

Right-Wing Media's Rendering of R₀: Media, Misinformation, and Affective Contagion

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ABSTRACT

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 signaled a definite shift in the global spread of a new nationalist, populist, racist, political Right. This sweeping trend was fuelled and is sustained by social media's vast networks that disseminate (mis)information and efface the subject's body by mediating reality through digital interfaces. Intensified right-wing news media and politics mutate the socio-semiotics of digital networks, rendering affective slogans that destabilize language and inform user subjectivity. Facebook re-posts and 4chan memes re-articulate refrains chanted at rallies, such as "Stop the steal," intensifying their affective resonance and causing them to speak in and through subjects, rather than being spoken by them, engendering incorporeal transformations on bodies in the sociopolitical field. Stripped of semantic meaning and referential reality, these slogans operate through affect to produce collective phantasies that channel users' unchecked desires. These slogans affectively interpellate users by pulling apart their individuation, weaving them into endless threads, sites, and networks that amplify and spread fascistic imaginaries of a Great America under Trump, the God-Emperor. Slogans' affects and their resulting phantasies function as coefficients of digital networks' innumerable connections, exponentially proliferating and catalyzing microfascisms via ever-multiplying rhizomatic connections – a sociopolitical recalibration of the R₀ formula models these affective transmissions, a calculation otherwise used to measure a disease's potential transmission among a vulnerable population. The affective intensification and spread of right-wing discourses

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were a prelude to the Covid-19 pandemic and function in tandem. As economic shut-downs and stay-at-home orders augment financial precarity and digitize quotidian life, media networks intensify the spread of (mis)information among susceptible users, leading to anti-mask protests, political rallies, and unsafe work environments that, in turn, increase Covid-19 cases. Right-wing media's affective, digital contagion and the Covid-19 pandemic produce a feedback loop of transmission, mutually amplifying their R_0 values as both mutate and spread.

1. Introduction

Before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, media ecologies facilitated a contagion of misinformation. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as alternative forums like 4Chan and Reddit played and continue to play central roles in the global spread of easily consumable, highly affective, but ultimately empty stories, memes, and slogans. Neoliberal erosion of political discourse has informed increasingly ineffective politicking, which results in political parties' systematic misdirects and hollow promises in the face of looming economic, climate, and humanitarian crises. Unsurprisingly, the growth of right-wing populism in Western democracies exploited neoliberal politics' alienation and institutional ennui by conjoining inflammatory rhetoric with the consumability of sound-bites and memes, formulating a viral offshoot of misinformation for a digitally mediatized public. Politicians, pundits, and click-baiters circulate slogans deprived of substance that infect online communities, transmitting affect through users, who, in turn, mutate and spread it through their likes, links, and posts. Misinformation and its related slogans and memes actualize a viral politics of affect highly prone to radicalized mutations, capable of transmitting from user to user through social media networks and infecting mainstream discourses. The expressions, permutations, and proliferation of molecular, semiotic components within and through users galvanize molar trends of extremism and its materialization. In this regard, readapting a model used to study infectious disease dynamics to analyze the socio-semiotics of affective contagion can map the digital and bodily transmissions of more contagious strains of misinformation.

A socio-semiotic recalibration of the primary reproduction number, or R_0 , provides a timely modeling of political misinformation's functions in the sociopolitical field. The basic reproduction number is "an estimate of contagiousness" of a given virus, which considers both social and biological factors of humans and pathogens (Delamater et al. 2019: 3). Retooling this measure of transmission into a socio-semiotic model of affect will not solely rely on a descriptive comparison of viruses and language. Rather, it will emphasize how signs inherently function beyond discourse within and through bodies by exploiting the social hyper-connectivity of online networks. This modeling

and analysis will build upon Félix Guattari's theories on semio-pragmatics and subjectivity, which offer a "language of mutation, proliferation, and molecularity [...] to think through the capacity of fascism to spread throughout the social body" (Genosko 2018: 111). In line with Guattari's modeling practices, Covid-19's reorientation of labor, social, and medical models offers a novel modeling of media and language's intensified existential entanglements in the real world (Watson 2009: 82). The R₀ modeling of misinformation's socio-semiotic contagion of affect will analyze how politicized language directly intervenes in the sociopolitical field through the porous border between the digital and real. It will map right-wing media content's affective spread, tracking how it mutates into more virulent, radical strains of alt-right misinformation and populist imaginaries.

2. Communicable Diseases: Language, Bodies, and the Digital

In the contemporary global media landscape, misinformation has gained a pre-eminent presence in the news feeds of social media networks and on mainstream media platforms. The term misinformation, as used throughout this paper, reworks its standard definition as "[c]ommunication of false information without intent to deceive," a subset of disinformation, or propaganda, "designed to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences [...] to obtain behavior compliant with political goals" (Benkler et al. 2018: 37, 29). Such an understanding of non-factual memes and stories foregrounds user intention but neglects how their semiotic dimension functions within individuals and broader media ecologies. Indeed, misinformation's language functions beyond its inherent content, which can be easily dismantled and dismissed, and relies on other factors for its consumability and transmission. For example, rather than evaluating the logic or evidence of a given theory or story, users and viewers mainly consider other contextual cues so that misinformation content is inconsequential to its efficacy (DeWitt et al. 2018: 324). Whether containing half-truths or nonsensical inaccuracies, shared by bad actors or duped users, misinformation relies on non-discursive means to spread through social networks, digital and otherwise. It is not so much a question of (mis)representing sociopolitical reality as a singular intervention within sociopolitical life by ordering an individual's relation to the world (Porter 2009: 14, 17). Though the recent growth of political dis/misinformation in the media can be understood as an 'epistemic crisis' preventing a unified understanding of the world and abetting polarization, it also figures as a totalizing media affect that shapes the body politic and its realia (Benkler et al. 2019: 20; Massumi 2002: 43). Misinformation, therefore, can be understood as inaccurate communications that primarily function through affect to intervene in the

sociopolitical field, with the aim of broader dissemination. Such communications find themselves in the newsfeeds of diverse users, whether through algorithmically suggested videos or ‘weak links,’ and circulated by news outlets of various political leanings; misinformation’s affective reach, in this regard, encompasses the media ecology’s totality.

