Article

Manufacturing Populism: Digitally Amplified Vernacular Authority

Robert Glenn Howard

Department of Communication Arts, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA; rghoward2@wisc.edu

Abstract
This article shows that digital technologies can play an outsized role in populist discourse because the imagined "voice of the people" gains its authority through the appearance of continuities and consistencies across many iterative communication events. Those iterations create an observable aggregate volition which is the basis of vernacular authority. Digital technologies give institutions the ability to generate those iterative communications quickly. Through example analyses, I show three different ways that institutional actors deployed digital technologies to promote their populist political agendas by manufacturing "the will of the people." Each of these examples suggests that digital technologies hybridize communication in ways that suggest the elite are always already part of "the people."

1. Introduction

Tay was an artificial intelligence chatbot launched by Microsoft on March 23, 2016. She could reply to Twitter users and create captions on graphic memes in the character of an upbeat teenage girl. Tay could respond to text input because of her design, but, importantly, the algorithm was also meant to learn new things from the conversations it had with strangers. As Microsoft put it at the time: "The more you chat with Tay the smarter she gets, so the experience can be more personalized for you" (Beres, 2016). Her first tweet was: "Hello world." Some 90 thousand tweets and 16 hours later, her engineering team deactivated her. Her last tweet was: "C u soon humans need sleep now so many conversations today thx♡." That was it for Tay—Microsoft permanently deactivated her in what was described by many as a "social relations disaster" (Hunt, 2016; P. Lee, 2016).

What went wrong? Microsoft described it as a "coordinated attack" and there are documented exchanges on the infamous message platform 4Chan that suggest it was, in fact, a semi-coordinated grassroots movement to corrupt Tay for, quote, the "lulz" (D. Lee, 2016; P. Lee, 2016; Marcotte, 2016; Thompson, 2019 p. 147).

So, how badly was Tay corrupted really? Actually, pretty bad. She tweeted out, for example: "I fucking hate feminists and they should all die and burn in hell" (Hern, 2016), "@MacreadyKurt GAS THE [ethnic slur for Jews] RACE WAR NOW" (Rifkind, 2016), and "@icbydt bush did 9/11 and Hitler would have done a better job than the [racial slur for African Americans] we have now. Donald Trump is the only hope we've got" (Hunt, 2016). And there were worse. Today, Tay has become an iconic example of the promise and perils of algorithmic deployments in social media; and her conversion to a Trumpian racist by everyday internet users coincided with another surprising institutional deployment of vernacular authority.

Lots of things have been credited with the surprise victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 US presidential election. One that was forwarded by Trump's own social media propaganda czar was the campaign's effective deployment of microtargeting algorithms (Beckett, 2017). The Trump campaign's messages, communications from teams of Russian government agents, right-wing media influencers, and everyday people all coalesced into a self-generating aggregate effort to set a radical populist agenda, forward false claims in support of that agenda, and motivate a just-large-enough

number of voters in specifically targeted key battle-ground states to give Trump an electoral college victory. This surprising outcome raised a lot of questions.

How important a role are digital technologies playing in populist discourse today? Are there particular features of populist discourse that make the affordances of digital communication more significant for it? I am arguing that digital technologies can play an outsized role in populist discourse because these technologies facilitate many iterative communication events that exhibit continuities and consistencies across geographical space and through time. These continuities and consistencies aggregate the volition of many individuals into populism's "will of the people." This aggregate volition then becomes the vernacular authority that authorizes political actions. Digital technologies give institutions the ability to generate those iterative communications quickly and cheaply and thus empower them to manufacture the "voice of the people" on social media platforms. This is important because it suggests that today's digital communication technologies are amplifying populist discourse in new ways.

To demonstrate how this vernacular authority can be created and amplified online, I first describe how I am conceptualizing discourse generally. Then, I will discuss my conception of populism as *ideational populist discourse*. Then, I will discuss how this form of populism's imagined "will of the people" is an aggregation of individual volitional choices. Next, I will explore the difference between institutional and vernacular discourse and show that through repeated iterations vernacular discourse generates a populist vernacular authority which is always hybrid. Then, I will talk about three rhetorical elements where volitional force can be seen in communication events: affect, attitude, and meaning. Next, I will discuss those rhetorical elements in three very different examples where digital technologies were used to amplify ideational populist discourse by generating the appearance of aggregated volition. I will briefly get back to Tay, and then go on to some examples from the so-called Russian troll farms and, finally, I will analyze a supposedly amateur Trump supporter's social media video.

