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Bots and Fake News: The Role of WhatsApp in the 2018 Brazilian Presidential Election

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Abstract

This paper will seek to explore the use of computational propaganda, as defined by Woolley and Howard (2018), specifically on the chat app WhatsApp, in the 2018 Brazilian presidential election. It will argue that the illegal use of computational propaganda paved the way for the victory of the far-right candidate Jair Bolsonaro. First, this paper will outline Brazil’s recent political history and acknowledge the role that history played in the outcome of this presidential election. Then, this paper will look at the transformation in Brazil’s media landscape – specifically at how WhatsApp has taken over the role the traditional news media has played in the country. Finally, using news reports from both Western and Brazilian news media, in addition to preliminary research that has been conducted by academics in Brazil, this paper will outline how paid-for “cyber-troops” were able to use the public group feature on WhatsApp to disseminate fake news, and the variables that allowed this to be a successful misinformation campaign. The use of chat apps, WhatsApp especially, to disseminate fake news, particularly during elections, has been a growing trend in Global South countries where use of the app has grown rapidly. This paper will conclude by analysing articles, academic and journalistic, to suggest ways in which this problem can be combated to prevent future manipulation of public opinion by political actors using WhatsApp during elections.

Keywords: Brazil elections 2018, WhatsApp, fake news, computational propaganda

Introduction

On Sunday October 2018, social media was flooded with news sites publishing articles declaring the results of the 2018 Brazilian presidential election. The far-right wing candidate, 63 year-old Jair Bolsonaro, claimed 55.1% of the vote. (Phillips & Phillips, 2018b) A year ago, many political analysts assumed that he did not stand a chance winning the presidency. Since his victory, the world’s concern has turned to how he will govern. For the first time in its modern democratic history, Brazil elected a president who supports extreme far right-politics. (Staff, 2018)

For a large part of Brazil’s history, the military played a central role in the running of the state. In 1964, a military coup d’état forced the ruling reformist party out. The authoritarian military regime that took over was an oppressive one, focused solely on neo-liberal projects meant to modernize the state. The regime faced intense
resistance from leftist political groups, artist, intellectuals, and press outlets. Ultimately, the regime fell back and there was a transition to democracy in 1984. Though Brazil is now the world’s fourth largest democracy, its recent political history has been marred by scandals and corruption by the leftist parties that have run the country.

Political analysts and historians have attributed current nostalgia for the days of the regime, to the scandals that have come to light in recent years. (Napolitano, 2018)

This nostalgia is what many believe lead to the shocking results of this 2018 election – a country that only elected centrist or leftist parties since transitioning to democracy, elected a “a far-right, pro-gun, pro-torture populist,” who publicly reminisced about the days of the military regime. (Phillips & Phillips, 2018b) Though the results were shocking to many, they show a continuation in a global trend that started with the 2016 American presidential election. Populist proto-fascist candidates have been winning elections globally, notably in Europe, and their right-wing rhetoric has slowly become normalized.

There is a strong argument to be made that this normalization is happening, in large part, through social media. The most notable aspect of various elections that took place over the past two years, again, beginning with the 2016 American presidential election, is the central and vital role social media has increasingly played in each one. The 2016 American presidential election brought this role to the spotlight – it revealed that international interference in elections was happening on a micro-targeted level on social media platforms. Russia, namely, tried to sway the American election in favour of Donald Trump. A report recently published by the Computational Propaganda Project at the University of Oxford (Howard et al., 2018) revealed that Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election was present online as far back as 2013, across several social media platforms including Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. The Russian government’s Internet Research Agency had utilized “automated or fake accounts” to spread false content online. According to the report, over 30 million users between 2015 and 2017 shared the Russian content which often “[encouraged] extreme right-wing voters to be more confrontational and [spread] sensationalist, conspiratorial, and other forms of junk political news and misinformation to voters across the political spectrum.” (Howard, et.al 2018) As the world is well-aware, this misinformation campaign succeeded, and pushed online right-wing content into the mainstream.

This revelation sparked outraged calls for social media companies to be held accountable for allowing such interference on their platforms. The world was reminded that only six years earlier, social media served as the liberating force for democratic movements such as the Arab Spring; as a result, social media had been hailed as the new democratizing force that would allow social movements to mobilize. The potential for social media to be used as a mobilizing tool for non-state actors such as progressive social movements and political dissidents was met with optimism. These platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook, created a “new public sphere” that allowed grassroots participation for political dissidents and a new platform for political education, particularly among youth. Freedom of expression and speech was possible in authoritarian contexts, if users were careful to protect their identities online (Fominaya, 2014, pp. 162–163); however, the optimism for the democratizing
potential of social media was quickly replaced by cynicism, as states and political actors adapted to this new technology.

Initially, governments blocked access to social media during times of civil unrest or protest. This has happened in countries like Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan, to name a few examples (Arthur, 2011; Fominaya, 2014, p. 164; Frenkel, 2018; Kalvapalle, 2017; Roberts, 2016); however political actors have been increasingly using the same platforms that help mobilize social movements, to subvert the movements and to subvert democratic processes. As Bradshaw and Howard (2018) write, “where government control over Internet content has traditionally relied on blunt instruments to block or filter the free flow of information, powerful political actors are now turning to [misinformation campaigns] to shape public discourse and nudge public opinion.” This has been happening almost exclusively in Global South (pp. 4, 8).

While the 2016 American presidential election demonstrated how foreign governments use disinformation campaigns to do this, the 2018 Brazilian election demonstrated how political actors do this domestically. This was one aspect that the news media focused on when covering the Brazilian election.

The other aspect the news media focused on during the 2018 Brazilian election was the social media platform where the disinformation campaign took place. Previously Facebook and Twitter had been the platforms of choice for disinformation campaigns as the 2016 American election demonstrated. The disinformation campaign that took place in Brazil during the election was on WhatsApp, a messaging app. (Isaac & Roose, 2018) This was not the first time that WhatsApp came under fire for having misinformation on its app. In January 2017 propaganda spread on the app that incited racial violence in India (Rebelo, 2018). There were also alarms raised over its misuse during other elections such as in Mexico (Owen, 2018). However, during the Brazilian election mainstream media focused so heavily on a misinformation campaign taking place on the app and many commentators blamed the app for Bolsonaro’s victory.

These two aspects of the Brazilian election demonstrate how quickly political actors are adapting to new technologies and to using the tools, once used by progressive social movements, to subvert democratic processes. Brazil in particular was positioned for a domestically led misinformation campaign, because of its population’s reliance on social media, and this political event presents an opportunity to anticipate how other political actors in the Global South might lead similar campaigns against their own populations. The use of WhatsApp specifically, is disturbing – there are several reasons it caused a firestorm of coverage in the news media.

This paper will first outline a history of Brazil’s media landscape: how it evolved, and how this evolution can be seen in other Global South countries. Then, this paper will seek to explain why WhatsApp became the next frontier for these misinformation campaigns and how political actors benefit from using messaging apps. Finally,

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1 The Egyptian government moved swiftly to block social media sites after protests began in 2011. (Fominaya, 2014, p. 164)
this paper will examine how WhatsApp was used in during this specific election, relying primarily on news coverage; explore attempts to quell misinformation on the app; and briefly discuss the next country that observers predict will have a similar experience in its upcoming election.

**Brazil’s Changing Media Landscape**

When Brazil emerged from its 20 year rule under a military regime, and transitioned into democracy it maintained many of authoritarian qualities from the regime (De Lima, 1988, p. 109; Woolley & Howard, 2018, p. 134).

Despite this, its news industry was built on the model that existed in the United States: “the press is run a free enterprise business and the state controls licenses for private business” (De Lima, 1988, p. 109). Brazil’s new media industry was taken over by a “virtual monopoly” in the form of The Globo Network (1988). The network owns radio stations, online sites and well as print products, namely *O Globo* and *Extra*, the newspapers with the second and eight highest circulation rates. Its rival companies are all family-owned companies. Few news properties exclusively cover politics in Brazil and they tend to target “an elite readership” (Woolley & Howard, 2018, pp. 132–133).

Globo’s properties are where most Brazilians get their news when they turn to traditional news media. According to a paper published in 2013 comparing Brazil and Spain’s media landscapes, Brazilian’s reliance on newspapers is remarkably low, due to high illiteracy rates (Luengo & Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013, p. 117). The paper found that while in Spain the newspaper circulation rate was 14,448 per thousand people the number is Brazil was 3,555 per thousand people. Brazilians tend to watch television broadcasts for news, specifically *Jornal Nacional*, a show owned by Globo. *Jornal* holds 70 per cent or 31 million viewers in Brazil. Despite the seemingly high news consumption the paper concludes that Brazilians trust public and governmental institutions less than Spaniards, who consume less news yet trust governmental institutions to a higher degree. (Luengo & Coimbra-Mesquita, 2013, p. 121) De Lima (1988) offers a possible explanation for this. In *The State, Television, and Political Power* the author points to three major political events that *Jornal* covered where false information was aired, coverage of the first oil refinery workers’ strike in the country’s history was distorted, and information was suppressed in relation to an election. (p. 110) Using Gramsci’s theory of politics as a theoretical framework for an analysis of these three instances the author concludes that Globo was working in the interest of the state to “propagate the dominate political ideology” (p. 124).

According to Caio C. V. Machado a Brazilian lawyer, Brazil’s elections have historically relied on television for hosting debates and other election related content. Machado explains that each party is “allotted free time slots based on the size of their party and their representation in the legislature.” In this past election, for

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2 An electronic version of *Computational Propaganda* is being cited.
example, Geraldo Alckmin, the former governor of Sao Paulo, was given 6 minutes, and Jair Bolsonaro was only allotted 8 seconds (C. C. V. Machado, 2018). Yet, Bolsonaro won.

Bolsonaro won because, despite the fact that television viewership in Brazil remains high with 75 per cent of people saying they use television for news in 2018, 66 per cent of Brazil’s population is online (Carro, 2018; C. C. V. Machado, 2018). This makes it the country with the highest internet penetration in the western sphere, second only to the United States (Woolley & Howard, 2018, p. 129). Woolley & Howard (2018) attribute this to the fact that Brazil “controls much of the backbone network infrastructure of South America including transatlantic fiber optic cables, international interconnections, Internet Exchange Points, and data centers” (p. 129). This includes things such as domain name systems and IP addresses among other systems that Woolley & Howard explain allow for influence online (2018, p. 129).

In addition to having a high internet penetration, 66 per cent of Brazilians said they use social media for news. A large portion of them said they specifically used WhatsApp for news consumption – 54 per cent (Newman, et al., 2018). According to an article from The Guardian, 120 million Brazilians are on WhatsApp—that accounts for almost half of the total population of the country (Nemer, 2018).

Similar trends can be seen in other Global South countries such as Malaysia and Turkey, where users say they are increasingly relying WhatsApp for news consumption, according to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2018). The same report showed that users in authoritarian countries are relying on messaging apps because people felt they were better protected on them when expressing political opinions. 56 per cent of Brazilians stated they felt that they exercised caution when they posted political content online for fear of getting in trouble with the authorities (Newman, et al., 2018). The number for Turkey was at 65 per cent, making it the highest of all the countries surveyed (Newman, et al., 2018). All this marks a disturbing trend where people in the Global South are having to rely on closed off messaging apps for news, that is not verified. As the 2018 Brazilian election demonstrated, this can have disastrous consequences—possibly worse than campaigns led on Facebook or Twitter.

The danger of WhatsApp

Just as users in the Global South have increased their usage of WhatsApp, so have political actors in those countries. These political actors have used it to disseminate “computational propaganda.” As defined by Woolley and Howard (2018), computational propaganda “describes the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully manage and distribute misleading information over social media networks” (p. 4). Bradshaw and

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4 Woolley & Howard also point to the fact that Cambridge Analytica, the company found to be responsible for algorithms that spread fake news to support Trump and Brexit, wanted to open an office in Sao Paulo. (2018, p. 129)
Howard (2018) found in their report on global use of computational propaganda, evidence of an increase of dissemination of this type of information on chat apps, specifically. They write,

[In] this year’s report, there is growing evidence of disinformation campaigns taking place on chat applications. We have seen evidence of social media manipulation campaigns on chat applications in around a fifth of the countries in our sample, many of which are from the Global South, where large public groups on chat applications are a widespread phenomenon. (p. 6)

This demonstrates that these political actors have an ability to adapt quickly to new technologies. They are no longer relying solely on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook; they have demonstrated they understand the benefits of using chat apps. The qualities that make these apps effective propaganda machines are the qualities that make them dangerous if they continue to go unchecked.

These chat apps function very differently from social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Their audience, their unique functionalities, and the manner in which their audience uses them is what makes them an especially dangerous, and fertile ground, for computational propaganda. What differentiates these apps from other social media platforms is that they are messenger apps and were created to replace traditional Short Messaging Services (SMS), that is to say, texting. WhatsApp, specifically, can be downloaded on any device with any operating system making it easy to access. Once the app is downloaded, it accesses the phone’s contacts allowing users to contact people they know. The app also allows users to send images, audio files, pdf files among other types of media (Church & Oliveira, 2013, pp. 352–353).

The app was launched in November 2009 by Jan Koum and his friend Brain Acton. The two worked together at Yahoo! and eventually Koum left to get his start-up off the ground. In 2007 Acton joined him and they built the app together. The purpose of the app Acton told Forbes magazine in a 2018 interview was for it to be “informational and useful” with “no ads, no games, no gimmicks” (Olsen, 2018).

The app initially flopped when it was launched onto various app stores. When it was first uploaded it got 10,000 downloads—it was free to download, which is why it had some reaction—but it was not making its founders money. The founders had purposely avoided selling advertisement on the platform in order to protect user information. They decided to charge a small one fee for the app. The downloads dropped instantly. The app was not making money (Olsen, 2018; Rowan, 2014).

Then, in February 2014, Facebook announced it was purchasing the app for $22 billion—a move that confused many. Facebook, unlike WhatsApp, received most of its profit from advertisement, and by selling user information (Olsen, 2018). Facebook is, as of the writing of this paper, caught in several scandals regarding fake news, and what it knew or did not knew regarding Russian intervention in the 2016 American elections (Cuthbertson, 2018). After Facebook acquired the app, its usage skyrocketed. WhatsApp total global users as of
the first quarter of 2018 had reached 1.5 billion—an astonishing statistic when considering the app’s beginnings (Molla, 2018). Eight of the twelve countries that used WhatsApp most in the third quarter of 2017 were Global South countries. Brazil was fourth on the list (Statista, 2018).

This is the first reason that WhatsApp is perfectly suited for misinformation campaigns. As demonstrated in the previous section of this paper, evidence suggests that audiences in the Global South are turning to these apps for news and reliable information. The report by Bradshaw and Howard (2018) showed that overwhelmingly, misinformation campaigns were being carried out in the Global South. Out of the forty-eight countries they looked at, forty-three were countries in the Global South; Brazil among them. They reported that ten countries had seen misinformation campaigns on chat apps, including but not limited to WhatsApp. All those countries were in the Global South (2018, pp. 8, 15). The audience on WhatsApp is especially vulnerable to misinformation campaigns.