Twenty-first-century populism and its alt-right derivatives effectively harness the affective means of misinformation to cultivate a highly virulent strain of Right-wing media. Much more dangerous than the strenuous inaccuracies circulating through mass and social media, the new variant of Right-wing misinformation ushered and sustained a twin digital pandemic. The populist Right, especially in the United States, refined the ‘affective jingoism’ of former US President Ronald Reagan, who, as Brian Massumi explains, “was unqualified and without content. But, his incipience was prolonged by technologies of image transmission and then relayed by apparatuses such as the family, the church, the school, or the chamber of commerce, which in conjunction with the media acted as part of the nervous system of a new and frighteningly reactive body politic” (2002: 41-2). Mass and social media’s permeation of the body politic enables radical ideologies to disseminate through non-ideological means; that is, the mutable affective potential of media is locally received and realized by disparate users, viewers, and readers. In other words, the alt- and populist Right present politics “as a set of affects and not a set of beliefs” through their misinformation (Danskin 2019). The content of Right-wing political messages can, in this sense, become increasingly senseless and radical, while its affective contagion gains traction; whether it is a convinced user, who shares an inaccurate article about vaccination, or a serious journalist, who critiques and disproves the article’s claims, the misinformation’s affect spreads throughout the social body as individuals respectively localize it.

This affective jingoism exploits the widespread mistrust of government and media held by many citizens, both right- and left-leaning (DeWitt et al. 2018: 327). As Daniel Pipes highlights, paranoid thinking is predominant on both sides of the political spectrum but differs in argumentative and linguistic registers. Leftist conspiracy theories present more sophisticated arguments that emerge out of a “tradition of high-powered political theory.” In contrast, rightists’ disinformation “contain obvious self-contradictions as well as errors of fact,” often relying on “pseudoscience and fanaticism” (1997: 160-61). The alt- and populist Right continue this trend by circulating radical memes and theories with premises that buckle under their inconsistencies – this often extends to their crude (edgy) and incoherent semantics. In this sense, they weaponize the body politic’s skepticism through a totalizing media effect, bombarding the senses (cognitive and bodily) with misinformation that affectively shapes their reality. This results in a hyper-charged, paranoid tautolo-

gy that formulates “a vast, historical, all-encompassing conspiracy” on the Right (Pipes 1997: 162). For example, the alt-right’s pizzagate interprets leaked emails of the chairman of the 2016 Hillary Clinton campaign, John Podesta, as coded messages about pedophilia and postulates that a widespread, liberal-elite, pedophile ring operates through Washington D.C. pizza parlors; it compares the parlors’ and Clinton-affiliated charities’ logos to pedophilic symbols, links the Podesta brothers to the 2007 disappearance of Madeleine McCann, and claims that Serbian performance artist, Marina Abramović, aids in the ring’s Satanic sacrifices. Any liberal entity, event, or personage can be linked to pizzagate. If researchers or journalists debunk it, it is an attempt to censure or bury the truth, thereby further evidencing the theory’s actuality. Radicalized right-wing misinformation’s far-reaching affective intervention in the sociopolitical field operates reciprocally with a globalized paranoia, achieving unprecedented dissemination and pervasiveness through mass and social media.

With its capacity to transmit itself through individual hosts to rapidly spread through social networks, many researchers have compared misinformation’s media dissemination to a viral infection. The analogy dates back to European anti-fascist struggles before WWII, when the Popular Front leader Léon Blum described the rise of fascism and its propaganda as a ‘contagion.’ In the twenty-first century, the analogy gains even more relevance through the constant and instantaneous interconnectivity of the global media network. In 2018, Heidi Larson used the viral analogy to identify super-spreaders “who propagate misinformation through social media” as a significant health risk during a pandemic (309). Three years later, the comparison acts as a grim reflection of the Covid-19 pandemic – a “pathogenic allegory for modern information” (Grimes 2020). A recent media study, understanding the global spread of misinformation as an infodemic, confirms that super-spreaders (politicians, journalists, influencers) as well as more local peer-to-peer transmissions, can effectively spread misleading information throughout the media ecosystem without regard for borders, much like a pathogen (Aengus Bridgman et al. 2021). Super-spreaders and average users operate within a globalized infodemic sustained by a complex intermingling of troll armies, bots, incentivized click-baiters, advertisers, algorithms, and data mining. These insights, however, refrain from delving into how the semiotics of misinformation factor into its pathogenic capacity to spread through media ecologies and the sociopolitical realm. In addition, their analogous models fail to identify a valuable function of infectious diseases, namely R_0 .

Referred to as the primary reproduction number, R_0 is a mathematical, epidemiological model that calculates “the number of secondary cases one case would produce in a completely susceptible population” (Dietz 1996: 19). The model has been used widely in epidemics and the current pandemic to project case number dynamics. This quantitative metric, however, is predicated on qualitative factors. As Paul Delamater

states, “ R_0 is a function of human social behavior and organization, as well as the innate biological characteristics of particular pathogens” (Delamater et al. 2019: 2). R_0 , therefore, is based upon the complex, reciprocal entanglements between molecular biological functions and the molar structures of social dynamics. Another important parameter is a disease’s mutation rate, which is affected by various factors, including cellular microenvironment and replication mechanisms. Furthermore, viruses mutate non-linearly, meaning that the initial mutant strains may be ineffective and not spread.