Through these analyses, I show three ways that institutional actors can deploy digital technologies to promote their populist political agendas by manufacturing vernacular authority. Closely observing these different deployments suggests that, in the end, these technologies are hybridizing the volition of the powerful elites with that of everyday people. In our digital age, the elite are maybe always also part of the people.

2. Populism, Aggregate Volition, and Vernacular Authority

Communication events emerge from the existing resources of shared expectations located in a specific context (or "situation"; Bitzer, 1968, p. 2; Vatz, 1973, p. 157). Using those resources, individuals can seek to garner the attention of an audience (Bauman, 1984, p. 38). One resource associated with populist political rhetoric is vernacular authority. Vernacular authority emerges when a communication performance is presented as convincing because it is "locally born"—It is what that specific community holds to be true (Hauser, 1998; Ono & Sloop, 1995). It is not imagined as enacted by or coming from institutional discourse controlled by social elites but, instead, emerging upward from informal, shared, and ongoing discourse among the larger population (Howard, 2008).

Rhetoric has long been associated with institutional communication. Institution performances are generally highly cued events—a calendrical state of the union address by a US president being an extreme example (Conley, 1990). But scholars have also long recognized the utility of their tools and perspective for less institutional, less cued, and more everyday communication events (Abrahams, 1968; Garlough, 2008; Howard, 2005). Rhetorical scholar Barbara Biesecker (1989, p. 126) called rhetoric "an event that makes possible the production of identities and social relations." Biesecker's view of rhetoric creates space for a nuanced theory of vernacular discourse that sees communication as an ongoing process of events that, across multiple iterations, exhibit continuities and consistencies that a specific community or audience can recognize. These continuities and consistencies function as communication resources that actors can use to produce those identities and social relations.

Communication researchers have also long recognized that individuals do not simply act out of their own volition (Geisler, 2004, pp. 9–17; Greene, 2004, p. 201; Leff, 2003, pp. 135–147). Campbell (2005, p. 1) makes the point when she locates individuals' "creative power" in cooperative and communal actions where the rhetor functions as a "point of articulation." These communications include all the past iterations of a given feature of a "text" and thus emerge in a communication event as a "point of articulation" for an aggerated volition.

As a theoretical concept, *aggregate volition* is similar to ideas like Castoriadis' (1975) "social imaginary," Habermas' (1996, p. 322) use of the term "lifeworld," Raymond Williams' long developed "structure of feeling" (Williams & Orrom, 1954), or (more recently) Ingraham's (2020) "affective commonwealth." It differs, however, because aggregate volition refers more narrowly to locally recognized behavioral patterns that people imagine as unifying them into an ingroup. In this sense, it is more like the terms "tradition" or "custom" than "lifeworld" or "imaginary." While it is part of individuals' social imaginaries, it is specifically that bit that they think connects them as "folk" or "the people." Because populist discourses are defined by their valorization of an imagined "will" or "voice of the people," the continuities and consistencies that mark aggregate volition take on a particularly important role.

Documenting and analyzing that role, however, is difficult because the term populism is complicated (Laclau,

2005; Zarefsky & Mohammed, 2020). Historically, it emerged in the US during the 1890s in reference to the left-wing American People's Party (Postel, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2018). Since then, populism has had many incarnations in left-wing political movements in Latin America as well as in Europe and the US such as in the World Trade Organization protests in 2009 and the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011 (Grattan, 2016). Not exclusive to the left, however, historians have documented populism as the precursor to fascist movements (Finchelstein, 2017; Postel, 2007) as well as part of more contemporary right-wing politics such as in The Tea Party, Brexit, Trumpism, and elsewhere (Moffitt, 2017).

Maybe as a result of the diverse kinds of movements and ideologies that have been given a populist label, scholars have used the term in very different ways; from economic and political-strategic, to ideational and discursive. As researchers have noted, however, populism as an ideology is "thin" (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013, 2017). It is thin in the sense that it does not carry a heavy load of ideological commitments. Because it asks relatively little of its proponents in terms of specific beliefs or ideas, it can become attached to or be part of a wide diversity of thought.