There are several reasons why WhatsApp in particular has drawn the attention of users in the Global South. The primary reason is the cost. While traditional SMS i.e. texting costs were tied to mobile data plans which tended to be quite expensive in Global South countries, WhatsApp relies on an internet connection to send its messages which makes it much more cost-effective. The second reason is privacy. Though WhatsApp is now owned by Facebook, the company has maintained the original founder’s intention for WhatsApp to be encrypted end-to-end. This means that from the moment a message is sent, it cannot be intercepted or read even when it reaches the intended reader (Church & Oliveira, 2013, pp. 355, 359). Finally, as mentioned earlier, Bradshaw and Howard (2018) cite that large public groups are a phenomenon in the Global South (p. 6). This group function is part of what makes these apps attractive to users. The groups create a sense of community according to Church and de Oliveira (2013). People often use them to plan social events and to share important family news (Church and de Oliveria, 2013, p. 355) Users can add up to 256 people in these groups, to exchange photos, audio and messages (Armstrong, 2018).

The latter two functionalities are what make WhatsApp uniquely vulnerable to misinformation campaigns. End-to-end encryption makes it difficult for researchers and fact checkers to see what messages are being shared and find out the extent of the dissemination of the misinformation on the app. This effectively makes WhatsApp a “black-box of viral information” (Wang, 2018). Despite this, various organizations have attempted to fact check and analyse political content that is shared on the app. Prior to the general Mexican election, the Nieman Lab interviewed members of a group called Verificado—a group of journalists and organizations who were attempting to fact-check misinformation regarding the election. In the article the author explains why the end-to-end encryption makes their jobs difficult. The author writes:
Fake news on WhatsApp is a really hard problem to solve. News is spread in closed exchanges and messages are encrypted, making it impossible to know how what’s being spread or how many people are seeing it. False information doesn’t just come as text, but as images and memes. (Owen, 2018)

The members of Verificado demonstrated they understood that the nature of the app was different than other platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp and that audiences used WhatsApp differently, primarily because of its privacy. Diana Larrea Maccise, content editor at Al Jazeera Media Institute, and one of the members of Verificado told the Nieman Lab, “we understand that WhatsApp is not like Twitter or Facebook… it [is] a private space for the users to interact with family and friends, so instead of using broadcast to spread our debunks, we opted for an individual relationship.” Verificado chose to set up a public group with a link that allowed users in Mexico to send them media they saw on the app, to have it verified.

Verificado and other organizations used groups to attempt to tackle misinformation on WhatsApp; group functionality is in fact the very functionality that makes it relatively easy to share misinformation quickly and widely. In India for example, people used the same family groups that they used to plan weddings to spread news, most of it false (Chauhan, 2018). In addition to the group functionality, WhatsApp also allows users to select a message and “forward” it to any other person or group they have access to. This helps the ease of sharing to a massive amount of people—more than 250 people—at one time (Hern, 2018). In the run-up to the May election that took place in India, youth leaders and parties were actively using WhatsApp to rile up their bases. According to the New York Times (2018), all the parties in the race had collectively set up 50,000 public groups on WhatsApp to spread propaganda. The type of misinformation was specifically targeting users where sectarian tensions between Hindus and Muslims were high. The media in those groups exacerbated those tensions ultimately leading to mob violence and in one case the lynching of a Hindi woman. It was not until after this violence erupted that WhatsApp finally limited some of its functionalities for users in India (Hern, 2018). This demonstrated, early on, the drastic consequences that misinformation on WhatsApp can have if it goes unchecked. It also demonstrates the willingness of political actors to use WhatsApp and other chat apps for these types of campaigns despite the consequences.

How WhatsApp was used in the Brazilian election

None of this was new or surprising to analysts and commentators. In fact, several newspapers and news sites sounded the alarm on the dangers of WhatsApp and its potential to influence the Brazilian election long before election day (Hennigan, 2018; Kulwin, 2018; Leahy & Schipani, 2018, Lopes, 2018; Tardáguila et al., 2018). The prediction was that the fake news on the app would help Bolsonaro win. Three Brazilian researchers took to the New York Times to request that WhatsApp limit its functionalities in Brazil, before the election, just as the app had done in India. Cristina Tardáguila, Fabricio Benevenuto and Pablo Ortellado requested that WhatsApp
limit the amount of forwards, limit the size of broadcast (which allow users to select multiple contacts and send them all a message) and limit the size of groups which can include up to 256 people (Tardáguila et al., 2018). These warnings went unheeded; the election came and went and Bolsonaro won.

Immediately after the election a flurry of news reports came out blaming WhatsApp for his victory. A bomb-shell investigation published on the front page of the Folha De S. Paulo, one of Brazil’s largest dailies, contained allegations that Bolsonaro’s aides paid people to create a misinformation campaign on the app to help Bolsonaro win. The allegations specifically state that Bolsonaro received illegal help from entrepreneurs in the country that funded a multi-million-dollar misinformation campaign on the app dubbed the “anti-Workers’ party campaign” (Mello, 2018; Phillips, 2018). Bradshaw and Howard (2018) predicted this type of campaign in their report, which was published before the Brazilian election. They wrote:

Since 2010, political parties and governments have spent more than half a billion dollars on the research, development, and implementation of psychological operations and public opinion manipulation over social media…in most countries this involves the spread junk news and misinformation during elections, military crises, and complex humanitarian disasters. (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018, p. 3)

In the case of Brazil they found that since 2010 political parties and private contractors had been participating in misinformation campaigns focusing on creating new content on these apps and social media platforms (2018, pp. 10, 15).

As mentioned previously, the app is a black box of information, so it has proven difficult to study. Despite this, there have been attempts made by researchers to look at the content on WhatsApp in Brazil and to see who has been using it. For example, a group of researchers from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, conducted a study, where they joined 127 public WhatsApp groups based in Brazil and analysed the content on them (Resende et al., 2018). They found that most of the content in the group was related to the mass strike by truck drivers that had been taking place in the country, confirming that Brazilians were using these groups for political news (Resende et al., 2018, p. 390). The researchers suggest their method as a potential way for researchers to look into WhatsApp, because it is so difficult to monitor. Realistically, it is the only way to monitor WhatsApp messages because it is impossible to read person to person messages or messages posted in private groups.

For the aforementioned reason, this section of the paper will rely heavily on news reports of how the app was used during the Brazilian election. Journalists did heavy reporting on the topic that shed some light on how

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5 This article was in Portuguese. Google Translate was used in order to access it in English.
6 This paper was written in Portuguese. Google Translate was used in order to access it in English.
7 This paper was published in a journal for the dates of October 16–19, 2018, a few weeks before the Brazilian election.
the app was used. In order to understand the content that was travelling on the app it is important first to understand the types of users who were on the app leading up to the election.

David Nemer, a journalist for the Guardian, conducted an experiment of his own to get a sense of the types of people who were using the app. Nemer joined four pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups and received 1000 messages per day, per group, he claimed in his reporting. After he analysed the messages, he found that there were three types of users as he classified them, “ordinary Brazilians”, “Bolsominions” (that is to say, Bolsonaro supporters), and “Influencers”, which he defined as the people who actually created the false videos, images and messages that everyone else shared. Through his experiment, he found that most people in these groups were ordinary Brazilians who no longer trusted traditional news media and were in the groups to learn about Bolsonaro. The Bolsonaro supporters disseminated false information in support of their chosen president and would react aggressively to anyone who questioned Bolsonaro’s policies by kicking them out of the groups or by harassing them. Finally, the Influencers, Nemer reported, tended to stay in the background but reacted similarity to Bolsonaro’s followers, whenever anyone questioned his policies (Nemer, 2018). A poll that was conducted before the first round of presidential elections in Brazil found that 81 per cent of his supporters reported using social media with 61 per cent saying they used WhatsApp to receive information and news (C. C. V. Machado, 2018). 40 per cent said they shared news or information on the platform (C. C. V. Machado, 2018). These numbers are staggering and point to the types of users that dominated the discourse on WhatsApp, the app where most Brazilians get their news, during the election.

Just as with the elections in India, most of these users found the information on groups, private and public. The same researchers that wrote in the New York Times pleading with WhatsApp to make changes to its functionalities during the election, conducted an analysis of the images that were shared on the app (Tardáguila et al., 2018). They joined 347 different groups from the period between August 17 to right before the election on October 17 in order to look at the images that were being shared. They found that of the 50 most shared images 56 per cent of them were misleading. Only 8 per cent were true. Separate research conducted by the Institute for Technology and Society in Rio de Janeiro, involved joining 110 different groups (C. Machado & Konopacki, 2018). The researchers at the institute looked at 26, 487 messages accumulated over 7 days and found that four administrators were responsible for 17 different groups, and in another case, they found that one user had been in 49 different groups that supported the same candidate. This suggests that the WhatsApp groups created for the election were created by a small group of people intent on creating the content in these groups, filtering and moderating them (C. Machado & Konopacki, 2018).

These were likely members of the “anti-Workers’ party campaign” that Bolsonaro’s aides had bankrolled. The allegations stated that the campaign was specifically designed to flood WhatsApp groups with millions of fake news messages simultaneously. The report by Folha de S. Paulo (2018) found that there were specific companies paying users, sometimes selected based on geographical region or by social class, to send pro-
Bolsonaro messages. Users were paid 0.08 to 0.12 Brazilian reals (0.021-0.031 USD)\(^8\) if they were actual Bolsonaro supporters and 0.30-0.40 reals per message (0.077-0.1 USD\(^1\) if the user was provided by the company\(^9\)\(^10\)(Mello, 2018; Phillips, 2018). There was suspicion early on that there were bots being used by users on WhatsApp to clog the app with misinformation. This is another trend that Bradshaw and Howard (2018) saw emerging in their report. They found that “cyber troops” were being used increasingly to help spread pro-government messages in various countries. They define “cyber troops” as “government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online” (2018, p. 4). They added that these cyber troops used various techniques to accomplish their goals, including but not limited to, the implementation of automated political bots that flood hashtags or platforms with messages in support of a particular party or, in the case of an election, a particular candidate. They write, “political bots are used by cyber troops to flood hashtags with automated messages promoting or attacking particular politicians, or to fake a follower base on social media. Increasingly, they are also used to strategically post particular keywords, in order to game algorithms and cause certain content to trend” (2018, pp. 6–7).

Bradshaw and Howard’s (2018) report also found that when they collected data in Brazil, human accounts, automated accounts and cyborg accounts were all used to spread pro-government messages, attacks on the opposition, “distracting or neutral messages” and tolling/harassing messages (2018, p. 14). In its research, the Institute for Technology and Society in Rio de Janeiro also looked at the use of automation in the groups they analysed (C. Machado & Konopacki, 2018). In one instance, they looked at 10 users who had sent out the most messages between the dates of October 17th and 23rd, 2018. They found that the users together sent over 2,292 messages in that period. The most active user had reached 360 messages between those dates. They found that these users were 25 times more active than average users who sent 9 messages in that same time period. They also found that 8 out of the 10 highly active users had no photos or personal information on their profiles, concluding that these were bots that were sending messages. The research concluded that ultimately there “there [were] strong elements of automation to [disseminate] information among different groups on WhatsApp [and] that there [was] coordinated action among different members in … groups on WhatsApp” (C. Machado & Konopacki, 2018).

As mentioned, this was predicted from early on and it did not go on without resistance. A group called Comprova\(^11\) comprised of 24 Brazilian newsrooms came together to try to fact-check the misinformation on

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\(^8\) Author used a currency conversion tool.
\(^9\) See footnote 9.
\(^10\) See footnote 6 on translation.
\(^11\) It should be noted that this was funded by both the Google News Initiative and Facebook’s Journalism Project. (“24 Brazilian newsrooms unite to investigate election misinformation,” 2018)
WhatsApp. WhatsApp provided them with an API\textsuperscript{2} that allowed them to receive questions from WhatsApp users through a website called Zendesk. They received 3000 questions daily during the first week of October, when they launched. In total, they received 70,000 questions asking them to verify information (Rinehart, 2018). Though this may have helped curb some of the misinformation floating on WhatsApp, it ultimately was not enough to stop the misinformation from influencing the election.

**Conclusion**

All of this paints a disturbing picture, especially when one considers the implications these misinformation campaigns have for democratic institutions such as the news media and elections. As users, particularly those in the Global South, rely more on chat apps like WhatsApp, they need to be made aware of the fact that political actors will use those spaces for spreading misinformation. This is becoming a trend for these actors especially during elections. Bradshaw and Howard (2018) write:

> With each passing election, there is a growing body of evidence that national leaders, political parties, and individual political candidates are using social media platforms to spread disinformation… what makes this phenomenon unique is the deliberate use of computational propaganda to manipulate voters and shape the outcome of elections. (p. 5)

Just as the Brazilian elections wrapped up with an unease as Bolsonaro takes office, analysts have already started to warn about misinformation in the upcoming Nigerian election. Once again, WhatsApp is the biggest concern for journalists, and once again, a team of journalists have come together in attempt to provide an antidote to the viral misinformation (Kazeem, 2018; Rinehart, 2018). If misinformation and fake news are to be stopped, laws need to be implemented to regulate these social media giants; they need to cooperate and actively look for solutions to reduce the misinformation on their platforms, and users need to be educated on media awareness more actively. What is at stake is too valuable to let this go on unchecked.

**Biography**

Latifa Abdin is a candidate for the Masters of Globalization at McMaster University and a graduate of the Ryerson School of Journalism. While at Ryerson University, Latifa developed an interest in the intersection of media and politics, specifically looking at how media influences politics on both local and international levels. Latifa is continuing to pursue this interest in her graduate studies. In addition to being a student, Latifa is also

\textsuperscript{2} Simply put, an API (Application Programming Interface) is a software that allows applications to communicate with each other. (“What is an API? (Application Programming Interface),” n.d.)
journalist actively working in the news industry, first with Canadaland, an award-winning podcast network, and currently at CBC News Network.

References


Fictitious Capital: Netflix and the New Narratives of Media Value in Platform Capitalism

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Abstract

What is Netflix? A tech company? A studio? A global television network? A website? An application? A wise investment? This essay showcases –through Netflix– how the convergence of technology and culture industries are discursively performed under the emergent financializing logics of value creation in platform capitalism. The production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of internet television is creating and controlling new flows of attention, data, content, and capital, all of which are justified through the emergent grammars and narratives of media value in the digital economy. In looking at the ever increasing overlap between cultural production, finance, technology, and globality, I hope to offer forth new approaches and methodologies to the shifting state of these converging industries, more specifically the narrative language which performs, projects, obfuscates, and justifies these emergent practices and strategies. Netflix’s corporate communications include a range of media texts, such as investor relations materials, quarterly earnings reports, press release archives, executive interviews and profiles in trade publications, and company blogs, all of which constitute Netflix’s discursive narrative of ‘disruption’ and value creation. I argue that these texts should be read for their narrative, rhetorical, and political purchase; employing textual analysis to examine the emergent figures, narrators, themes, and motifs present in the evolving discourses of media value today. Expanding Marx’s concept of fictitious capital –capital produced more so through its hyper-circulation rather than from material production– this essay seeks to begin to unpack the cultural logic of platform television and platform capitalism more broadly, as capital is increasingly fictionalized, and fiction is increasingly capitalized upon.