In contrast, others that develop subsequently (either from mutants or the original virus) can be more effective and become the dominant strain (Sanjuán and Domingo-Calap 2016: 4433). A variant may attain more efficient transmission or a higher fatality rate, potentially rendering immune populations susceptible, thus ultimately altering its primary reproduction number (Feng et al. 2019: 1; Flores and Cardozo 2020: 1). In this sense, the primary reproduction number’s deciding factors supplement the analogy of misinformation like a virus. However, these essential, qualitative factors belie the mathematical formula; social dynamics, for example, cannot be reduced to a numeric value.

Similarly, many of the above studies that analogically compare misinformation to pathogens solely use quantitative measures. Where R_0 and viral models fall short, an analysis of misinformation’s socio-semiotic, affective contagion supplements the respective lack of qualitative attention to sociopolitical dynamics and semiotics’ central role in the infodemic. A recalibrated viral R_0 model will examine how the socio-semiotics of misinformation permeates individuals, spreads through a hyper-connected social field, and potentializes more radical variants. By reframing the primary reproduction number in qualitative, socio-semiotic analysis, a helpful conceptual model will demonstrate how viral misinformation’s affective potential intervenes in the material sociopolitical field.

Semiotic theories of affect foreground the interpenetration of language and the body, which elaborates R_0 ’s intermingling of human social dynamics and a virus’s biological characteristics. In particular, Guattari’s radical, materialist understanding of language’s innate functioning within and through social assemblages corresponds to how R_0 accounts for the intermingling of humans’ molar social dynamics and the pathogen’s molecular biological aspects. As Janell Watson highlights, Guattari adopts a molecular logic in his theories, “[choosing] complexity [...] his semiotics must include the molecular-level physical-chemical processes intrinsic to organic life” and grounds semiosis within a complex, material sociality (Watson 2009: 74). Indeed, Guattari himself quips, that “[a]ll things considered, I think it’s better to biologize than to linguistify,” referring to the necessity of grounding semiotics within the physical (Guattari 2006: 76-77). A key concept that embodies this inherent conjunction between semiotics and physiognomy is faciality, which “designates the fact that language always ema-

nates from a face, and cannot be understood outside of the context of that face” and “makes manifest Guattari’s insistence on the constant interaction among physiological and semiotic components” (Watson 2009: 76, 86). Without discourse, the face orders and restricts language, subsuming it as though a landscape. Faciality prefaces meaning by asserting “‘it’s just like that,’ an expression of a semiological coup de force establishing that, once and for all, ‘that’ will always mean something,” cementing semiotic components in a highly stratified system of signification indicative of “the reigning socio-semiotic order” (Guattari 2011: 77). The mass-mediatised face’s mouth, nose, and eyes capture signs and order them to transmit socio-semiotic structures through the viewer, who, in turn, reproduces and spreads them. Faciality “per se [does] not signify and [does] not convey information, although [it] work[s] alongside semiotic elements like signifiers and information” as a unique mechanism that intensely inscribes language within the body (Watson 2009: 76). Guattari’s socio-semiotics of faciality refracts Ro’s rendering of a pathogen’s biological characteristics that rely on human sociality. In particular, it understands the face’s mucous membranes (mouth, nose, eyes), a virus’s points of entry, incubation, and transmission as instrumental in potentializing and transmitting the affective contagion of misinformation.

Whether it is a politician’s face blown up on a screen, or any talking head on the news or social media, the composite, mass-mediatised face surcharges language with non-discursive particles that infect the body and subjectivity. For the North American alt- and populist Right, the face of Donald Trump iterates slogans, memes, and theories, catalyzing a politics of affect that intervenes in and shapes the sociopolitical realities of disparate communities. Trump’s trademark hair and his unmistakable visage are synonymous with celebrity, business, and capitalist excess; they offer the Right’s fanaticism a dear leader, through which “[e]very proposition [...] receives its social weight of truth” (Guattari 2011: 82). His face contextualizes communications, such as the ‘Lock her up’ chant in response to FBI investigations concerning Hillary Clinton’s emails, but also diffuses them through individuals by reaffirming social syntaxes, such as laden sociopolitical binaries male-female, corrupt globalists-disempowered citizens, minority-hegemony, and so on. As the slogan loses semantic substance – becoming less so about the emails and more about demonizing political opponents – it functions more efficiently and affectively by resonating with various political phyla. This is evidenced by Trump’s appeal among blue-collar conservatives, as well as “David Duke, Jared Taylor, the Klan, and other members of the fascist movement” (Ross 2018: 295). Trump’s verbal incoherence and gestural idiocy channel and amplify Reagan’s affective politics, an “embodiment of an asignifying intensity doubling his every actual move and phrase [...] the continuity of his discontinuities” (Massumi 2002: 40-1). The nonsensical register of his slogans, held together by his facial and bodily jerks, parse his communications into stops

and starts imprinted within viewers, who then arrange them locally. Hence, Trump, just as Reagan, is “so many things to so many people” (Massumi 2002: 41). Faciality ensures the spread of socio-semiotic order through non-linguistic functions, acting as a non-discursive superego that permeates the social and individuated body. Supporters corroborate such an interpretation by acknowledging that Trump’s messages are taken seriously but not literally (DeWitt et al. 2018: 330). That is to say, supporters perceive the incoherence of his statements about the economy, immigration, and women but register them as legitimate politics. Therefore, the affective, asignifying particles emitted from Trump’s face transmit empty populist, alt-Right slogans as an affective contagion that infects and spreads through the body politic.