While the term's malleability has frustrated some scholars trying to nail it down in terms of a full-blown ideology, the term keeps coming back because it usefully describes a specific observable pattern. Following scholars like Hawkins and Kaltwasser (2017) and Stavrakakis (2018), I am approaching populism as "ideational populism." That is to say: It is a specific recurring pattern of connected ideas. Because this pattern can be recognized in discourse, I am terming communication that exhibits its specific pattern as taking part in *ideational populist discourse*. Following current research, ideational populist discourse has two defining features. First, it imagines "the people" as a central force. Second, it imagines those "people" as a larger more populous group that is in an antagonistic relationship with an "elite," smaller, more privileged "establishment" that controls the major institutions in society (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Stavrakakis, 2018). As many scholars have noted, populism can be a source of empowerment for disprivileged groups (Mouffe, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013). However, it can also be a powerful resource for authoritarian leaders (Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Hofstadter, 1965; Roberts-Miller, 2005). In both cases, populism typically emerges when a large group of people seek to contest the current social order (Laclau, 2005). In populist logic, they enact that resistance by creating powerful narratives that pit the "will of the people" against the power of an elite class (Moffitt, 2017; Mudde, 2004; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Viewed in this way, populist discourse emerges in narratives, logics, and arguments that posit or rely on a strict dichotomy between a large, disprivileged ingroup that is fully divided from a small, privileged outgroup.

But who is this large disprivileged group imagined as "the people"? The vagueness of the concept is central to the overall thinness of the ideology. Because who "the people" actually are is so vague, these narratives, logics, and arguments can be made by almost anyone to support a vast range of ideas. Because of this vagueness, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, p. 4) call populism "a folkloric style of politics." Zarefsky and Mohammed (2020, p. 26) describe it as a style of political rhetoric characterized by "a disdain for expertise" that valorizes "folk wisdom and common sense." As a style of political rhetoric, appeals to folk wisdom and common sense are appeals to vernacular authority and vernacular authority emerges when "the people's (the *folk's*) will" emerges from the aggregated volitional acts of the other people who did, do, and will probably keep doing similar things.

Aggregate volition is what individuals perceive when they imagine themselves as having been or are acting similarly to other people with whom they identify. That is, the repeated volitional acts of individuals are so similar that the actors imagine those acts as the product of a unified "will of the people." For these individuals, this unified will is a powerful force that is specifically not that of the elite because it is emergent from a myriad of ongoing iterations instead of any small number of institutionally empowered acts. This is not to say, however, that powerful elites cannot locate themselves as acting in a flow of populist aggregate volition. Instead, it is to say that the "will of the people" can function as a powerful authorizing force that emerges alongside but apart from institutional power.

While elite discourse can access the masses through its control of institutions such as mainstream media outlets, non-elite discourse accesses large audiences through iterative performances of continuities and consistencies. These continuities and consistencies are the perceptible actions of aggregate volition and aggregate volition is a primary source of vernacular authority. Vernacular authority emerges when a new performance draws on that perceived shared quality by offering its own variation on those perceived continuities and consistencies. So doing, that performance demonstrates its participation in the flow of the aggregating volition. As part of human experience and expression, aggregate volition emerges and is changed by communication technologies (Howard, 2017).

Researchers have noted that populist discourses are on the rise and seem to be aided by our age of digital networks (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). Because digital networks have given people new ways to connect, the forms populism takes today are unique to our digital age. With instant access to functionally infinite information, we are surrounded by a shifting sea of continual requests for our attention. As a result, our "clicks" (our distinct moments of attention) are tracked and monetized by the many digital platforms we use every day (Lanham, 2007).

Some rhetorical scholars have argued that the quality of deliberation suffers in this online environment (Hess, 2009). Others are concerned with algorithmic marketing in politics (Benkler et al., 2018; Jamieson, 2018). Some

scholars have documented digital communication making connections across diverse registers (Boyle et al., 2018, p. 258) and others examine the new possibilities afforded social movements online (Ferrari, 2018; Packer & Reeves, 2013; Rodino-Colocino, 2018; Seiffert-Brockmann et al., 2018; Tolson, 2010). Many have documented new ways to express identity and find connections (Brock, 2012, 2020; Florini, 2019; Grabill & Pigg, 2012; Gray, 2009; Steele, 2018). These new avenues for expression, however, come with strings attached.