Keywords: Netflix, Investor Lore, Platform, Financialization, Streaming, Data, Value, Industrial Convergence, Discourse

What is a story worth? How are stories made and circulated? How do the pop culture forms of film and television intersect with technology, finance, and social relations? What exactly is Netflix, and what does it represent? In trying to answer these questions, I examine today’s new political economies of culture, media, tech, and finance industries and the discourses of value which now bind them. Using Netflix as a lens, I want to ask relevant questions about how new forms and flows of value and capital are described, narrativized, produced, and exchanged. The vertical integration –total control and ownership of the processes of production, promotion, and distribution– of Netflix and increasingly of major tech and media conglomerates with streaming platforms is reminiscent of the Hollywood Studio System of the early to mid 20th century, albeit with the important affordances and powers of digitality.
In the context of this essay, I will argue that Netflix’s “growth” has hinged upon its ability not only to create, but more importantly to communicate new forms and flows of value enabled by media convergence and the digital platform. Thus it is imperative that we unpack and critique such communications to understand their role in generating and sustaining new forms and flows of content, capital, data, attention, and control. Netflix was built upon and is now sustained by a combination of debt structures, venture capital funds, shareholder investments, and subscriber revenue. Each of these financial instruments and processes are prefigured by discourses and narratives of value seeking to convince a range of investing actors in the scalability, and speculative profitability of their platform model. As figure 1 exemplifies, Netflix is now operating at a staggering, indeed unprecedented scale. My research argues that Netflix’s meteoric rise represents the broader re-definition and expanded imaginaries and temporalities of value in platform capitalism. Through language, rhetoric, and discourse, Netflix’s success has been its ability to constantly sell new narratives of new value.

Today, virtually all major American tech companies and major media conglomerates are racing into the streaming market as evidence of this perception and narrativization of value. Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon, WarnerMedia (conglomerate of AT&T + TimeWarner, owner of HBO), Disney which owns controlling shares of Hulu, Comcast (owner of NBC Universal), and even the criterion collection among others are converging into streaming platforms. Leveraging advantages in technology or content, each of these companies wants to emulate and displace Netflix in some capacity; to cash in on the perceived “value” streaming represents, or perhaps necessitates. But what do we mean when we say value now? What types of value do streaming and platform
economies represent and reward? How are these discourses of value communicated? We need to seriously rethink previous political, economic, cultural, and social conceptualizations of value to understand and navigate the 21st century, and more importantly to create and imagine alternative politics, economies, and socialities of value in opposition to and beyond late capital.

The successes of Netflix’s platform model have clearly sparked new ideas, discourses, and practices surrounding media production, promotion, distribution, and consumption. A growing body of academic work on Netflix from a number of fields has taken aim at each of these aspects of media industries, and yet virtually none have considered the narratives and discourses of value which organize, justify, and govern these new industrial practices. In essence I am less interested in how Netflix operates, and more interested in how the company frames and projects such operations as valuable in order to mobilize financial capital. Thus this essay focuses primarily on the conceptual and methodological interventions my research hopes to make, offering some new ideas and critical approaches to studying the polymorphous object of the digital platform. Within the context of this publication and its themes, I hope these interventions will be helpful as to how we think about and critique the increasingly inescapable platform ecology which now organizes not only media, communication, discourse, and debate, but increasingly capitalizes upon such behaviours and practices of everyday life itself.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework I put forth argues that the convergence of tech and entertainment industries are discursively performed under the financializing logics and narratives of potential value creation in platform capitalism. Thus the provision (licensing, production, promotion, and distribution) of internet television through Netflix is creating and controlling unprecedented new forms and flows of value wherein data, behaviour, attention, time, content, information, infrastructure, and sociality are translated and financialized from inputs into investments similar to those of capital, credit, debt, and labour. Each of these new forms and flows of value are organized and justified through narrative language; a clouded assemblage of rhetoric, communication, code, integers, images, and voices. Each text performs a story. Importantly, this discursive performance is both aimed at and reproduced by a variegated audience of investing actors: users, executives, investors, shareholders, venture capitalists, and talent. Labelling this broad group of stakeholders as investing actors and their discourses as investor lore, is helpful in excavating and unpacking the narrative discourses of these data-fied and financialized forms and flows of value.

Industrial convergence, financialization, and platform capitalism are the three key concepts which underpin this framework. Putting these ideas into conversation with one another provides a useful conceptual framework to examine and unpack the emergent logics and imaginaries of value in the digital economy. Industrial convergence is the idea that once disparate industries, especially media industries, are becoming increasingly interrelated, intersecting, and overlapping, through an increasing and shared reliance upon digitization and ubiquitous
computing (Negroponte, 1978; Fidler, 1997; Jenkins, 2006). Next, financialization refers to the exponential growth of global financial markets, institutions, and products over the past 30 to 40 years, in which value is increasingly generated through the hyper-circulation of and speculation upon capital through financial instruments and processes. To paraphrase cultural theorist Frederic Jameson, financialization indicates the logical extension or outward spiralling of late capitalism, a tellingly post-industrial and post-modern fantasy of “profit without production” (Jameson, 1997; 246; Appadurai, 2017). Lastly, ‘platform capitalism’ is the idea that data are becoming increasingly important and valuable resources in contemporary economics. Thus the digital platform is the best and perhaps only model through which to collect, process, and mobilize such potential value (Srnicek, 2017). These three concepts are inseparable and mutually reinforcing, as financialization has always accelerated alongside advancements in computing technology and the digitization of finance is a process of industrial convergence in itself. Here the digital platform, as a product of technology, is also always already highly financialized, as the tech industry depends upon and mobilizes instruments of finance such as venture capital, debt, public offerings, mergers, acquisitions and so on. Together these processes produce platform capitalism as a convergent and hybrid model designed to most efficiently gather, measure, process, and mobilize capital and data ever seeking to translate such capital and data –through user profiling, advertising, e-commerce, digital services, and now importantly film and television– into more financial capital over time. The dot com boom of the 90s and early aughts from which Netflix emerged, and the current frenzied flows of capital into the tech sector further indicate these contemporary economic logics, circuits, and narratives of value generation and accumulation.

Our current environment of ubiquitous computing generates increasingly specific data sets at all scales. From your individual heart rate monitored by your iWatch, to the global trends of Facebook’s 2.3 billion monthly users. If you can measure something, especially over time, you can begin to value it, sell it, trade it, and gamble upon the uncertainty of its future value. The exponential scaling of our technological ability to measure and mobilize everything as data thus opens up the potentiality and capitalist fantasy of turning everything into a new financializable product, service, or market; we call these futures (Srnicek, 2017). The value logic here is that data increasingly carries the potential to beget capital. What I want to argue, by putting these concepts into conversation, is that the platform is at heart a financial technology, data-fying the practices of everyday life in efforts to capitalize upon them. Netflix exemplifies this, as it has data-fied not only film and television, but more importantly the very practice and behaviour of watching into a financialized feedback loop of value. Not only are your subscription fees re-invested into financial markets, but your behaviour –what you watch, where you watch, what device you use, what language you watch in, how long you watch for, how you rate content, how you browse the catalogue, and how you engage with recommendations– are but a few of the key user data metrics which Netflix monitors, ever in attempts to monetize. We tend to think of streaming as the hyper convenient flow of images and sounds descending from the cloud to our devices but we must also consider the simultaneous flows of our user data which return to the platform, keeping in mind how all of our digital behaviours and practices are measured, guided, processed, and financialized (Holt, 2017).
The Narrativity of Value Production in Platform Capitalism

What are the cultural logics and narrative discourses of value which prefigure, justify, and sustain these new flows of data, content, capital, and control? Speaking to someone at a start-up, or in the worlds of business about their product or service, they’ll tell you the most important part of any pitch as well as any brand is really storytelling. Putting forth a narrative with relatable characters: users, investors, and “talent” (platform capitalism’s favourite word for labor). A conflict or problem which their innovation can resolve: the neoliberal solutionism of disruption and market creation. Compelling story arcs: risk, investment, scale, competition, profit, “value”. And finally, the implication of a happily ever after: the capitalist fantasy of perpetual profit and growth, ultimately ending in monopolization through vertical integration and conglomeration. Within this financializing framework, and specifically within platform capitalism, the same uncertainty, risk, and potentiality that gives meaning to stories and indeed life itself has been objectified, commodified, branded, and financialized in the name of future value. This is precisely why I think it is important to analyze the textuality and narrativity governing the discourses of value that come with our increasingly inescapable platform economy.

“Fictitious capital” now describes much of the financialized logics of platform economics, and is also literalized by Netflix, as they trade in the business of storytelling: narrative and fiction. Netflix has grown over the past twenty years through telling its own story of value; namely that the company provides home entertainment as a most convenient, flexible and enjoyable user experience. The belief here is that this experience should, in theory, strengthen the brand through hype and word of mouth promotion, which should continually grow the user base, increasing inputs of revenue and user data, which can in turn be reinvested in the company’s operations (by financing data, equity, and debt to program more content, acquire bigger stars and directors, and improve its technology), improving the user experience, strengthening the brand, and so on and so forth. This positive feedback loop represents Netflix’s performative promise of perpetual growth and value. This feedback loop which marries user value, financial value, and now cultural value is the bedrock of Netflix’s business model, and has propelled the exponential growth and projection of their high valuation as a company. For twenty years Netflix has sold this story to all stakeholders: from investors, to users, to creative and tech workers. This is what I have come to call Investor Lore.

Investor Lore

Timothy Havens’ media studies concept of Industry lore is defined as “the conventional knowledge among industry insiders about what kinds of media culture are and are not possible, and what audiences that culture will and will not attract” (2008). Adapting this for the platform age, I put forth instead the concept and methodological approach of investor lore as: the emergent discourses among investing actors about what kinds of user experiences are and are not valuable, and which users those experiences will and will not engage. Shifting the focus from the knowledge of industry insiders, to the discourses of value of investing actors –users, executives,
various investors, and creative and tech workers—allows for a more multifaceted, multi-sided methodology to begin to unpack the new forms and flows of “value” in the expanding platform economy. It is important to conceptualize investor lore in all its forms as performative discourse, which as Butler has said “must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.” (Butler, 1993; 2). By constantly reiterating and citing specific discourses and promises of value, Netflix, and the contemporary economy more broadly, seeks precisely to bring into being the forms of value that it names. Netflix’s lore remains a networked project of rhetorical performance, aimed to instill faith from users, investors, and labour in the myriad forms of value the company projects to each of these actors and audiences.

I have focused primarily upon the financial discourses and audiences of Netflix, in attempt to excavate the cultural logic beneath this company’s unprecedented mobilization of financial capital, through its hyper-circulation of content and data. Netflix’s investor relations media and financial communications provide a wealth of information to analyze how this company rhetorically frames and performs its strategies and narratives of value generation. We must pay critical attention to CEO letters to shareholders, financial earnings reports and filings, executive interviews, press releases, and company blogs as rich sites for analysis containing the prominent narrators, figures, motifs, and themes which come together to form the narratives of value of investor lore. I have found that thinking of these various objects as narrative or literary texts lends a critical insight into their rhetorical modes of persuasion.

To rethink value in the platform age we must conceptualize it as a complex and multiplicitous matrix of financial, technological, sociocultural, and affective characteristics, produced by and for these investing stakeholders. Investing actors include: users, executives, shareholders, venture capitalists, financial institutions, and labour. Investments of value are no longer just financial capital, but importantly: data, attention, time, sociality, debt, credit, labour, content, connectivity, information, and infrastructure (Citton, 2017; Smieck, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). I label this broad group of actors as investors, as platform capitalism hinges upon the datafication and in turn financialization of these new forms and flows of value. Whether you like it or not, as a user, investor, or worker, you are investing and circulating various forms of value such as data, attention, time, capital, content, information, infrastructure, labour, and sociality in the mechanisms of platform capitalism. Conceptualizing these new forms and flows of value as investments forces us to always keep in mind the new ways in which they are measured, calculated, circulated, and financialized.

Given the length of this publication, I cannot go into great detail regarding the specifics of Netflix’s investor lore, but can provide the overarching structure of my analysis. For example, the narrators of Netflix’s investor lore are its executives, financial analysts, trade journalists, users, and now stars, auteurs, and show runners. These players shape and circulate the dominant media discourses and negotiations of Netflix’s value. If we think of these agents as narrators, we can begin to examine how central their role has been in projecting the value and potential of the
company as a service, content producer, and investment. Whether it’s a quote from a user, long term shareholder, or financial analyst, or an endorsement of the creative freedom at Netflix from a director or showrunner, each of these narrators frames and negotiates the myriad forms of “value” in Netflix projects. The key figures of the drama of Netflix are the user, the investor, and creative and tech “talent”. Discussed both in the abstract and in reality, these figures are ever present in Netflix’s investor lore, and are perpetually benefitting, or as they say in finance “gaining returns on investment” for Netflix, be it in terms of entertainment value, financial value, intellectual and creative fulfilment and so on. The recurring motifs throughout Netflix’s story have been consumer choice, convenience, flexibility, sociocultural cache, and technological innovation. Whether it was through DVD rental by Mail, streaming, or original productions, these motifs symbolize the sociocultural and affective forms of value Netflix offers users, in attempts to always gather and financialize more user data and subscription revenue. In terms of creative and tech labour, it offers the opportunity to have a mass audience for the work “to be a part of something bigger.” In Netflix’s investor relations, discourse, images of users, investors, and workers harmoniously enjoying various forms of value Netflix brings to them is ever present, in attempts to further convince and solidify belief in these values and its long term sustainability.

Lastly, each of these narrative elements of course serve the overarching themes of Netflix’s lore, which put forth the potentialities of value in 1) innovative ecosystem growth, 2) vertical integration, and 3) global market expansion. Fostering the convergence, first of DVD and later streaming technologies, Netflix has always identified and projected itself as an innovator, and branded this identity to investors as a competitive advantage, perpetually leading and yet always improving upon existing infrastructures and technologies of entertainment. As the ecosystems of DVD and eventually streaming became ubiquitous with Netflix’s help, the company boldly moved into original content production as an optimization of capital in an increasingly competitive streaming landscape. Netflix vertically integrated production into its distribution and recommendation model as a new –if not necessary– way to extract value from its investments, by producing shows which they “knew” would have Netflix audience attention based upon user data, and giving themselves global rights in perpetuity. And lastly, as competition seemingly grows every day, Netflix has worked hard over the past eight years –in which they have expanded into 190 countries– to frame themselves as a global television Network, frequently citing a mantra of utopian televisuality where “great storytelling transcends borders”. Of course, so too does global capital, as this move clearly signals to investors the financial potential of entering and dominating international markets to extract such capital, and offers users and workers a form of global participation and citizenship.

**Conclusion**

“[...] any comprehensive new theory of finance capitalism will need to reach out into the expanded realm of cultural production to map its effects; indeed, mass cultural production and consumption itself—at one with globalization and the new information technology— are as profoundly economic as the other productive areas of late capitalism and as fully a part of the latter’s generalized commodity system.” (Jameson, 1997; 252)
Jameson’s idea that the flows of finance capitalism will always be reflected in and by “mass” culture industries is perhaps most evident through Netflix and its new media economics, a compelling case study through which to analyze such processes. Netflix’s guiding logics of flexibility, scale, surveillance, and debt all speak to the broader structures and movements of labour, capital, and value in today’s platform economies. In the financing, distribution, promotion, and consumption of internet film and television, each of these processes are driven by platform capitalism’s narratives, assemblages, and flows of value: data, time, attention, capital, information, infrastructure, algorithms, labour, and sociality. The adoption of Netflix’s investor lore has fundamentally reshaped media industries, as the datafication, and in turn financialization of television speaks not only to the model of Netflix, but indeed to the expanding platform economy writ large. One must engage – navigate, click, look, listen, share, mention, and discuss – to participate in any digital cultural form, exchanging not only one’s capital but their very behaviour for access to entertainment and culture. I hope that the concept and methodology of investor lore can help elucidate the cultural logic and narrativity of value in platform capitalism, in which industrial convergence and financialization work in concert to measure, monitor, and monetize increasingly datafied practices of everyday life. These discourses of value sustain, justify, and organize the increasingly technocratic rationale of contemporary society, which we must continue to read, translate, and critically engage if we are to imagine more creative and equitable futures.