A diffused, composite Trumpian face enunciates misinformation through mass and social media, which continuously mutates as it intermingles the digital and bodily. The constant and instantaneous network connectivity realized by personal handheld electronics guarantees constant exposure to Right-wing theories and memes, which achieve existential consistencies through this technological prosthesis that subsumes the body. Berardi describes that “[t]he connective paradigm [...] infiltrates the deep fabric of the human biosphere, permeates the organism’s barriers [...] [t]he mutation invades the individual’s self-perception, and integrates it in the connective framework of the socio-technical continuum of the net” (Berardi 2017: 55). Therefore, the user uses her device to connect to the Internet, her neurology and biology synch to the network. Populist and alt-Right misinformation, thus, expresses itself through the body and directly intervenes in the sociopolitical field. The contagion is far-reaching, as memes, slogans, and theories spread through social media newsfeeds, left- and Right-leaning news platforms, and other online forums; pundits, trolls, users, and viewers consume and repeat them through overlapping rhizomatic networks. These networks viscerally interpellate users and function as their reality interface. Digital reality, reverse-engineered from the user’s preferences and search history, subsumes the body and shapes its relation to the world in tandem with language. Online echo chambers function like all-encompassing feedback loops of misinformation, intensifying the global paranoia of Right-wing theories. The Covid-19 pandemic is shadowed by a twin infodemic, as the default position during the global lockdowns has been online; more than ever before, within networked life and labor, “the individual body is [...] exposed to the constant intensification of neural stimulation, and insulated from the physical presence of others” (Berardi 2017: 50). Immobile and socially isolated, individuals avoid infection but expose themselves to misinformation, constantly increasing their viral load of affective contagion.

As with the spread of an actual disease, an extensive saturation of misinformation leads to mutations within and through users. Through continuous circulation, communications evolve as posts reframe them through additional commentary or

reactions. As Gabriele Marino notes, online media are defined by “modalities of diffusion that are repetitive, adaptive, appropriative, and – in general – participative,” enabling widespread diffusion and mutability (2015: 50). Misinformation’s re-posted, incoherent redundancies thus pair with its homogenizing resonance that spreads across the Right’s political spectrum, this “recentres and disempowers the semiological redundancies and empties them of content, but at the same time, mechanically super-empowers them by granting them autonomy” (Genosko 2018: 99-100). Incubating and multiplying through users, who share and intensify misinformation, the affective contagion receives reciprocal energy with which to mutate. Even though Trump’s diffused, mediatized face orders the slogan’s words with a supervalent affective charge, viewers, and users reinvest it with their desire, which may result in much stronger conformity, a radical departure, or a synthesis of both. In the case of right-wing misinformation, the slogans and memes of the 2016 presidential campaign evolved into increasingly extreme maxims and theories, namely the QAnon narrative. Its affect and spread growing inversely to the absurdity of its political claims; even as predictions, court cases, and theories break down, it works ever more efficiently through its affective potential that takes hold in the right-wing info-economy. As Right-wing, affective politics intensifies, it normalizes the empty but fanatical, fascist claims it circulates; in turn, this leads to a new and more dangerous actualization of politics, as exemplified by QAnon proponents’ violent demonstrations and congressional representation in the United States.

3. Empty Resonance: Strains of Right-Wing Political Misinformation

The 2016 American presidential campaign catalyzed a new era of right-wing, affective politics. Trump’s successful campaign and subsequent administration encapsulate the populist reorientation of Western democracies, an evolving political paradigm still in effect. In this regard, the case study below will use a socio-semiotic model of affective contagion to trace how Right-wing misinformation of the 2016 election campaign intervened in the sociopolitical field by spreading through media ecologies and how it subsequently mutated into more infectious and radical variants. The incoherence of American Right-wing politics will first establish the contagion’s milieu, how Trump’s Republican candidacy epitomizes the empty center of contemporary nationalist-populist trends. Misinformation repeated by Trump resonated and spread through various media ecosystems, such as popular social media platforms, news stations, and alternative online forums; theories and slogans incubated, multiplied, and mutated through these environments, most prominently on Reddit, 4Chan, and 8Chan. One of the central slogans was the ‘Lock her up’ chant turned meme, which mutated through

such forums and social media into increasingly fanatical and absurd political discourses, such as assertions that Democratic lawmakers operate a satanic, pedophile cabal. These mutant strains affectively spread through the body politic with sociopolitical repercussions, like the QAnon conspiracy theory that progressively gained momentum and overtook mainstream media and Capitol Hill.

The ideological incoherence of the contemporary Right-wing paradigm is made manifest by the contentless discourse of the 2016 election campaign, which informed its misinformation. Traverso points out that right-wing “populism is above all a style of politics,” more than an ideology, which foregoes the formulation of an intelligible political platform to prioritize the hollow rhetoric of marketing (2019: 15). The Republican Party’s nomination of Trump as its presidential candidate encapsulates this strategy. Trump’s stance is anti-establishment, a poise “all the more paradoxical given that he [was] the candidate of the Republican Party, the so-called Grand Old Party (GOP) that stands as one of the pillars of [the] establishment”; and, as noted, he is synonymous with the economic elite, a real-estate millionaire and TV celebrity, therefore a proponent of the establishment (Traverso 2019: 22; Müller 2016: 33). His rallying call was ‘Make America Great Again’ that pledged to bolster the American economy through job growth and security, despite his embodiment of the neoliberal establishment, which globalized markets by relocating industries to other countries for cheaper production and eroding the strength of trade unions, ultimately ushering an era of unprecedented economic precarity and wealth disparity. This is epitomized by the iconic MAGA hats sold at Trump’s rallies that are made in China; even the ‘official’ hats made in California by Cali-Fame contain imported fabric, bills, and stiffeners – not to mention the Trump family’s private companies’ products, which are predominantly made in Asian countries (Horwitz 2016). In other words, the current right-wing-populist paradigm is ideologically and politically empty, thriving on self-contradiction.

