distribution with considerably longer duration. So, what I am trying to extract from these various accounts of cultural production is the manner in which *media determine our situation* (Kittler, 1999). The temporality of the signal/message/reception ratio is stretched, even if the spatial distribution is far more contained within the circuit of the art system and its economy. Yet the eleven-year interval between the works of Acconci and Calle also extends to the time and space of Hollywood’s dream machine, and then again to other world cinemas exploring *noir* themes of paranoia and self-inspection. We could also carry this observation over to the cultural industry of pulp fiction.



In a way, fake news has no regard for scale anyway: the so-called intention to mislead through the cultivation of post-truth truths is often enough an exercise in self-affirmation for individuals, communities and populations. Whether it happens for one person or one hundred million people is perhaps beside the point, since both the effect and affect are the same: the yearning for imaginaries of security in a world underscored by chaos and destruction.

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