Biography
Colin’s current SSHRC funded research examines the discursive production and communication of “value” through the lens of Netflix’s investor relations materials. While this research takes aim at internet television, Colin is interested more broadly in the processes of datafication, appification, and financialization of everyday life and culture in platform capitalism.

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Horror Movies on Wax: Examining Violence in ‘90’s Horrorcore Rap

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Abstract
Popular hip hop criticism has traditionally categorized rap music as violent, misogynistic, materialistic, and unequivocally profane. Explicit urban accounts have resulting become the focalized exegesis for music critics to condemn violent and profane narratives as exaggerated representation or spectacle. This is especially evident through criticism on horrorcore, which is a subgenre of gangsta rap thematically mirroring horror cinema by combining supernatural, demonic, drug-induced, and psychotic imagery through explicit lyricism. Specifically, this paper presentation will explore the controversy surrounding horrorcore lyricism and its unapologetic, explicit subject matter and delivery predominantly criticized through popular journalism. Many music critics and cultural theorists condemn horrorcore for promoting violent murder and crime as forms of inconsequential rebellion, whereas horrorcore rappers opposingly argue that horrorcore is a commentary on the individual’s internal struggle inside the oppressed urban environment, which is expressed through exaggeration. As horrorcore rapper Grym Reaper argued, “To say that our music would have negative connotations is not true because a lot of the things that we base our songs on we find on the news. We find suicide on the news…We just feeding off of everyday situations and showing you the horrors of everyday life” (TheBlackIce, 2010, 4:15). I will apply horror film psychoanalysis to repurpose horrorcore lyricism as lived experience. Horrorcore as lived experience versus horrorcore as violent obscenity enables consideration of contradicting popular culture discourses and the distinction between fiction and nonfiction in rap music as either art or entertainment.

Keywords: Hip hop, Horror, mental health, violence

Introduction

Popular hip hop criticism has traditionally categorized rap music as violent, misogynistic, materialistic, and unequivocally profane since the mid-1980’s new school era. During hip hop’s lyrical and sonic transformation into the early 1990s, the dominant narrative for gangsta and hardcore music pushed this negative criticism further. According to Tricia Rose (2008), critics see gangsta and hardcore rap as foundationally grounded in masculine power rather than honest vulnerability; however, rap’s stylistic versatility encompassed lyrical commentary on socially, economically, and personally locative struggles, and “the city [was] an audible presence, explicitly cited and sonically sampled in the reproduction of the aural textures of the urban environment” (Forman, 2002, p. xviii). Urban violence was portrayed consciously as part of a larger, systemic
problem and rapper vulnerability, though not necessarily visible lyrically, was present beneath the surface (Hodge, 2010). Yet explicit urban accounts resultingly became the focalized exegesis for music critics and scholars to condemn violent and profane narratives as exaggerated representation, or spectacle. This was especially evident through criticism on the gangsta subgenre of horrorcore.

Defining Horrorcore

Alonzo Westbrook (2002) defines horrorcore generally as “rap with themes of horror, dead bodies, funerals, tombs, etc” (p. 72). More specifically, horrorcore invokes similar themes as horror movies, combining violent imagery with the “supernatural, demonic, drug-induced, or downright psychotic” (Riggs, 2018, p. 215). According to hip hop producer Prince Paul, the term was coined in 1994 by music journalist Havelock Nelson, who labelled Gravediggaz collective as such after pioneering the sonic and lyrical horrorcore content on 6 Feet Deep (Diggs, Huston, Berkeley, & Hamilton, 1994f) (247HH.COM). A 6 Feet Deep reviewer reported, “The Gravediggaz is a kind of reaction, an antidote almost, to gangster rap” (McCann, 1994, p. 113). Examples of horrorcore lyrics include:

Gravediggaz - 1-800-Suicide:

So you wanna die, commit suicide?/Dial 1-800-Cyanide line/Far as life, yo, it ain’t worth it/Put a rope around your neck and jerk it/That trick don’t work/your life was fucked up from the first day of birth.

Geto Boys – Assassins:

But all was in my head was kill the bitch like Freddy/I dug between the chair, and whipped out the machete/She screamed, I sliced her up until her guts were like spaghetti.

Mimicking gangsta rap’s violent features, horrorcore transformed urban narratives into tales of terror resembling the carnage visually internalized in horror cinema and scary movies like Friday the 13th (Cunningham, 1980) and A Nightmare on Elm Street (Shaye, 1984).

Amid the shocking brutality of horrorcore’s lyrical content, reviewers quickly analyzed the new genre. Billboard (Flick, 1994) wrote:

Hip-hop newcomers step as the leaders of a bizarre but brilliant new creative twist in rap, dubbed ‘horrorcore.’ Violent imagery is placed inside a spooky framework that gives track the feel of an elaborate slasher movie. This oh-so-clever concept is bolstered by a head-bobbin’ midtempo groove that kicks hard and is fleshed out with ominous sound bites and samples.

For rapper RZArector (b. Robert Diggs), the Gravediggaz were:
[T]rying to educate [kids] by showing...by shocking them. It’s like when you watch something, and it scares you and you see that it is something you don’t want to do anymore, it affects you more than somebody telling you ‘Don’t do this, don’t do that.’ (Diggs et al., 1994d)

RZArector’s desire for “street education” echoes gangsta rap sentiments where the urban environment becomes the lyrical landscape for discussing violence that inner struggle and oppression systematically produces (Forman, 2002). Through these notions, it is important to investigate beyond horrorcore’s violent, criminal surface to identify alternative meanings opposing traditionally negative criticism. Dyson (2001) argued that dismissing suffering narratives “slights the initiative and ingenuity of poor black youth who filled a leadership vacuum with artistic expression” (p. 208).

**Criticism Towards Horrorcore as Violent**

The horrorcore disparager interprets the music texts as violent, male-dominated narratives, spectacle and exaggeration for consumer shock value. Comparatively with gangsta rap, horrorcore is heavily attacked for its uniquely graphic glorification, violence, and malice on consumers. In his review of *The Geto Boys* (1990), Robert Christgau (1990) of *Consumer Guide* said, “Whether the Boys are expressing inner natures or one-upping N.W.A. and 2 Live Crew, they’re sick motherfuckers” (para. 1). Horrorcore’s cinematic content can be seen as exaggerated spectacle promoting a violent, psychotic world where fantasy and reality become intertwined to the extent of unbearable decipherability. For the Washington Post’s review of Geto Boys’ *The Geto Boys*, David Mill (1991) wrote:

The price you pay, the listener, for a few minutes of vicarious thrills is the nagging worry that, damn, maybe songs like these are turning this into a world where a teenager can shoot into a stranger's car because he feels like "bustin' somebody," then grin when he's arrested for murder.

However, dissecting horrorcore’s narrative can reveal that rappers are not boasting, as is characteristic in popular gangsta critique, but are instead demonstrating alternative realities rarely acknowledged in historic hip hop. As RZArector mentioned, shock value and exaggeration are didactic techniques, which indicates that, for Siegfried Kracauer (2003), “The sickness of the psyche is, essentially, taken for granted, and the impression remains that nothing can be done about it” (p. 108).

Re-examining negative horrorcore discourse demands reevaluating the subgenre’s lyrics in order to demonstrate mental health subjectivity that is omitted from historical hip hop narratives. Horrorcore discussed as a purely violent gimmick, which Antoine Hennion (1990) noted is a musical “trick” to capture the market, can be transformed if compared to horror film psychoanalysis for illuminating the “monstrous” horror personas and their mental states that rap music criticism fails applying. Fredrich Kittler (1997) also discusses technical “tricks” as power techniques, which shows that RZArector’s didactic methods, though arguably gimmicky, are powerful tools for generating meaning, even if scholars or critics have not investigated these tools yet.
Culturally and psychoanalytically considering seminal horrorcore texts is essential for understanding the subgenre’s original intent, or at least repurposing its contents, because of its copious commentary on the human psyche.

**Defining Horror(core) as Genre**

Larrie Duddenhoeffer (2014) stated that “horror cinema turns on revealing what we cannot comfortably reveal, on transposing outside of us what must remain on the inside, on disclosing what seems impossible to ever visualize or claim as our own” (p. 5). Despite horror’s graphic depictions, notably within the psychological horror and body horror subgenres, the excessive ferocity illuminates within the viewer a mirror image of themselves as embodying the same mental truths as the characters on screen (Bellour & Rosolato, 1990; Lacan, 2001). For Brigid Cherry (2009), “horror films tap into the cultural moment by encoding the anxieties of the moment in their depictions of monstrosity…” (p. 11), meaning that the temporal and spatial circumstances dictate what is deemed horrific or pedestrian to the viewer.

Within horror cinema, and later exercised in horrorcore rap, the monstrous figure is simultaneously positive and negative, acting and reacting to its mind’s desires that the environment shapes. Gravediggaz’s Grym Reaper (b. Anthony Berkley) similarly stated that “if a human being is going to be balanced, he got to have negative and positive within him” (Diggs et al., 1994b). For Sigmund Freud (1934), the creative writer divides their ego and dispenses their mental life through characters, either as hero or spectator.

**Abjection and Self-Harm**

Julie Kristeva (1982) argued that the individual is fractured between the “I” and the other, which is called the abject; the abject becomes an alter ego only accessible through pleasure and delight. The abject’s signs and drives are conscious/unconscious dialectics arising from individual reaction due to a loss of distinction between the self and other. Abjection is characteristic of the body horror subgenre involving mutilation and physical violence, and the body horror character acting on abject consciousness embodies a persona or suppressed, raging other in response to threat. In horror, films seek ridding or purifying the abject other so the monstrous character can opposingly establish its positive self, in turn repurposing the symbolic unconscious (Grant, 2004).

Laura Wilson (2015) said, “[T]hinking about the self and the other – ‘I’ and not ‘I’ – in relation to physicalities generated, opens up new ways to explore our conscious and unconscious” (p. 62). In Dans Ma Peau (*In My Skin*) (Farenc, 2002), the character’s antisocial behaviour manifests into body mutilation and self-harm, and the “discord between Esther and the outside world anticipates her future actions as her self-harm is read as an attempt…to communicate…to a world outside herself” (Wilson, 2015, p. 64). Horrorcore rap music exerts the same longing to communicate with an outside world, which is enacted via explicit lyrical imagery. Scarface rapped, “Like I said before, Scarface is my identity/A homicidal maniac with suicidal tendencies…I remember waking up in an asylum/Being treated like a troubled kid/My shirt was all bloody, and both of my wrists were slit”
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(Jordan et al., 1990b). Waking up to cut wrists indicates that Scarface unknowingly harmed himself and his unconscious uncontrollably surfaced and assumed power.

Lyrically, Scarface illustrates a vulnerability and horror from being inside an asylum. The physical not “I” harming the “I” only becomes evident after action is conducted. Scarface’s story aligns with Kristeva’s (1982) theory that “if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me” (p. 10). For Scarface, despite unknowingly attempting suicide, the urban space he fills helps produce the persona he cannot visualize but is made to identify.

If abject is the matter that the individual excludes in order to solidify their identity (Grant, 2004), then Kristeva’s theory posits that horrorcore’s mutilation and self-harm techniques represent the rapper’s aspiring division from institutional influences. However, Gatekeeper does not see division as a realistic possibility, rapping, “Put a rope around your neck and jerk it/That trick don’t work/your life was fucked up from the first day of birth” (Diggs et al., 1994c). Therefore, Gatekeeper presents a universality that each oppressed person is born into a mentally ill mind state and environment. Although suicide displays itself as an escape mechanism, the individual still suffers. Self-mutilation and self-harm thus appear within horrorcore as a communicative non-language, which is directed towards agents outside the urban space. “[U]nderstanding of human experience and development as involving essential and continuing interaction between the individual and the environment” (Katz, 2017, p. 34) is necessary for critics to contemplate.

Regardless of the popular criticism directed towards horrorcore’s narrative, the lyrical imagery, even if exaggerated, represents the lived experience structuring social formations and identity (Markovitz, 2011). Geto Boys and Gravediggaz successfully acknowledge the bestial unconscious through lyrical expletives, which is a commentary not only on their fractured identities, but also on the fractured identities of others whose stories have not been told. Especially in the 1990s, mental health-related exhibitions of self-harm were stigmatized. Rap’s abject via self-harm and mutilation “serves as a substitute for a language that has failed” (Wilson, 2015, p. 74).

Killers: Multiple Personalities and Duel Meanings

Violent killing is the predominant theme in horror cinema and horrorcore rap, but only psychoanalysis is applied to the movie serial killer. Psycho killer and duel personality archetypes therefore become tools for understanding human behaviour and emotion (Fleming & Manvell, 2006). Friedrich Nietzsche (2003) stated, “He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you” (aphorism 146), meaning that the individual must acknowledge their double self or fall victim to its control; this theme flows through horror rap. Resultingly, discourse surrounding horrorcore’s murderous narrative demands crucially examining the narrator whose psychotic mind forces exterior pain as opposed to the abject figure quietly terrorized within.
Desire for aggressive vengeance is highly recognizable in horror. Serial killers are psychological performers rather than man-made scientist creations (Jancovich, 2015), indicating that “whether society be a spiritual vacuum or a battlefield of irreconcilable beliefs, it seems no longer to provide a shelter for the individual, or principles that would compel his integrity” (Kracauer, 2003, p. 109). Horror serial killers traditionally cannot be remedied or fixed inside a laboratory like Frankenstein’s monster, but instead must face the world alone; the killer’s support network behaves obtusely and insignificantly, and the killer consequently responds.

In *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), serial killer Norman Bates’ solitary motel inside Fairvale, California, provides no metaphorical supportive shelter. Because he is often alone, especially succeeding his murderous rampage against his mother and her lover ten years prior, his integrity and psyche are unbalanced. Bates’ consecutive murders on the motel grid are violent acts of jealousy that his “mother,” which has become his dual personality, carries out when the Norman monad attracts women. Bates’ violence towards women shows internal anxieties associated with an abusive childhood aggression (MacDonald, 2013). Horrorcore does not avoid depicting such parental anxieties either.

Embodying the female perspective, the Grym Reaper discusses a woman suffering from multiple personality disorder in response to parental abuse during adolescence in the Gravediggaz’s song “Death Trap”:

Her step-father was robbing the cradle, banging her boots/Her heartbeat increased at night she couldn't sleep/Daddy dearest, was bringing her grief between sheets/Deep scars invaded her soul, force and mind/Six years of torture started at age nine/At age sixteen already an old maid/It seems she was caught like Freddy in a bad dream/Meanwhile her body is being defiled/Telling her mother, only brought a stage of denial/Moms followed pops on the low-down/Led to a showdown, for a week shit slowed down/But one night overcome by lust/Father Dukes tried to score just one more thrust/He should’ve held back ‘cause Lizzie got an axe/Gave his dick forty whacks and threw his ass in the death trap. (Diggs et al., 1994a)

Grym Reaper’s tale specifying a young girl’s Freddy Kreuger-esque abusive nightmares from years of trauma aligns with Bates’ internal parental anxiety. Both Bates and Lizzie kill their parents while formulating new identities, for Lizzie this is an extremely violent response, in torturous environments. Because the spaces do not provide shelter, either within the Bate’s motel or Lizzie’s household, the killer is pushed to murder the invading threat.