Trump’s communications embody this incoherence. His criticism of the Obama administration’s nuclear deal with Iran from July 2016 is regarded as a testament to his inarticulate politicking:

but you look at the nuclear deal, the thing that really bothers me – it would have been so easy, and it’s not as important as these lives are [...] but when you look at what’s going on with the four prisoners [...] but when it was three and even now, I would have said it’s all in the messenger; fellas, and it is fellas because, you know, they don’t, they haven’t figured that the women are smarter right now than the men, so, you know, it’s gonna take them about another 150 years – but the Persians are great negotiators [...] and they, they just killed, they just killed us. (Mikkelson 2016)

This excerpt from the 285-word, run-on sentence exemplifies Trump's contentless political messages. His starts and stops interrupt progressions of semantic meaning, suspending his criticism in incomplete limbo, while the jerks of his body mirror the cuts between clauses. It is all held together through faciality, which orders Trump's "semiotic salad" to affectively register within viewers and users (Bennett 2016). The inchoate redundancies are rendered through the face's socio-semiotic physiognomy. They generate a resonance through the social and individuated body; despite the political and semantic nonsense, such communications are localized and expressed through individuals who legitimize them. Trump's initial remarks on the Iran nuclear deal also gained existential consistencies, like the US's abandonment of the diplomatic effort and the discriminatory flight ban enacted shortly after his election into office. Such contentless and affective politicking is far from the exception for Trump's 2016 campaign and administration.

Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, the Republican's most prevalent misinformation pertained to Hillary Clinton. The 2016 Republican National Convention's unofficial slogan was 'Lock her up,' which the crowd chanted as speakers and politicians repeated misleading claims about Clinton's mishandling of national security while Secretary of State (Gass 2016). This resulted from months of Trump's claims that his Democratic rival was guilty of wrongdoing and should face jail time; following the convention, the chant became routine at the Republican candidate's campaign rallies. Despite the context of the FBI's investigation of Clinton and her political past, Trump's reiterations of the slogan surcharged it with sociopolitical redundancies of a political insider-lone outsider, feminine frailty-masculine virility, and over-privileged minority-silent majority, giving way to hegemonizing political polarization, unprecedented in past US politics. Rally-goers' chants and Trump's repetitions of the slogan were overlaid onto a right-wing media ecosystem comprised of significant news stations like Fox News, as well as popular social media and alternative online forums. The slogan's socio-semiotic affect thus diffused through digital networks was simultaneously consumed and reproduced; user individuation was pulled apart and woven into continuous threads of posts, messages, and memes. The emptiness of Trumpian politics was charged by the unfettered desires of users and supporters of more radical camps, drawn in by the supervalent misogyny and white supremacy of the campaign's slogans, resulting in surprising mutations (Genosko 2018: 110). Within this insular info-economy of the alt- and populist Right, 'Lock her up' redundancies intensify through its hegemonic resonance. Toward the end of the presidential campaign, the slogan radically mutated into a more affectively charged and virulent strain of misinformation.

A new variant of anti-Clinton misinformation emerged from the alt- and populist Right media ecosystem and quickly proliferated through the broader media



Figure 1. Trump's tweet of the History Made meme

tagline of making American history with the first female US presidential candidate. Its tripartite structure of a text, image, text establishes an imagistic rhythm that echoes the slogan's pulsating chant at rallies (Marino 2015: 55). The originally red star of David's caption (later a circle), 'Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!', paired with the background of \$100 bills, demonstrates how the resonant redundancies of the slogan channeled the /pol/ board's extreme anti-Semitism and misogyny. In July 2016, Trump tweeted the meme to his 9.5 million followers with the caption, 'Crooked Hillary - - Makes History!', resulting in yet another debacle for the campaign. The meme nonetheless achieved more attention and shares (Rappeport 2016). The movement from mainstream to radical periphery back to mainstream exemplifies the non-linear mutations of misinformation through various formats, channels, and demographics, intensifying its affect's resonance through a multifaceted media landscape. The Right-wing info-economy began circulating another variant that proved highly affective and transmissible in the months following the History Made meme.

With Wikileaks' October batch of DNC emails leaked, the 'Lock her up' slogan's affective contagion intensified and mutated into the spirit cooking meme. In John Podesta's emails, meme makers from 4Chan, 8Chan, and other alt-Right hubs found mention of a 'spirit cooking' session "with the performance artist Marina Abramović whose 1996 book *Spirit Cooking* included ingredients like breast-milk, semen, and

landscape, eventually formulating the QAnon theory. Trump campaign staffers directed by former Breitbart News chairman Steve Bannon, internet trolls turned supporters, and more radical online elements exploited Wikileaks' leaking of stolen emails from the Democratic National Convention (DNC) to initiate and later escalate the so-called Great Meme War of 2016 (Merrin 2019: 209). The DNC's preferential attitude toward Clinton over other Democratic primary candidates was unearthed, leading to anti-Clinton memes that mutated the already popular 'Lock her up' slogan. Initially circulating and likely made on 8Chan's /pol/ board, the History Made meme reconfigures the Trump campaign's slogan (Schreckinger 2017) (see Figure 1).

The meme satirizes the Clinton campaign, using its fonts, color scheme, and

“jealousy” (Merrin 2019: 208). Clinton’s alleged corruption morphed into memes and theories about her involvement in child-trafficking rings and satanic rituals, conjuring up the patriarchal-Christian imago of a witch and confirming the anxieties of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s that “Satanists [operate] at all levels of society, from powerful politicians to teenage vandals” (Laycock 2015: 136). The pizzagate theory complements the spirit cooking claims by alleging that Podesta’s emails use a secret code for pedophilia, as among online forums, “‘child porn’ was often abbreviated to ‘cp,’ which then became known as ‘cheese pizza’” (Merrin 2019: 208-9). Posts soon postulated more elaborate paedophilic codes at work within the emails, such as ‘Hotdog = Boy / Pizza = Girl / Cheese = Little Girl / Pasta = Little Boy [...] Map = Semen / Sauce = Orgy / Dominoes = Domination,’ through which trivial emails became absurd messages about sex-trafficking and rituals. For example, an email to Podesta that states, “The realtor found a handkerchief (I think it has a map that seems pizza-related. Is it yours? [sic],” suddenly becomes a workable piece of misinformation through the suggested code (Wikileaks). Users could find similar trivial emails through this cipher and express increasingly nonsensical and affective messages; their already benign content was emptied and saturated with inchoate information that intensified political polarities and convictions. Users on 4Chan and Reddit thus incessantly hollowed out and charged such emails with indefinite conjectures regarding pedophilia, leading to more affective misinformation. For example, Washington D.C. pizzerias’ logos are interpreted as secret pedophilic symbols marking the restaurants as communal hubs for rituals and child abuse.

On November 3, 2016, the spirit cooking meme and pizzagate story infected the broader Right-wing media ecosystem. The misinformation’s decentralized circulation on alternative sites like Reddit, 4Chan, and blogs was redirected into news sites like Infowars, the Drudge Report, The Washington Times, Gateway Pundit, and eventually, Sean Hannity’s program on Fox News; that day, the hashtag #spiritcooking trended on Twitter (Benkler et al. 2018: 232). Alternative Right-wing forums and Right-leaning news platforms operated as mutual resonators. The former’s misinformation heightened the affect of mainstream discourse, while the latter enhanced the spread of the misinformation and galvanized its affect with the attention of a wider audience. This mutation of the initial ‘Lock her up’ slogan circulated heavily, progressively charging Trump’s hollow, populist narrative of outsider versus corrupt establishment with theological-political dimensions and materializing a phantasy about an appointed savior rooting out society’s hidden evils. Through their multiplatform spread and contagious permeation of a massive user base, the innocuous slogans and memes midwived Trump’s presidency while catalyzing his empty politicking through an affective contagion that potentialized sociopolitical phantasies.

4. The QAnon Variant

Spirit cooking and pizzagate's spread led to the most contagious and radical variant of Right-wing misinformation, the QAnon conspiracy theory, and its subsequent plague of misinformation. Initially conceived on 4Chan and 8Chan's /pol/ boards, the QAnon conspiracy began as a cryptic amalgam of transfigured memes and slogans from the 2016 presidential election. After a string of anonymous posters (anons) claiming to be part of intelligence and law enforcement agencies circulated so-called intel about investigations into the Clinton Foundation and the DNC leaks, an anon claiming to have the Department of Energy's Q-level clearance to top-secret data, hence the eponymous Q, or QAnon, began posting about Trump's shadow war against a cabal of satanic, liberal elites leading a global sex-trafficking ring. On October 28, 2017, in a 4Chan/pol/thread about the Mueller investigation, one of Q's first traceable posts echoes a familiar slogan repeated by Trump and his supporters: "Hillary Clinton will be arrested between 7:45 AM - 8:30 AM EST on Monday - the morning on Oct 30, 2017" (Q 2017). Q then claims the Mueller investigation is part of Trump's strategy to indict corrupt elites, including Clinton's former aide Huma Abedin, Barack Obama, and George Soros. Such anti-Semitic and racist views were not uncommon on /pol/, but the subsequent spread through social media and mainstream media was unprecedented. While there was an evident dissemination effort of 4Chan moderators and bloggers, QAnon distinguishes itself from previous misinformation through its highly affective socio-semiotics that reconfigured and channeled the so-called meme magic of Trump's campaign. Reconfiguring the anti-Clinton 'Lock her up' slogan, QAnon exploits Trump politics' intensification of the sociopolitical binary of Left vs. Right, its homogenization of various center and Right-wing fringe groups, as well as the Manichean pizzagate theory, to produce a hyper-virulent strain of alt-Right misinformation.

QAnon's more intricate posts function through Trump's composite, mediatized face and empty themselves of semantic and informational content to maximize their affective potential. What was and continues to be essential to QAnon is that all its claims are enunciated through the diffused faciality of Trump. The POTUS functions as the misinformation's ordering nucleus; Trump's inconsequential tweets and statements, routine staff meetings, and functions all instill Q's assertions with the weight of a sociopolitical truth. QAnon's anonymity also facilitates faciality's functioning, in that the anonymous posts are untraceable to any identifiable individual. Still, since language always emanates from a human face, the posts re-articulate themselves through Trump's disembodied, mediatized face. In this sense, the posts' dissemination is facilitated through a Right-wing faciality that spreads misinformation through the digitized public and shapes its sociopolitical reality.