Grym Reaper’s emphasis on the female killer empowers an unfamiliar narrative in horror movies while also humanizing the killer. Rather than seeing the body mutilation as purely unreasonable psychosis, Grym Reaper produces a narrative of abuse that he finds reactionary to a helpless environment, resembling the abject discussed earlier. Lizzie’s continuing battle with occupied personal space and physical oppression causes her to reciprocate a torturous existence towards her abusive father through castration. According to Janovich (2015),
women in horror often systematically drive their victims to the edge when paralyzed by self-doubt, and Lizzie’s manufactured personality and resulting “deep scars invad[ing] her soul, force and mind” at the hands of her father, both literally and figuratively, are justifiably retributed.

The parental figures of Bates and Lizzie are “overcome with lust,” as Grym Reaper stated, and create psychotic killers in return. Hitchcock and Grym Reaper illustrate psychosis potentialities, individual vulnerabilities, and manufactured alternative personalities that completely control the body (Indick, 2006). Grym Reaper alters this dark personality speculation through justified action, which the cultural theorist must psychoanalytically decipher, because “America has easily accepted [violent] imag[ry], since it plays on some of the most basic aspects of primitive thought, those which equate murder with the mad as a way of distancing such an act from the world of the sane” (Fleming & Manvell, 1985, p. 109). Grym Reaper’s unique lyrical narrative about Lizzie successfully communicates the Gravediggaz’s mandate that “as long as you got mentally dead people who are living in the midst of death, meaning living in a mental grave, you need somebody to dig that grave up and bring them back to life” (Diggs et al., 1994c).

Conclusion: Spectating Sonic Horror

After analyzing self-harm and violent killing using psychoanalytic theory, it is evident that the horrorcore narrative posits lyrical depth for discussion. Utilizing cultural analysis of horrorcore as spokesperson for vulnerable people interacting with(in) their environment enables further discourse around audience and the role of voyeur or outsider. This is not to say that these lyrics are not violent or misogynistic, because very often they are. However, these layered narratives can be dissected and analyzed within various scholarly frames. Gravediggaz’s Grym Reaper declared that:

To say our music would have negative connotations is not true because a lot of the things that we base our songs on we find on the news. We find suicide on the news…We just feeding off of everyday situations and showing you the horrors of everyday life.” (TheBlackIce, 2010, 4:15)

Not only does the horror psyche need to be acknowledged, but it also needs to be culturally reassessed. Perhaps it is time we listened to horrorcore’s violent screams more closely.

Biography

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References


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Abstract

How does Mexican cinema challenge national status quo, the canon of whiteness, and hegemonic masculinity? This paper identifies the motif of contrast in two films by Alfonso Cuarón and demonstrates that dual narratives are the necessary means through which criticism is conveyed, and Mexico’s antithetical social and political dynamics are portrayed. Award-winning *Y tu mamá también* (2001) uses the genre of coming-of-age, road-trip movie to address the Mexican contradiction between revolutionary impetus and persisting patriarchal attitudes. The film is defined by duality: the married woman Luisa Cortés, visiting from Spain, seduces the two teenage Mexicans Julio Zapata and Tenoch Itúrbide; the character’s names are borrowed from historical Spanish colonizers and Mexican revolutionaries; the “sea, sex and sun” narrative is regularly interrupted by documentary-style episodes and their political voiceover; homoerotic tension is juxtaposed to demonstrations of traditional *mexicanidad* and macho instincts. Manifold contrasts, binaries and dualities also characterize the new Golden-Globe winner *Roma* (2018): black/white, Indigenous/white, Mixtec/Spanish, motherhood/child-caregiver, dirt/cleanliness, speech/silence, etc. The camera moves constantly and yet draws attention to great detail. Reality and fiction mingle as lead actress Yalitza Aparicio realizes while acting that her character Cleo is having a stillborn baby. The figure of the Indigenous domestic worker is put to the forefront, which goes against the cult of white beauty that very much inhabits Mexico from screens to billboards until today. By constantly confronting contraries, both films provide a space for what Gloria Anzaldúa called “a new consciousness” of mestizo/a, and here, Mexican at large, identity.

Keywords: Alfonso Cuarón, mexicanidad, race, masculinity, status quo

In discussing the power of antithetical points of view, the works of Mexican film director Alfonso Cuarón are particularly relevant. They demonstrate how contrasts (artistic, social, political) open horizons onto “third options”; they propose non-binary paradigms for the future of nations like Mexico. Specifically, *Y tu mamá también* (2001) and *Roma* (2018) converge in their constant depiction of two sides of Mexico, at multiple levels (Spanish motherland versus colonized Mexico; the rich versus the poor; indigenous versus white; speech versus silence, etc.). This article interprets omnipresent contrast as a narrative and audiovisual device necessary in both films to represent
multiple binaries that are transcended into a negotiation of *mexicanidad*¹ and a critique of Mexican societal stagnation. Two issues suffering from status quo in modern Mexico are given particular attention: the canon of whiteness and hegemonic masculinity.

*Y tu mamá también* (2001) is a popular film in Mexico and abroad. Known as the coming-of-age, road-movie type, it received academic attention in the 2000s, with critics such as Hester Baer and Ryan Fred Long often reproaching it not to be political enough, or even regressive and too representative of old Mexican stereotypes. The storyline is as follows: best friends Julio Zapata (middle class) and Tenoch Itúrbide (upper class) just graduated from high school and they see off their girlfriends who are flying to Europe for the summer. Hoping to have a good time (sex, drugs and swimming) before they begin university, they are on the lookout and end up meeting an older woman (the wife of Tenoch’s cousin), whom they take to the beach in the hope of seducing her. As Luisa Cortés keeps her terminal cancer a secret and lets loose for the final weeks of her life, the boys compete for her, revealing homoerotic tension. All parties have sex together; the boys split up after the embarrassing event, and Luisa stays at the beach to await her death. Julio and Tenoch meet again in the street a year later, both in the position they were supposed to be in (with girlfriends, in the study programme their parents chose for them). Tenoch shares the news of Luisa’s death. They never meet again.

*Roma* (Netflix, 2018) has not yet received academic attention but is already a Golden-globe and triple-Oscar winner. Film journalists have often reduced the two-hour long film to Cuarón’s personal nostalgia of his childhood in the Roma neighborhood of Mexico City. Cleo, in her twenties, is a *muchacha* (domestic worker) for an upper-middle class family in Roma in the 1970s. The father, a doctor, is often absent and is unfaithful to the mother of four. In the midst of these unnatural family dynamics, children consider Cleo a second mother and the parents see her as a family member while exploiting her (though not by Mexican standards). In her free time, Cleo meets a young man and becomes pregnant. She loses the baby during the Halconazo Massacre² and continues working for the family, with the mother now separated from the father.

**I. The Canon of Whiteness**

Anyone visiting Mexico even nowadays will notice the dominant whiteness presented as an ideal by the media, cinema and commercials. From screen to billboards, the people presented are representative of a select few that do not represent the majority of population, which is of Indigenous and mestizo/a ethnicity. The contrast of color is widely addressed in Cuarón’s two films, and this is where interpretation is crucial; is depicting inequity a way to sustain it, or is it necessary to depict it in order to denounce it?

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¹ Here understood as Mexican identity at large, the word *mexicanidad* is defined by Octavio Paz (1997) as “una manera de no ser nosotros mismos, una reiterada manera de ser y vivir otra cosa” (p. 37): a way of not being ourselves, a recurrent manner of being and living someone and something else (translation mine). The self and peer pressure for behaving in a coded manner contained in this definition is crucial to understanding the hypocrisy that hinders progress in Mexican society.

² The Halconazo Massacre, also known as Corpus Christy Massacre, was a mass shooting of student protestor in Mexico City on June 10, 2019. A militia trained by the federal forces, Los Halcones (“the falcons”) are estimated to have killed over a hundred protestors and civilians present.
Hester Baer and Ryan Fred Long (2004) have seen the representation of race and gender demarcations in *Y tu mamá también* as a preservation of misogyny and social roles, with Cuarón failing to transcend those inequalities (p. 152). While misinterpretations are a risk when clichés are used, the latter are necessary for a denunciation of the status quo. Clichés bear truth, and indeed, such a truth that the mere facts have become clichés. Mexican society needs to be represented in order to be successfully challenged, and Cuarón’s films are filled with symbols inviting the spectator to question the status quo. For instance, an early scene in *Y tu mamá también* has Julio and Tenoch making their way through typical Mexico City traffic on their way back from the airport. In their light mood of discussing their university plans and playing fart games in the car, Julio (middle class) complains about what he thinks is a civilian demonstration slowing down traffic. Tenoch, the upper-class citizen, replies that people are in their own right to demonstrate – a scene representing social hypocrisy from the start. The real cause of bad traffic is discovered when a man is seen dead on the side of the road. The voiceover (a recurrent, documentary-style interruption voiced by acclaimed actor Daniel Giménez Cacho) intervenes to give a name to the dead, Indigenous roadworker Marcelino Escutia who got run over by a speeding bus because he could not afford the detour of taking a pedestrian-safe path to his construction site). This way, the voiceover affords a voice to the less visible – though the more numerous – part of Mexican people. It is a separate narrative itself that contrasts with the two teenagers’ personal story about becoming adult over an eventful summer. Thus, symbolically, Mexico at large exists in parallel with Julio and Tenoch; if they grow, it grows, and if they do not, it stagnates. As María Donapetry (2006) notes, “either the spectator assumes and identifies with the rhetoric of ‘y tu mamá también’ or he distances himself from it and reflects on its subject”¹³ (p. 96). This is a necessary risk Cuarón was willing to take.

In *Roma*, the dynamic of white versus Indigenous is well represented by the relationship between Sofía, the mother, and Cleo, the servant. In a crucial scene, the white, privileged woman comes home drunk at night, several times crashing the car into the garage walls as she tries to park. Cleo is there welcoming her (a duty included in her job, it seems) and looking at her anxiously. When Sofía sees her, she says to Cleo: “Estamos solas. No importa lo que te digan, siempre estamos solas.”⁴ This way, Sofía gives Cleo a lesson she already knows too well as an Indigenous woman come to the city, far from her family to earn her keep, and as a pregnant woman deserted by the child’s father. This ambivalence characterizes the film and denounces a hypocrisy of Mexican society; “muchachas” (young women) are euphemistically called that so that their exploitation sounds less like it. Like Cleo, they are often both fellow women and servant to their employers; sometimes a shoulder they can rest on, sometimes a servant they can yell at. The proximity suggested by Sofía saying “we are always alone” is hypocritical too, because it implies that no matter what ethnicity or social class, their condition of women puts them in the same category, giving a false sense of female solidarity. The technical aspect of movement in the scene reinforces the semantic contrast: Cleo waits passively and statically, while Sofía moves frantically and excessively. No matter how well she means by

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¹³ “Y tu mama también” (and your mother too) is intended here not as the film’s title, but as the insult the boys playfully give each other while getting drunk with Luisa at the beach, meaning that in addition to have had sex with each other’s girlfriends, they also had sex with each other’s mothers (whether or not that is true).

⁴ We’re alone. No matter what they’ll say to you; we, women, are always alone (translation mine).
embracing Cleo and treating her as a fellow woman; she is still the one that has agency in this shameful circumstance. Hypocrisy is also shown in both films by a gesture domestic workers seem to do automatically: they are always expected to pick up the household phone (even if a family member is right next to it) and to wipe it clean before they hand it over to them, as if they were not worthy of touching the phone before their white bosses. María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2005) identifies this as either a trained habit ordered by the employers, or as a consciousness of what would be “[their] own abjection” before their white employers (p. 765). Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) argues that the mestiza suffers “nepantilism,” a Nahuatl-derived word referring to the inability to fit in any of the imposed identities of the current Western-ruled world (p. 100). This “identitectomy” is one that Cleo has suffered, now assuming a liminal state of being, having no identity to cling to (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 105).

II. Hegemonic Masculinity

If the two films are similar in their treatment of race, they differ slightly in that of gender. In Y tu mamá también, it is done explicitly through the male figures of Julio and Tenoch, while in Roma, it is done implicitly through a secondary character, Fermín (Cleo’s lover and the father of her child). Nonetheless, masculinity is performed in both films as the misogynist and heteronormative paradigm demanded and promoted by Mexican society.

Raewyn Connell (2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as follows:

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (p. 77).

Patriarchy is an essential component in the representation of what it means to be a Mexican male in the twentieth century. In Roma, this is done by the attention given to the father. When he comes home in his car, every member of the family and both domestic workers stand at the door to greet him, with glorious classical music in the background. The scene is particularly long and detailed. For example, there is a close-up on the car wheels crushing the dog’s excrements, which is forbearing of the patriarch telling Cleo off for not washing them away. When he leaves again (for work, as a cover, but actually to his mistress), he stands stiff and cold as Sofía hugs him from behind, desperate for a gesture of affection. The hypocrisy of this cold-heartedness is ironically represented in the Halconazo scene in which Fermín, Cleo’s lover and the father of her child, assaults a furniture shop and finds her there, pointing his gun at her while casually wearing a heart tee-shirt.

While patriarchal mexicanidad is denounced subtly in Roma, it is more obvious in Y tu mamá también – perhaps due to the classic love-triangle intrigue involving the two adolescents and the older woman. As Hester Baer and Ryan Fred Long (2004) point out, women are evinced from the narrative early on. Luisa, the only active female presence, is eventually killed off (p. 162). However, one may argue that this is not a sexist but a feminist feature of the film: it is a depiction of a country ruled by men, with mexicanidad defined by macho instincts and the repression of homosexuality, and that depiction is a statement in itself.
The final erotic scene between the three travel mates is crucially symbolic of the revolving cycle of constantly negotiating Mexican identity while undoing progress and starting over again. Luisa, as the Spanish woman come to disrupt (colonize) the two Mexican boys (colonized), facilitates the realization of the homoerotic tension that had been building up between Julio and Tenoch. Going down on them both, she disappears from the camera view as they hesitantly move towards each other and kiss. They are temporarily freed from what Saldaña-Portillo (2005) calls their “repressive heteronormativity” (p. 776) but then, Luisa is evinced in turn. She is only seen again once, when she informs the boys that she will stay at the beach Boca del Cielo. As the spectator is informed at the end of the film, she chose this place to die, and as she disappeared, she closed the liminal space in which emancipation from societal pressure seemed possible for the boys. The brief homosexual experience was embarrassing enough to kill their friendship. Mexico returns to conventionality; Tenoch studies economics, Julio, biology, and they both have new girlfriends, foreshadowing a future predictably conservative of Mexican status quo. As Felipe Quintanilla (2014) explains, “es en la Boca del Cielo que se logran ahogar las exigencias de la masculinidad heteronormativa mexicana, y donde se muestra, finalmente, la posibilidad de un espacio alternativo” (p. 143). This mirroring of a possible alternative space, scary as it is, has Julio and Tenoch hastily return to the capital, the centralized space of the Nation and its comforting normality in which gay individuals, like their charolastra friend Daniel, are shunned from home, but happy (p. 145). Clearly, the two teenagers are metonymies for Mexico as a country. Saldaña-Portillo goes as far as to identify their desire for each other as “allegorical stand-ins for the PRI’s historical desire for an identificatory relationship with el pueblo, and vice-versa” (Saldaña-Portillo, 2005, p. 763). As for Luisa, she is the embodiment of both an ideal for society (Spain, the colonizer, as a model) and, thereby, Mexico’s failure to evolve. For Ernesto Acevedo-Muñoz (2004), “the Spanish woman’s body becomes the site where Mexico’s current economic, political, and class tensions are revealed as failures of the revolutionary state (p. 48). At any rate, there is a consensus among critics that the two teenagers’ story refers to a national story beyond their own – whether or not critics are convinced by the efficiency of that reference.