QAnon posts thus require a minimum of information to express and inscribe themselves within users, who, in turn, legitimize their affects as politics (Caló 2021: 278). Take, for example, Q's post from November 11, 2017:

Who funds MS13?
Why did BO instruct HS & BP to release MS13 captures at the border?
What agency has direct ties to (2) major drug cartels?
Why is AG Sessions / POTUS prioritizing the removal of MS13?
Why is AG Sessions / POTUS prioritizing building the wall?
Immigration?
Drugs?
Who do you hire for a hit?
Who can be eliminated after the job is complete?
Seth Rich.
Who was found dead (2) shortly after his murder?
What affiliation did they have?
Classified. Q (Q 2017)

Referred to as 'crumbs,' this post of short, incomplete phrases exemplifies a form often used by Q. Staccato statements, and rhetorical questions interrupt Q's progression of logic and meaning. They are impoverished semantically, functioning through a cascade of punctums about political figures, events, organizations that form an inchoate linkage, subjectively hailing the user through a suffusion of affect. As with Reagan and Trump's politically affective incipience, Q's 'crumbs' operate through logical and semantic *coupures* that implicate users by galvanizing them to fill the gaps with their inherent biases, desires, and speculations. QAnon's misinformation thus enunciates itself through the faciality and tone of Trumpian politics, galvanizing its contentless communications with asignifying particles that affectively transmit them through users. The affective contagion of QAnon spread throughout the right-wing media ecology, gaining ever-greater resonance and existential consistencies during the Trump administration.

Similar to how the spirit cooking and pizzagate stories bled from alternative forums and blogs into the right-wing info-sphere, Q's pro-Trump speculations about the deep state first circulated within 4Chan's /pol/ board, but its redundancies were soon charged by their resonance across the alt- and populist Right info-economy. Six days following Q's first post, 4Chan moderators asked YouTuber and former talk show host Tracy Diaz from the Tea Party news network, Liberty Movement Radio, to cover the QAnon posts; subsequently, Diaz and the moderators established Reddit forums, which then filtered a broader audience to 4Chan and 8Chan (Zadrozny

and Collins 2018). This resulted in QAnon gaining traction on Facebook, Twitter, and other popular media platforms, eventually reaching Fox News. Indeed, throughout Trump's presidency, Q and their supporters often cited Fox News host Sean Hannity as a fellow patriot involved in their investigation of deep state corruption; Q even encouraged fellow posters to watch his program. Hannity's reporting elaborated the crumbs mentioned above through his program, including the murder of DNC staffer Seth Rich and Clinton's "web of corruption" (Hannity 2017). Local community spread and superspreaders like Hannity amplified QAnon's affective misinformation through the incessant image- and information-based economy, leading to its oversaturation of Right-wing media ecologies and user desingularization; anything Trump did or said, any scandal within the Democratic party or whatever peripheral event of potential interest was interpreted through QAnon's misinformation about the deep state. The Right-wing info-economy operated through this redundant resonance, incessantly hollowing out politics to charge them with affect. Both Fox viewers and 4Chan posters were constantly exposed to the affective contagion of cross-contaminated, Right-wing misinformation. It encapsulated everything within its global paranoia, and the constant consumer attention, dissemination, and participation populated its emptiness. Misinformation functions through users to intervene in the sociopolitical sphere, "[shedding] light on the mechanisms of power that work through and/or within language, beyond the linguistic" (Caló 2021: 281).

Through digital media's user subjectivity and body stimulation production, QAnon achieved existential consistencies through real-world interventions. QAnon's misinformation intensified the intermingling of digital and real, materializing in misdirected, politically-motivated action and even violence – language expressing itself through the body. By 2018, QAnon supporters were donning Q merchandise at Trump rallies across the US and congregating with each other to discuss the president's covert war against the deep state. In June of the same year, Q's misinformation expressed itself through Matthew Wright. He set up an armed barricade on Hoover Dam and demanded that the government release the OIG Report, which, according to Q, contained a secret report concerning Trump's counter-operations against corrupt politicians (Mansell 2020). In March of the following year, Anthony Comello – another QAnon supporter – murdered Francesco Cali, believing him part of the deep state's corruption ring (Li 2019). One of Q's sign-offs for his posts echoes their misinformation's saturation of Right-wing news media and these instances of real-world interventions: "You are the news" (Q 2019). The reciprocal digital-real diffusion is a coefficient of right-wing misinformation, which augments its affective contagion within and through social and individual bodies. Misinformation operates through molecular and molar registers, its socio-semiotics of affect, and the social dynamics of digital media, which, in turn, reciprocally intensify one another and blur the digital and real-world divide.

With the Covid-19 pandemic and 2020 Presidential Elections, sociopolitical realities have revealed themselves to be unmediated expressions of QAnon's affective contagion. Misinformation related to QAnon has affected, and continues to affect, an unprecedented number of people, its materialization and spread augmented by the digitization of life and labor caused by pandemic lockdowns. Before its sweeping ban of QAnon, Facebook reported having over three million users affiliated with QAnon groups in mid-2020 (Sen and Zadrozny 2020). QAnon's misinformation evolves by adapting to and reconfiguring users' subjectivities, informing their sociopolitical realities. In tandem with stay-at-home orders, Q politicized the pandemic response: "What is the primary benefit to keep the public in mass-hysteria re: COVID-19? Think voting. Are you awake yet?" (Q 2020). Posters immediately elaborated the 'crumb' with responses about mass mail voter fraud, mandatory vaccine microchipping, and an impending police state that will seize power in an economic collapse. QAnon's amplifying resonance captured the mass disillusionment of unemployed workers from the service, leisure, and restaurant industries, as well as the mistrust of the pharmaceutical industry's greed and the government's faltering pandemic response. It is unsurprising that the Covid-19 conspiracy theory video, *Plandemic*, which exploits anti-vaccination and anti-establishment perspectives, initially premiered on a QAnon Facebook group. The video exponentially spread through other social media platforms garnering millions of views and interactions shared by influencers and politicians like Dr. Christiane Northrup and Republican campaigner Melissa Ackison (Frenkel *et al.* 2020). Right-wing news media circulated similar opinions to Q: Hannity claimed: "the virus [is] a fraud by the 'deep state' trying to spread panic, manipulate the economy, and suppress dissent" (Peters and Grynbaum 2020). As before, Q's affective contagion actualized in real-world interventions: anti-lockdown protests began in April 2020 and are ongoing throughout North America – QAnon signs often commingle with open-carry firearms and pro-Trump paraphernalia. The increasing existential consistencies of QAnon-inspired misinformation led to its unmediated political injunction in the 2020 Presidential election and beyond.

The 2020 election and its aftermath exemplify how the malfunctioning, right-wing misinformation machine is predicated on a material intervention in the sociopolitical field. As the right-wing media ecology spread QAnon's affective contagion, gaining even more impetus through anti-lockdown demonstrations, it produced new political realities. In the general election, six QAnon exponents were on ballots, and two were voted into the US House of Representatives as Republicans: Lauren Boebert and Marjorie Taylor Greene (Gregorian 2020). Both representatives unwaveringly support former president Trump, sought to overturn election results, and voiced their belief in the QAnon theory before and after taking office (Bump 2021). Greene exemplifies how misinformation inscribes itself within the body and expresses itself through it.

On social media and at public events, she has promoted the QAnon narrative and related theories; she held that the Sandy Hook and Parkland school shootings were false flag events intended to heighten gun control legislation, and, at one point, she physically confronted and mocked a Parkland shooting victim (Hananoki 2021). Boebert and Greene's elections into government offices exemplify right-wing misinformation's inherent existential dimensions that result in molecular and molar political interventions.

Trump's loss in the general election and his failure to realize mass arrests of liberal politicians manifested the hollowness of QAnon's misinformation, mirroring his empty politicking. This emptiness once more resonated through their supporters, who filled it with their attention and energy. The more the misinformation broke down, the more affectively it functioned through adherents by taking new forms and intervening in the sociopolitical field. Trump's lawyers consecutively failed in their voter fraud lawsuits. Still, supporters, pundits, and politicians intensified fraud claims and rallied to oppose the certification of the election – encapsulated in the 'Stop the steal' slogan and movement. Galvanized by Republican lawmakers' statements and Trump's rhetoric, on January 6, 2021, a mob of roughly nine thousand people – Christian Dominionists, the Oath Keepers, the Proud Boys, die-hard Trump supporters, and QAnon adherents, all coalescing around the latter's theories – surrounded the Capitol building to stop the electoral vote certification (Willis 2021). A contingent of roughly three hundred rioters stormed the building, many of which were marked QAnon supporters, seeking to confront and harm Congresspeople and Senators. Right-wing media discourses' affective infection of the individuated subject and social collective's bodies resulted in political violence – an insurrection – that left five dead and hundreds of others injured. Devoid of sense and over-saturated with affect, the socio-semiotics of right-wing misinformation innately operates within and through the sociopolitical field to realize incorporeal and corporeal transformations.

5. Conclusion

By extrapolating the primary reproduction number's qualitative factors of viruses' micro-biological characteristics and humans' macro-social dynamics to the socio-semiotics of affect, the analogical modeling of misinformation as contagion addresses the question of language and the body more comprehensively. It maps the commingling of the body, semiotics, and the digital, how misinformation operates through these dimensions by non-discursive means through sets of affects that permeate the social and individuated body by exploiting the digital network's extension of the human nervous system. A composite, diffused faciality spreads this affective contagion; its eyes, nose, and mouth emit non-linguistic particles that order misinformation's

empty language, imbuing it with supervalent, social syntaxes. Within the Right-wing media ecosystem, this faciality is more often than not informed by Trump's unmistakable face, which superimposes itself upon slogans, stories, and theories. This socio-semiotic model of affective contagion demonstrates how the repetition and intensification of an empty slogan, like 'Lock her up,' through a digitized body politic can result in unexpected, radical strains of misinformation that shape individual and collective political realia.

The intensification and spread of misinformation through Right-wing media ecologies signals a shift in contemporary politics. Slogans, memes, and their related discourses embody "a new politics of affectivity" that rely less and less on the cohesion of political messages and platforms (Merrin 2019: 222). Instead, they increasingly exploit the social dynamics of digital networks and signs' non-discursive capacities. User subjectivity is thus informed by language's extra-linguistic components, operating through molecular power mechanisms that inscribe themselves within the body, not unlike a contagion. Applying R_0 to a pragmatic framework of semiotics not only demonstrates that language "is inseparable from a concrete world which it affects and is affected by," but shows how signs embody communicable diseases and require equally complex analyses of their molecular and molar effects (Caló 2021: 269). Earlier analogies of an infodemic found a macabre expression in the Covid-19 pandemic. As anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests continue and misinformed individuals disregard public health warnings, the community spread of Covid-19 and misinformation reciprocally grow. Right-wing media's affective contagion and the pandemic mutually augment each other's basic reproduction numbers, undermining the work of vaccination efforts and eroding productive political discourse. This interpenetration of media and human ecosystems further evidences the unstable border between the digital and the real, and misinformation's supervalent physical affectation as a contagion and through the virus, Covid-19. These drawn parallels and R_0 modeling of the socio-semiotics of affective contagion highlight the dangerous potentialities of misinformation's growth and influence in the sociopolitical realm, which require critical investigation and measured counter-responses, much like a public health crisis.

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