**Conclusion**

Contrast as a narrative and technical device in Cuarón’s films is not a weakness of argument, nor a vacillation between progress and status quo. It is a depiction of Mexico’s struggle to surpass obsolete paradigms and settle into a more tolerant and ethical society. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2009) conceptualizes self-contradiction and non-linear narratives as means of creating nuanced discourse. In an “era of weak thought,” the philosopher advocates complexification, and Cuarón’s films allow this with the risk of not satisfying the spectator (p.1). Doing so, in fact, would not be the purpose: upsetting the public is much more effective in the strife for change. Cuarón

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5 At the Boca del Cielo beach, heteronormative demands for Mexican masculinity can be quieted; and there appears, finally, the possibility of an alternative space (translation mine).

6 Charolastra (a word invented by the two teenagers, likely derived from charro, cowboy) refers to their “Manifesto de los Charolastras,” an unwritten text stating their friendship rules which they proudly recite to Luisa while driving to the beach.
(2019) confirmed this in an interview at the Lincoln Center, New York: “as artists, our job is to look where others don’t, in times where we are encouraged to look away” (np).

Discussing the arguments presented in this article with a Mexican expatriate in the United States, I was asked the fatidic question: “what is the solution, then?” Naturally, resistance to what may sound like criticism of a foreign country, especially criticism of a “developing” country from a Western one deemed “developed,” is anticipable. Judging a foreign society in comparison to one’s own national standards poses fundamental ethical issues. However, there is no questioning the political narrative given by Alfonso Cuarón, and in films that are distributed beyond Mexico. With his subtle and extremely detailed film techniques, Cuarón proposes the following: the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) failed, and therefore, even in 2000, with the victory of the PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional), the first alternative party to win the presidency after seventy-one years of government by the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), Mexico still suffers from major social disparity. Even long after the end of Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship, young men remain cowboys of the revolución (hence the boys’ surnames, Zapata and Itúrbide, in contrast with the woman’s surname Cortés), they still need the mother(land) to make them (their country) grow up. They are brought up short, caught up by the misery, hypocrisy, corruption and brutal death making their society gangrenous. They aspire to studying literature or travelling away, but the rich inevitably end up in economics or business at a private university, so that the government is not recycled but perpetuated, and they do what their society destines them to do. Domestic workers need a job, and so the perpetuation of their exploitation is continued with a false bonne conscience. By depicting these facts so cruelly and compellingly in his film, Cuarón’s message is deeply political and advocates for an actual Mexican revolution that may never happen, but one that would pave the way for a Mexico in which Indigenous and mestizo/a people are rightly represented, do not reiterate the schemes established since colonization – again, it is a fact that whites are still being served by darker people in Mexico – and do not need the enslaving jobs because they can afford to take decent ones and earn their keep in a dignified context.

Biography

Manon Hakem-Lemaire (B.A. English and Spanish, Aix-Marseille Université, 2017) is a second-year master student of the exchange M.A. programme Erasmus Mundus “Crossways in Cultural Narratives” (comparative literature) through which she has studied at the Universidad Iberoamericana (Mexico City), the University of St Andrews (Scotland), and presently, the University of Guelph (Canada). Her thesis compares the uses of the fantastic as social commentary in the short stories of Guy de Maupassant and Horacio Quiroga. She is preparing to undertake her PhD in Comparative Literature at the City University of New York, while also working as a teaching assistant of Spanish and Linguistics at the University of Guelph.

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7 Julio’s surname is an obvious reference to the famous Mexican hero Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919), killed in the revolution. Tenoch’s surname evokes historic conservativeness by referring to the less famous Agustín de Itúrbide (1783-1824), a politician and caudillo (military leader) who reigned over the brief Mexican Empire (1821-1823). By contrast, Luisa’s surname is a reference to the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortés (1485-1547), whose expedition caused the decimation of the Aztec Empire. The historical references are reinforced by the film soundtrack “Nasty Sex” (1970) by rock band named La Revolución de Emiliano Zapata.
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Music, Noise, and Discourse: Pathways for Queer Agency in the Modern Sonic Landscape

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Abstract
Of all of the cultural forms of expression, music is perhaps not only the most subversive in its articulations, but also the most far-reaching and penetrative in its act of execution. Though expressed in a complex matrix of formations, this phenomenon has been entangled both historically and presently in all cultures, making it an attribute of universal human communication. While few would be bold enough to deny such claims, what is perhaps more aligned to conjecture is the actual definition of music. While certain formations of sound are deemed music, others are derided as noise, frequently through localized structures of political authority. This paper will examine the cultural phenomenon and tension of noise vis-à-vis music in its perceived social constructions. Through such an exploration, this paper will demonstrate the capacity of noise to emerge from music as a form of resistance against prevailing dominant hegemonic codes of culture; notably through its ability to be enacted as a tool of socio-political agency to escape the rigid constructions of hetero/cisnormativity in our modern cultural landscapes. Through engaging the controversial communication medium of noise, emerging possibilities of dialogue will be illuminated from theorists and artists currently utilizing bold measures of sound to challenge far-right political ideologies in our contemporary era of Brexit and Trump. By examining such sonic articulations through the lenses of queer theory, aesthetics, and critical disability studies, this paper ultimately will highlight new possibilities for progressive change in a current state of reality dominated by increasingly subversive power structures.

Keywords: Music, Noise, Queer Theory, Normativity, Critical Disability Studies, Acousmatic, Semiotics, Cultural Studies

Of all of the cultural forms of expression, music is perhaps not only the most subversive in its articulations, but also the most far-reaching and penetrative in its act of execution. Though expressed in a complex matrix of formations, this phenomenon has been entangled both historically and presently in all cultures, making it an attribute of universal human communication. While few would be bold enough to deny such claims, what is perhaps more aligned to conjecture is the actual definition of music. While certain formations of sound are deemed music, others are derided as something other, frequently through localized structures of political authority. This paper will examine the cultural phenomenon and tension of noise vis-à-vis music in its perceived social constructions. Through such an exploration, this paper will demonstrate the capacity of noise to emerge as a form of resistance against prevailing dominant hegemonic codes of culture; notably through its ability to be enacted as an affective means of anti-systematic control, and ultimately a tool of socio-political agency to escape the rigid constructions of hegemonic normativity in our modern cultural landscapes.

While this exploration centres around conceptions of noise residing within the realm of sound, it should be noted that noise as an entity reaches well beyond the scope of merely sonic phenomena. Whether articulated through sound, or
technological events such as the glitch, or even the informational parasite, noise has evolved through a consistent coupling with a sense of ‘other.’ Needless to say, when related definitions of music are examined from culture to culture, concepts of noise also arise from a need to most often juxtapose some other opposing binarism, whether defined vis-à-vis with terminology such a discord, cacophony, or a vast array of other terms synonymous with noise. While a definition of noise has never been universal across time and geographic space, one can situate connective circuitry most commonly within tenets of disruption and/or resistance towards the prevailing aesthetics, authority, and enforced social order. For the French economist Jacques Attali, its disruptive capacity has also become the modern harbinger of new social orders. (214).

Looking back historically, the condemnations of Claudio Monteverdi by Giovanni Maria Artusi or of J. S. Bach by J. A. Scheibe appear minor when compared to severe examples in modern history, such as the music censored as ‘degenerate art’ during the Third Reich. With this stated, however, one can still observe a certain pattern within the context of historical Western musicology that situates expressive means outside of dominant constructed codes of a period’s expression as a form of the ‘other’ in need of suppression. Musicologist Marie Thompson has recently traced numerous racialized and gendered instances of noise situated by authority figures (131), while Jean-Jacques Nattiez has noted that various definitions of music and noise have also been notoriously ethnocentric in articulation with even no means of consensus in a given society (48).

We can essentially place musical acts or expressions within a type of semiology, or more precisely according to Nattiez, within a chain of sign referents containing the neutral, the poietic, and the esthetic (ix). Interpretations of this chain can lead to the coinage of ‘noise’ as a descriptive, regardless of whether the producer had intended this disruptive interpretative experience intentionally, such as with the Italian brutistes, or unintentionally, as with Wagner’s Tristan Chord. Thus, an act of noise can emerge into vocabulary either intentionally or through a form of mistranslation due to factors within a localized cultural context. It is therefore reasonable to assume that ‘noise’ is an effect of normativity. Interestingly, such related terminology is actually more recent than many would assume, as Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers have noted in their paper “Queer-Crippin Anarchism.” They state: “Normalcy is a relatively new concept, which arose as part of the modernity project in 1800-1850 in Western Europe and its North American colonized spaces. The word ‘normal’ did not enter the English language until around 1840” (211).

One must additionally mention that the term ‘normality’ also differs from ‘normalcy.’ According to Lennard Davis, ‘normality’ correlates to an actual state of being regarded as normal, while normalcy is the structural realm that controls and normalizes bodies. These norms are not only rooted within the bourgeois, white, heterosexual male norms (with the middle class as the mean), but also exercise an ideology (102). The conceptual paradigm of noise is particularly relevant in this discourse as it often resides far outside at the extremities of whatever a society or state defines as such norms. Ben-Moshe, Nocella, II, and Withers further elaborate upon Davis as they state: “Everyone has to work hard to conform to norms but people with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, are scapegoated for not being able to fit these standards, while in fact they are needed to create these standards and maintain them” (212).

Interestingly, the trajectory of modern noise as a concept has followed a similar timeline. With the socio-cultural shifts emerging from the late-stage industrial revolution era the sonic landscape had shifted from one where acts of overt
noise no longer signalled acts of danger or violence, but were now casually intertwined within a burgeoning sonic landscape of technologically-driven artificial sounds with the first noise complaints entering the public sphere of France during the 1860s (Corbin 301). As such urbanized environments progressed, certain theorists have developed a tendency to romanticize the notion of silence, perhaps most notably R. Murray Schafer. While the notion of apparent silence is discussed, one is led to question the validity of such a state. Whether we are to cite John Cage’s popular story of visiting Harvard University’s anechoic chamber to hear the body’s nervous system and circulation, and deem silence to be an impossibility, or Attali’s claim that we only experience true silence in death itself (3), we can assert that notions of silence are at best symbolic, and that some level of noise already surrounds our daily existence in an inescapable fashion.

When attempting to examine the relationship between noise and queer identities, one could argue that the vast majority of relational sound has often been subordinated by the visual. As Annette Schlichter has noted, significant efforts have been made for queer agency which focus upon the body, but are often confined to the visual sense (32). She cites Judith Butler’s pivotal work, Gender Trouble, noting that while Butler evokes the notion of making bodies speak, her neglect of vocality simultaneously ‘mutes’ their associated voices at the same time (33). Though such domination of the visual is hardly unique to this particular discussion, if we are to move beyond this shortcoming to explore how the attributes of sound have spread throughout this circuitry of the visual, we must embark upon a re-examination of the unseen.

When approaching such action through the proper critical context and listening capacities, Brandon LaBelle proclaims new possibilities are possible when we exercise the utility of the acousmatic. In his 2018 work, Sonic Agency, LaBelle states: “The acousmatic functions as a generative tool, a condition or operation by which to undo much of the embedded or reactive impulses that mostly support normalizing structures and that return us to what we know” (35). First articulated by Pierre Shaefer and later by his student Michel Chion, the acousmatic essentially detaches sound from its source, asking listeners to engage with the sonic medium without its visual source. Building upon such discourse, LaBelle’s interpretation has been inspired by those such as the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber, who has proclaimed that “It’s precisely from these invisible spaces – invisible, most of all, to power – when the potential for insurrection, and the extraordinary social creativity that seems to emerge out of nowhere in revolutionary moments, actually comes” (qtd. In LaBelle 34). It is through such possibilities that LaBelle utilizes the acousmatic to essentially move beyond normalized interactions; beyond the face, beyond the visual, and beyond our ingrained spatialized understandings of appearances that wield such uncanny forces of influence in our day-to-day interactions (33).

With these various factors stated, one is inclined to ask how such phenomena, notably noise, can relate to queer agency. Perhaps the we should consider Lee Edelman’s work No Future, where he suggests embracing such negative associations as a mean of empowerment: Edelman states:

Rather than rejecting, with liberal discourse, this ascription of negativity to the queer, we might, as I argue, do better to consider accepting and even embracing it. Not in the hope of forging thereby some more perfect social order […] but rather to refuse the insistence of hope itself as affirmation, which is
always affirmation of an order whose refusal will register as unthinkable, irresponsible, and inhumane. (4)

With the related negative connotations of noise, certain theorists such as Michel Chion have suggested discarding the term altogether, claiming that the term promotes false ideas (245), but it is precisely these types of connections and associations that we should be further exploring and interrogating. While Chion’s frustration with such terminology is understandable within the field of sound studies, we must still be cautious to dismiss the representativeness of such phenomena, especially within our modern state, one which theorists such as Mark Nunes have proclaimed as an era governed by Jean-François Lyotard’s notion of ‘a “logic of maximum performance”: a cybernetic ideology of informatic control driven by aspirations of an error-free world; one which is entirely efficient, accurate and predictable’ (36).

Regardless of whichever state we reside in relation to Nunes’ claim, the emergence of noise is perhaps one of the key actors in a resistance against such an anesthetized state of hegemony. As Sasha Costanza-Chock, an activist and participatory designer from MIT has recently outlined:

Design mediates so much of our realities and has tremendous impact on our lives, yet very few of us participate in design processes. In particular, the people who are most adversely affected by design decisions (Design Justice, A.I., and Escape from the Matrix of Domination).

When discussing design, Jacob Gaboury has pointed out that the notion of the glitch holds promise in this realm, but also cautions that effective change must be achieved not simply through critique, but through a reframing of the very mediums in question. For Gaboury, “… it must offer a reframing of the goals, drives, and interests of these media as technologies in which queerness is necessarily situated” (486).

In a contemporary setting, noise can also draw associations with affect. Artists such as Diamanda Galas have been noted for such action (Thompson 143), and other less explored artists such as Emilie Autumn, explore unpleasant themes that are relevant to this discussion. Notably one could argue that Autumn evokes what Sara Ahmed has described as ‘feelings of structures.’ Autumn, a classical crossover artist, who has described herself as someone who has been outraged with society all of the time has used her music as a way to express not only her distain for society’s structures, but also her feelings of hopelessness towards the future. One can draw parallels between Autumn’s use of abrasive music to express rage at the hegemonic structures enforced upon women and Ahmed’s depiction of the Feminist Killjoy, which she has articulated by stating:

Feminist consciousness can thus be thought of as consciousness of the violence and power that are concealed under the language of civility and love, rather than simply consciousness of gender as a site of restriction of possibility… There is solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place (as we do not). There can be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must and we do (87).
While Autumn had already achieved success with her debut record *Enchant*, she instead decided to engage in a more bold, alienating, and disruptive pathway which has received mixed reactions and limited her marketability to the mainstream audiences; some of which still prefer the more accessible aesthetics of her earlier work.

By incorporating noise into her most recent record, *Fight Like a Girl*, Autumn evokes disturbing and unpleasant attributes, not only disrupting hegemonic constructions of a moral economy of happiness, but also positioning herself in a way that openly explores the disturbing structures of sexism and violence through explicit imagery of repression, grief, and outrage; all similar to those of the society that Ahmed has examined. For Autumn, by utilizing themes which push the listener to be engaged, even through graphic lyrical content and uncomfortable aesthetics, she ultimately hopes for progress towards a future she once deemed impossible.

Sonic acts of a similar nature can also be much more covert. For example, if we examine the body of American composer John Cage through this lens, we can observe that works such as *4'33"* are notable not simply due to their unorthodox performative traditions, but additionally due to the fact that they exemplify efforts to remove the ego from the process of artistic creation in an effort to rail against the dominant archetype of the male abstract expressionist (Katz 50). For Cage, certain compositions of overt control have also often symbolized states of fascism (Todd 215), and his efforts against such structures are notable in later works such as his *Europeras* with their efforts to challenge conventions of social control and demonstrate an ability to illuminate issues relating to gender, ethnicity, and sexuality often ignored by historical narratives (Williams 227). The five-part *Europera* series was intended to be an irreversible negation of the opera genre, symbolizing Cage’s rejection of the institution. Verging on a broad range of conceptions of cacophony, Cage hoped that each audience member would experience a different opera from seat-to-seat. Utilizing the most complex applications of chance aided by computer systems, the scores for *Europeras* 1 and 2 were described as essentially “a pair of circuses of independent elements - music, program notes, lights, costumes, decors, and action (Sherman). Whether through the ambient sounds of 4’33”, or the cacophony of the *Europeras*, there is a unifying factor of noise that favours the noise, the glitch, and the incidental nature of life over systematic control. While historian Caroline A. Jones has argued that Cage’s practices to remove the ego attempted to withdraw “the body” from what Foucault would later refer to the “body politic” (655), Jonathan Katz has reflected similar views, stating:

Closeted people seek to ape dominant discursive forms, to participate as seamlessly as possible in hegemonic constructions. They do not, in my experience, draw attention to themselves with a performative silence, as John Cage did when he stood before the fervent Abstract Expressionist multitude and blasphemed, “I have nothing to say and I'm saying it (50).

Perhaps Jacques Rancière best summarized such political engagement when he proclaimed that an image never stands alone unsupported, and that it ultimately belongs to a system that governs the status of the bodies represented and the kind of attention they merit (99). For Rancière, effective action is not attained through counter-posing reality, but by
constructing different realities and different forms of common sense, leading to different spatiotemporal systems, and different communities of words and things, forms and meanings (102). Perhaps most significantly, Rancière airs caution to not flatten differences, a potential pitfall for any effective measure that could render a concept solely into theory and not in actual practice.

In context, the concept of noise is undoubtedly difficult to articulate, whether within the landscape of the past or in the rapidly unfolding events of the present. By re-examining noise as a form of resistance, the repressive norms of society can not only be brought into a clearer ontological sense of focus, but also be challenged through more effective means. While such action may occur through a multiplicity of pathways, the possibility to illuminate new forms of organization for progress emerge, often in new and unexpected formations. Perhaps Attali summarized its potential most eloquently when he proclaimed that noise is the source of the “purpose and power, of the dream” (6).

Notes
Expanded discussions of certain themes in this article have previously been published in “Resisting Hegemony though Noise” in Assuming Gender 7.1. 2019.

Biography
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South Asia and the West: Identity, Multidimensionality and the Public Gaze

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Abstract

“South Asia” is a multidimensional and an umbrella term used for diasporic construction of countries in the southern region of larger Asian continent which exhibit many commonalities and idiosyncrasies but still have their own distinct cultures, linguistics, literature and religions. The construction and mobilization of diasporic pan-national communities through newly gained cultural currency in a broader Western sphere and mainly Anglophonic ones can be studied through the postcolonial understanding of orientalism, colonial mentality, cultural hybridity and the third space. Within diasporic South Asian community, there are ostensible differences in identity formation, cultural upbringing and acculturation amongst older first-generation and the younger diasporic members who either moved at a very young age or naturalized or born in their Western host lands. South Asian diaspora mobilizes and structures itself through national pedagogy of both the Western nation-states as well as the existing ones from their homelands. This governs diasporic integration, assimilation and acculturation processes. Popular Western culture through television and films perpetuates uni-dimensional stereotypes about South Asians; they are further shaped by old colonial oriental ideas of the “third world”. This essay looks at the construction of stereotypes and disparaging public gaze towards this diaspora, and how culturally hybrid and transnational diasporic members are challenging them.

Keywords: South Asia, Diaspora, West, Orientalism, Postcolonial, Public gaze, Identity, Stereotypes

Thinking Through South Asian Diaspora: Common Identity and Multidimensionality

“South Asia” is an umbrella term used for people hailing from countries such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives. There is a historical-cultural interrelation amongst all of these nations, with their borders permeable for cultural, linguistic, religious, spiritual, artistic and even political endeavours (Gupta et al. 2007). A bigger reason for South Asian common shared history is their colonial past under the British Crown rule that shaped political, bureaucratic and military structures, but after their departure (around 1947)—a common unity in form of shared struggles of establishing state through championing of people’s will,
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national identity, democratic legitimacy, territorial integrity and economic development emerged in this region (Shastri 2001).

The contemporary ramifications of South Asia as a postcolonial society is assessed through colonial *ambivalence* and *mentality* that places their culture, society and acumen in an anti-intellectual position (Fanon 2008). The British narrative of cultural superiority made the culture of their colonies ascribe an inferior position—this created a societal framework that still makes contemporary South Asian societies go through colonial cringe, cultural alienation and internalizations of cultural inferiority (Philips 2005; Bhabha 2004; Ashcroft et al. 1989).

Perceiving South Asia as a homogeneous diaspora in the West can be attributed to the fact that its narrative is often dominated by Indian cultural hegemony, and this places India in a position where it can exercise both its cultural and economic soft power in a more gregarious manner compared to other countries of this region (Zaidi 2002). Despite truth to the critique of the Indian cultural narrative of South Asia, it’s almost a fallacy to say that South Asia is a singular Indian narrative. An Indian narrative is redundant, because of the diversity of cultures, religions, languages and history that all these South Asian countries share with India; this term can be serviced in construction of a pan-nationality that counters existing neo-colonial Western attitudes which may view South Asia through an *oriental* framework of the third world, exoticism and cultural threat. The *oriental* lens of the West paves way for viewing diasporas from the East as the “Other” and clamping them as these uni-dimensional exotic cultures to fit their power binary of “Us” and “Them” (Bhabha 2004; Said 1978).

South Asian identity construction is a function of a scathing critique of neo-colonial and *oriental* attitudes and this is done by viewing them as these “transgressive post-colonial cultural functions” that manifest through integration, assimilation and acculturation grounded in *cultural hybridity* and *subaltern* understanding of non-Western ideas of perceiving the world (Sharp 2008). The idea of brown performance is in direct incongruence with the Western public gaze—and this according to Appadurai connects these diasporas around the world to what he calls as “one mode in a postcolonial network of diaspora” (1993b, p. 423). Western neo-colonial mentality perpetuates the “model minority” theory while immigrants in the form of labourers or sponsored family members suffer racism, discrimination and exploitation (Carsignol 2010).

This diaspora’s multidimensionality is a function of varying nationalities, linguistics, social classes, geographical regions and religions, but the physical similarities of South Asians binds the
narrative of ‘brown-ness’ or even ‘desi’. Common cultural identifiers such as curry, cricket and Hindi cinema are the elementary building blocks for a far more robust pan-South Asian identity that may lead to a better construction of South Asian political, cultural, social and economic agendas transcending both transnational local and global diasporas towards reaching majoritarian discourses (Bhojwani 2005; Lal 2003). These robust pan-national identities of South Asia in the West help move away from intrinsic diasporic differences between Hindus and Muslims or other problems of caste and class within the diaspora (Sen 2007). These mobilizations and pan-regional constructions help entrepreneurs and community leaders to maximize the cultural and economic presence in the West (Carsignol 2010). Subscription to a multidimensional and heterogeneous community over a singular national identity of say, an Indian, a Pakistani, or a Bangladeshi is more advantageous for diasporic members in the Anglophone West (Mohanty 2003).

The South Asian-Western Identity Constructionism

The portrayal of minorities and other marginalized groups in Western mediascapes is problematic, and this often disseminates through popular television, online video content and films—there is little that minorities can do to affect any unfair presentations (Indra 2010). According to Indian-American comedian Hasan Minhaj in his Netflix comedy special Homecoming King (2017), the difference between first- and second-generation South Asians is, “this tolerance of racism and audacity of equality”. This older first-generation usually have a sceptical relationship with their Western host lands who sees them as ‘migrant subjects’, while the younger first- and second-generation through their cultural ties and associations often see themselves as the ‘native subjects’ of their Western homes. The idea of a true Western citizen is foremost grounded in one’s ‘whiteness’ and affiliation with Christianity. These racial and religious basis takes precedence over the constitutional legal ideas of a citizen that are realized by paying taxes, obeying the laws and being a good Samaritan. This leads to apprehension when people of colour access public spaces—where even their innocuous actions can seem malicious (Blackwell 2018).

Older first-generation immigrants feel the need to concoct diasporic spaces in order to express themselves culturally. They see themselves as the ‘economic citizens’ of their Western host lands where their agencies may not be fully realized due to resistance from the majoritarian cultural forces. Immigrants from South Asia find it much easier to move, find work and overcome linguistic barriers in Western Anglophone nations of U.S., Canada, U.K., Australia and New
Zealand due to a colonial past that established higher education dissemination grounded in the construction of ‘South Asian bourgeoise classes’ through the language of English (Gupta 1995). South Asians as visible minorities are considerably high in U.S., Canada, and U.K. and their participation in the economy, higher education and workforce makes any contemporary cultural and national conversation excluding their voice seems unjustifiable.

South Asian people see themselves as citizens of two worlds, carrying the ascription of the “homeland” and the “host land”. The physical semblances of South Asians in these Western nation-states may be incongruent to the ideals upheld by a Western race puritan or a yesteryear’s colonialist, but their economic participation, cultural contribution and construction of personal ties should be enough to classify them as the citizens of their respective nation-state. South Asians are transnational citizens, that have cultural, political, economic and personal ties to the homeland of their parents, and one often wonders: Is it different than saying you are an Italian-American or Polish-Canadian or German-Australian? Why does a Bangledeshi-New Zealander or Pakistani-Britisher or Indian-American have to prove their Anglophone Western loyalties? The explanation lies in one’s racial identity and physical appearances, and a popular culture centred around normalizing the preconceived notion hinders with the acculturation process that makes a brown skin person be as American as an “Apple pie”, if of course, the idea of being an Aussie or a Kiwi or a Brit is deeply rooted in the colour of one’s skin, then expected integration, assimilation and acculturation of immigrants are vague and futile exercises.

The idea of whiteness with the help of Western construction of the ‘Orient’ (South Asia, Middle East, Southeast Asia and North Africa) situates Western Chauvinism to be an indicator of some form of ‘high culture’ historically placing cultures from these parts of the world as ‘backwards’ or ‘exotic’ through the Western gaze (Essaydi). Diasporas within modern Anglophone Western societies exist within margins, and the ideas of South Asians as just Indians or other oriental monolith tropes of inferior culture, questionable morality, third world dwellers and many disparaging stereotypes makes diasporic member cringe their culture and become reticent in accessing spaces outside their diasporic boundaries to evade dehumanization, miscategorization, mistreatment and other causes of mental agony borne out of inferiority complexes (Rahman & Pollock 2004). South Asian diasporic neighbourhoods in Anglophone Western nation-states often remain untouched by the majoritarian culture and grows in their own
isolation, and thus propagates the cultural alienation, lack of integration and assimilation of South Asian minority groups in these Western nation-states (Haq 2009).

Re-construction of Public Gaze towards South Asians

Often, construction of brown identity in the West extends beyond South Asia and encompasses the Middle East as well. A disparaging Western attitude fails to pin-point major cultural, geographical and religious differences amongst different diasporic members, and often employs harmful stereotypes to discriminate against individuals. The most common scenario is the parochial Western view that often sees miscategorization of Sikh men (who are originally from the Northern province of Punjab in India and practice the religion of Sikhism) as Muslims or of Arabic descent because of their idiosyncratic turbans and long beards. The public gaze that has been shaped post 9/11 in the Western world learnt to view people of Islamic faith in perpetual ‘suspicion’, which out of further ignorance gets extended towards Sikh men (Ahluwalia 2010).

Popular films and television series further help construct this hostile public gaze directed toward the minorities. Through the constant depiction of South Asians as cab driver, tech guys, convenience store manager, and more nefariously as these individuals whose culture makes them ‘hostile’ to core Western capitalist and neoliberal values. The creation of a monolithic caricature in the Western public consciousness through popular culture has a psychological effect on children which can’t distinguish reality from stereotypes, and thus it can contribute to the creation of hostile attitudes when communicating with members of other ethnicities, races and religions (Horton et al.1999). The cultural alienation of a diasporic South Asian is a psychological failure of association with any perceived positive attributes or characteristics that the Western popular culture constructs or perpetuates. The young diasporic individual in a bid to be more accepted by the society shuns South Asian personality traits; these traits for so long have been misrepresented in the West, that the diasporic youth subliminally starts to accept their cultural inferiority and opt for mimicry of the Western majoritarian culture in order to fit in (Bhabha 2004).

The re-construction of South Asian-Western identity should begin by discarding anti-intellectual biases, colonial purviews and moreover the old standing stereotypes perpetuated by Western popular culture. Artists, comedians, filmmakers, musicians, politicians and academicians, as the products of South Asian-Western cultural hybridization, are challenging this Western constructionism of South Asia (Bhattacharjee & Ferdous 2018). By suggesting multiculturalism over the mono-cultural ethos of Western racial homogeneity, the idea of South Asian-ness is
explored through its diasporic members’ unique heterogeneous individualities and nationalities (Singh 2006). This frees the diaspora from a homogeneous identity performance that the Western world often expects from what they perceive as the “third world”.

Indian-American comedian Hari Kondabolu in his documentary *The Problem with Apu* (2017) talks about how the popular character of Apu in the beloved series *The Simpsons* (1989 - ) is problematic; it perpetuates many oriental third world stereotypes and is employed through a brown voice (Davé 2013). Indian-American comedian and actor Aziz Ansari in an episode of the Netflix series *The Masters of None* (2015) highlights skewed Indian representation on American popular television shows and films. He does that by highlighting the problematic representations of South Asians in *The Indiana Jones and The Temple of Doom* (1984) and *Short Circuit* (1986).

The neo-colonial treatment of South Asia, or frankly the Eastern world, made culturally hybrid Western citizens demand fair representation or a platform to tell their side of the story in a more balanced and nuanced manner. The contemporary challenge of young first and second-generation South Asians is to help construct a collective “cultural imagination” which challenges the existing public gaze and perception created by popular Western Anglophone media.

**Conclusion**

Western spaces through a post-colonial framework may evolve to better position South Asian diaspora where expression of their unique identities, nationalities and cultures can effectively challenge the colonial framework of *subaltern* that was defined in historical racial hierarchies (Guha & Spivak 1988). The construction of culturally hybrid as well as innate diasporic identities in Western spaces helps imagine the South Asian *hybridity* praxis which challenges notions of colonialism, orientalism and anti-intellectualism through its efforts grounded in reterritorialization and deterritorialization of spaces through religious symbols, cultural motifs, cultural representations and linguistic dissemination. The construction of an atmosphere which condemns appropriation, stereotypes and speculation of South Asian culture may be construed as a cultural currency gained by this diaspora through its post-colonial meditations and discourses.

Cultural hybridity explores the ability of a transnational citizen to access two disparate spaces at the same time —their own diaspora as well as the nation-state (they are citizens or residents of). These unique “cultural positions” enables them to both champion their diaspora in the Western neo-colonial cultural space as well critique it by giving voice to *subaltern* groups such as women, nonheteronormative individuals and lower classes that may face double marginalization as a result.
of diasporic patriarchal structures and the racism outside it (Carsignol 2014; Spivak 1988). Pan-South Asian identities combining in cultural praxis serves as a third space (Bhabha 2004) in a postcolonial sociolinguistic construct that deals with the privilege of being the citizen of the West and how it can be put to use to help visible minorities of South Asia by recalling the “authentic” details of their lives, experiences, and cultures.

Biography
Anushray Singh is a Graduate Teaching Assistant and a master’s student of Film and Media Arts at the University of Windsor. He is also the director of three-part documentary series ‘The North Was Our Canaan’. His academic work resonates his culturally hybrid South Asian identity and its cultural connotations in Western spheres and has been presented during multiple academic conferences in India and Canada. He has completed his B.Tech in Civil Engineering from Vellore Institute of Technology in 2017. His filmography includes visual poems and experimental documentaries on themes resonating culture, nostalgia, emotions and juxtaposition of landscapes.

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Framing the Issue: A Critical Examination of Traditional Journalism

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Abstract
Using the often-discussed concept of the ‘journalism crisis’ as an entry point, this paper critically assesses the function and value that traditional media outlets offer to the democratic societies in which they operate. This assessment is based upon the primary social benefits that professional journalism is presumed to uphold: namely, existing as a source of civic information and serving as a watchdog of authority figures. Close examination is given to how economic imperatives constrain the idealistic values of journalism and the pervasive influence of public relations specialists on media content. Rather than accepting the premise that traditional journalism was effective in providing an essential public service during its more profitable era, it can instead be asserted that the pursuit of journalism as a commercial enterprise is systematically flawed in its ability to fully offer a public good. The reality of traditional media outlets – both during the golden age and in the present – is defined by a predisposition to producing content that yields economic reward over civic and democratic necessity.

Keywords: journalism, democracy, news values, agenda-setting, civic engagement

Particularly since the dawn of the new millennium, the emergence of the Internet and other digital innovations have become a widespread area of focus within communication studies. There exists a great deal of literature documenting the influence of digital technology amongst many facets of culture, and the study of journalism is certainly no exception. Existing research not only investigates how the Internet alters the exchange of information, but more significantly what this development entails for the profession of journalism and the democratic well-being of Western nations. As the following discussion will illustrate, the verdict of this contemporary landscape is resoundingly bleak. Beyond being perceived as less favourable to the exchange of relevant and accurate civic news, the Internet is presented as having a leading role in what is known as the ‘journalism crisis.’

The primary causal factor that has led to the proclamation of this crisis is the severe economic recession that the traditional journalism industry has endured alongside the emergence of the Internet. The profit models of print and broadcast mediums relied dominantly on revenue from advertisers throughout the ‘golden age’ of journalism, and thus were greatly disrupted by the the Internet’s arrival as an enticing new platform for
advertisers. In citing the findings of the Pew Research Centre, Benson (2017) states that American newspapers experienced a loss of advertising revenues from $49 billion to $18 billion between the years 2005 and 2016 (p. 1061). Various authors have provided similar types of statistics to emphasize the severity of this recession, typically to illustrate the widespread reality of media outlets making deep cuts to their newsroom staff as a matter of necessity (Edmonds, 2013; Greenspon, 2017; Schechter 2005; Simons et al., 2016).

While the journalism recession is a well-established outcome of the evolving media landscape, the situation becomes problematic when this industry-specific economic crisis is framed as a societal crisis. An apt example of this tendency can be witnessed in the work of McChesney (2016), who raises the point that “any sort of quality society requires credible, independent, powerful journalism” (p. 128). He continues to state, “Under professionalism, news would be determined and produced by trained professionals and the news would be objective, non-partisan, factually accurate, and unbiased” (p. 683). These qualities comprise the type of ‘value system’ that Western journalism is theoretically intended to abide by, and thus are the foundation upon which journalism is purported to hold an essential democratic function.

This conception of the mass media acting idealistically as an information source and objective overseer of powerful elites was widely understood by both citizens and journalists throughout the 20th century. Underscoring this value system is the reality that mass media holds an agenda-setting function for society, in determining the types of issues that are deemed to possess civic importance. The research study of McCombs and Shaw (1972) represented a further effort to test the agenda-setting theory, by conducting surveys of Chapel Hill citizens (who pre-identified as undecided voters) during the 1968 presidential election. This was accomplished by asking the participants to explain what they believed to be the major political issues of the upcoming election, while concurrently analyzing the political news coverage of the print and broadcast media outlets that citizens of the community were exposed to. Ultimately, the findings of this project indicated a strong correlation between the salience of citizen attitudes and emphasis of media coverage, which the authors believe, “…strongly suggests an agenda-setting function of the mass media” (p. 184).

A crucial element to note is that the agenda-setting theory operates under the premise that through a commitment of upholding values such as objectivity and impartiality, the media is able to direct the public to engage with certain issues without imposing a particular point of view. This framework leads to the belief among proponents of traditional media that journalism performs a crucial democratic function by enlightening the citizenry about key political topics, and thus establishing the necessary backdrop for civic discussion and debate. As a result, it can be witnessed how the affinity towards journalistic values lends itself to the conclusion that the media effectively fulfils an agenda-setting function, thus supporting the belief that journalists perform an essential and unparalleled democratic service.
An enlightening and less-commonly utilized method of observing this framework exists through the analysis of material used to educate journalism students. Within *The Canadian Reporter*, a textbook used by post-secondary journalism programs, there is a chapter dedicated to outlining the professional values that members of the media are ethically obliged to follow. This chapter begins by invoking the idea that professional journalism is responsible for the informing function of society, comparing this duty to the healing function that defines the ethics of medical professionals. Upon specifying the purpose and need for this informing function, authors McKercher, Thompson, and Cumming (2011) establish a link to democracy in a manner similar to other scholars discussed. They write, “Behind journalism’s informing role lie two related functions: first, to provide a public forum for thrashing out the ideas that are necessary to the practice of democracy, and second, to serve as a public watchdog, keeping an eye on powerful elites – in government, in business and elsewhere,” (p. 331, emphasis in original).

In applying a more critical lens to the framework of journalism values, it is important to highlight the distinction between the ethical belief systems of individual reporters and the broader, systemic imperatives of media outlets as capitalist institutions. The analysis of Lau (2004) proves resourceful in outlining how the economic pressures of media outlets to maximize profits can have a powerful influence on the process of news production from a structural or institutional standpoint. Lau provides dual categories of internal and extraneous factors in journalism, stating, “Thus, factors such as ownership, government regulations, technical and logistical factors, newspaper size and the like constitute extraneous factors. Factors such as professional journalistic practices, and ideologies and values held by journalists constitute internal factors deriving from journalists themselves” (pp. 694-695).

The perspective of news production being the outcome of both internal and extraneous factors offers a more balanced approach to this topic, in contrast to the tendency of Western literature to prioritize its focus towards the individual journalist. To briefly return to *The Canadian Reporter*, the chapter dedicated to journalism values focuses almost exclusively on the ethics of the individual reporter, greatly downplaying or omitting recognition of what Lau defines as extraneous factors. The textbook does mention the inevitable conflict between economic viability and the public interest, writing, “The subject of ethics in journalism is complicated by the commercial nature of the media in Canada and other western nations. The public interest is often in tension with the commercial interest, the need to make profits or sell advertising. To the extent that decisions are made on consideration of the public interest, they can be called ethical” (p. 332).

While acknowledging that the institutional imperatives of media outlets may conflict with the public good, the chapter fails to describe how this might occur with any level of detail. Rather than recognizing extraneous factors as powerful influences that exert themselves beyond the level of control possessed by individual journalists, they are instead presented as a brief aside. The argument can be made that since the textbook is intended to be an educational tool for aspiring journalists, there is a logical focus on the prescribed
conduct of individuals. However, it should be maintained that journalism students must be fully educated in all aspects that influence the production of news, even if that entails a compromising reflection of the media industry. Otherwise, to only present journalism values as a partial truth simply feeds into the mindset amongst the media profession that their craft is unwaveringly rooted in serving the public interest.

Moving beyond educational material, it can be observed that even the strongest proponents of traditional media are compelled to address the incompatibility between maximizing profits and acting in the public interest. Benson (2017) makes the assertion that during the financially successful decades of the 20th century, media outlets would strive to pursue civically valuable content, despite knowing it was a less profitable endeavour. However, it is then explained that media outlets were no longer able to dedicate such resources to the less lucrative public affairs coverage, due to the onset of unfavourable conditions. Benson outlines how, “...a series of crises arrived after the dawn of the new century: the consolidation of a commercial Internet and the flight of classified advertising to Craigslist, the decline of print display advertising and its meager replacement by online advertising, the societal financial crises of 2001 and 2008” (p. 1061).

It can be asserted, however, that this argument is problematic, as it offers the changing information landscape as a scapegoat for the degraded quality of journalism, and thus its decreased financial viability. Furthermore, it is implied that media outlets once expressed a greater concern for acting in the public interest, but the present economic conditions are now making this impossible. This explanation makes clear the fact that the imperatives of serving the public and producing profits do not exist in an equal relationship: any benefits to civic society are instead a positive outcome in the market-oriented process. While it is certainly true that many individual journalists do possess a great concern for upholding the civic values of journalism, it is unreasonable to expect that decisions at the corporate level regarding public good versus profit have not always been guided by economic imperatives.

As a result, the present-day narrative within journalism scholarship often presents a situation of conflict, with the Internet acting as a roadblock in the path of traditional media’s ability to serve the civic needs of society. Schechter (2005) states, “There’s a media war underway between the old school of newspapers, radio stations, and TV News and a new school of Internet-driven information – the web’s satirical, culturally biting programming, podcasts, broadband new media, and blogs…” (p. 20). This statement proves accurate; thus, proponents of the traditional system find themselves in the awkward position of both criticizing the Internet and acknowledging that traditional sources must adapt to its conditions.

Due to the fact that self-publishing on the Internet is now easily achievable by the everyday citizen or organization, there is an exponential increase in the variety and scope of media content that is accessible to audiences. Dahlgren (2013) explains how “…the vast amount of information on the Web can in itself serve to destabilize traditional journalism, in that it permits audiences to filter content according to their own values” (p.
This sentiment reflects the idea that traditional media now has a lessened ability to ‘set the agenda,’ since citizens can seek out online content in accordance with the issues or topics they feel are important.

It is apparent how the Internet has undermined the monopoly of content production that traditional outlets enjoyed throughout the 20th century. It is also clear why advocates of professional journalism might be abrasive towards the Internet, with its opening of the publishing capacity to greater society. As a result, it is important to remain cautious when engaging with the idea of a ‘media war’ and the belief that the downfall of traditional journalism is a social crisis. It is not surprising that literature on this subject will often stand in fierce defence of traditional values, since they are tied to the occupational system that journalists and scholars had been exclusively accustomed to; however, often underscored or omitted from such literature are the necessary critiques of the traditional media system, and a more critical outlook of its societal value.

In addition to the issue of media outlets tending to favour content that is sensationalist or popular over what is civicly valuable, concerns can be raised surrounding the ability for external actors to manipulate the content of news. This critique entails the fact that the process of news production has become systematically predictable to the extent that political and commercial organizations employ public relations professionals to influence media coverage of their group in a desirable way. Lippmann (1922) discusses the widespread use of press agents by various types of organizations, as these individuals are tasked with composing the basic facts of a situation into a coherent narrative of relevant information. He describes how, “…the facts of modern life do not spontaneously take a shape in which they can be known. They must be given a shape by somebody, and since in the daily routine reporters cannot give a shape to facts… the need for some formulation is being met by the interested parties” (p. 345).

Thus, the reason press agents are able to successfully influence news production is because they are essentially performing the job of the journalist for reporters; however, the reality that news composition – or even the recognition of events as newsworthy – is heavily conceived by public relations professionals remains highly condemning to the democratic value of journalism. Hall et al. (1978) aptly summarize how journalism renders itself vulnerable to reliance on elite sources, stating, “These two aspects of news production – the practical pressures of constantly working against the clock and the professional demands of impartiality and objectivity – combine to produce a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions” (p. 58, emphasis in original). This statement is also highly useful in understanding the emergence of public relations personnel; these individuals perform a dual service by both relieving the workload of journalists strapped for time and existing as ‘legitimate’ sources to satisfy the journalistic standard of obtaining input from authority figures.

This overarching influence of the public relations industry on the media appears to be a regularly expressed concern amongst scholars both within and outside the field of journalism. In spite of defending the
traditional values of journalism, McChesney (2012) acknowledges that “The dirty secret of journalism is that a significant percentage of our news stories, in the 40-50 percent range, even at the most prestigious newspapers in the glory days of the 1970s, were based upon press releases” (p. 684). This fact reflects poorly on the belief that news organizations are (or were) able to effectively balance the competing notions of generating profits and acting in the democratic public interest. Rather than accepting the premise that traditional journalism was effective in providing an essential public service during its more profitable era, it can instead be asserted that the pursuit of journalism as a commercial enterprise is systematically flawed in its ability to fully offer a public good.

While it is true that the quality of modern journalism has declined due to decreased profits and subsequent staff cutbacks, a restoration of funds would not remedy the fundamental problems that plague the profession. Most notably, this entails the fact that journalism does not fulfil its idealistic democratic function of providing the public with the information necessary to be civically engaged, nor does it effectively hold elite figures and institutions accountable to society. The reality of traditional media outlets – both during the golden age and in the present – is defined by a predisposition to content that yields economic success over civic and democratic necessity. The implications of this tendency towards profitability manifest in two primary ways. Firstly, the selection of content is geared towards being sensationalist yet advertiser-friendly, ensuring that news is able to maximize advertising revenues. Secondly, the dominant attention given by journalists to institutions of political and economic power does not result in a watchdog effect, but rather helps to maintain the legitimacy of such groups and the broader systems under which they operate. The failure of professional journalism to effectively hold those in power accountable stems not only from the capitalist necessity to maintain the economic status quo, but also the pivotal influence that press agents can exercise over news content to serve non-democratic interests.

The recognition of systemic flaws that have perpetually plagued the journalistic process is a necessary first step in understanding the societal impact of the traditional media recession. However, there is a great need for further research in this subject as many important questions remain unanswered. A great deal of the literature examined originates in the United States or other Western nations, with the ‘journalism crisis’ originating as a dominantly American conception. As a result, it is necessary to explore journalism scholarship from other parts of the world to determine similarities and differences in how the media is perceived to exist.

Lastly, the analysis of digital media technologies must continue to be undertaken, given their dominant position within the contemporary media landscape. In particular, thorough observation should be directed towards the participatory capabilities of the Internet, since exercising this potential to its fullest capacity could produce a more democratic media system. In the words of Schechter (2005), “The challenge of media reformers is not just to critique the logic behind this system but also to envision an alternative, and then, where possible, build it” (p. 25). Considering the alternative forms of journalism emerging on the Internet, perhaps the vision of media reformers is already under development.
Biography
Davis Vallesi is a doctoral student currently completing the joint program in Communication & Culture at York and Ryerson Universities. His areas of academic expertise include journalism, democratic theory, digital media, and the social impact of communication. His previous academic publications include an MA research project titled, *Politics & the Internet: The Impact of Digital Media on Democracy*, which was completed while studying at Wilfrid Laurier University. Davis is currently writing his doctoral thesis that explores the function of both traditional and digital media platforms during Canadian federal elections.

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