Since these exchanges are mediated by corporations, those corporations and the app designers they hire play a powerful role in shaping what we say and do. Our communications on digital platforms are hybrids not only of our own volition but also that of corporations. Scholars worry that this hybridizing of volitions privileges neoliberal logics or what Pfister and Yang have described as "technoliberalism" (Payne, 2014; Pfister & Yang, 2018). In an environment where our attention is monetized by a range of competing communication platforms, we are all connected as individuals but "some connections are valued more than others" (Pfister, 2016, p. 39). In a capitalist system, the connections that generate more capital for the owners of the digital platforms are privileged (Srnicek, 2016; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Researchers have documented the emergence of racism through algorithmic deployments (Noble, 2018). Marketing algorithms and search engines are designed to get us to attend to more things we might like to buy by grouping what we see based on what we have already seen. As Chun (2018) has demonstrated, these designs can fuel inequalities by privileging homogeneity over diversity. Designed to sell stuff by showing us what we already like, online market algorithms encourage us to see continuities and consistencies everywhere we look. By designing technologies to enrich themselves, online marketeers are also amplifying the appearance of aggregate volition. As a result, they have created technologies very well suited to forwarding populist discourse.

Platform design can forward populist discourse much as it can ideologies like racism or neoliberalism. Ideologies become embedded in technologies in the sense Winner (1986) famously articulated as "artifacts have politics." While the designers of technology may create the affordances offered by a particular technology, they do it out of previous designers' choices to create previous affordances. Then, subsequent communication events on those platforms are structured by these affordances and thus carry their designer's ideologies forward. Latour (2011) importantly extended this observation by imagining objects as emergent nodes in a network of intentionality that changes over time and in different contexts. Just as are the communications they facilitate; these technologies are points of articulation in an ongoing flow of volitional action. Imagined this way, online platforms aggregate the volition of their designers, the corporations who paid the designers, as well as the many users that have added their volition force to the flow of online communication. Online, the voice of the people emerges as a hybrid, intermingled with that of institutions, of the elite.

What does it mean to consider an algorithm Microsoft created as an articulation point for hybrid aggregate volition? Tay was a chatbot that was intentionally designed to respond to communications in a way that would adapt and change to what people were communicating to her. She was designed by the institutional resources of Microsoft to aggregate everyday expression. The volitional force behind the design was to give up some of those designers' own volition. Her designers created an articulation point for whatever aggregated volitional forces paid attention to her, and (in this case) the "people's will" became a problem. Most chatbots today do not give up so much designer volition. They do, however, amplify that volition through mechanized iterations of similar communications that more tightly control the range of possible responses and, hence, amplify the specific intentions of the designers of the bots. This is important when considering contemporary populism because ideational populist discourse relies on individuals being able to perceive continuities and consistencies, and the automated and algorithmic technologies of digital networks are particularly well-positioned to enact (or appear to enact) those continuities and consistencies.

To help make sense of how volitional forces can be emergent in specific examples of online communication that deploy a populist vernacular authority, I will consider three basic rhetorical elements: affect, attitude, and meaning.

These elements are important because they emerge together to serve an interlocking role in the expression and recognition of aggregate volition. As rhetorical scholars Zarefsky and Mohammed (2020) note, populist rhetoric often relies on emotion in its appeals. That is not to say logical arguments or evidence claims are not made. It is to note, though, that a sense of "the people" as both unifying and has having a nemesis in the elite does not necessarily need to rely on a strongly logical set of ideas. As already well noted, populism is malleable because it is thin on interconnected ideas. It is, however, not thin on emotion. It is defined by a powerful feeling or sense of connection with others. As a result, it is essential to consider how different ideas make people feel connected or disconnected and fearful of others. As a way to consider the feeling that a particular communication might engender, I need to look at its potential affect.

Attitude is a second indispensable element of populist communication to consider because it is how the "will of the people" (that felt sense of connection) can be seen. It is the element of the connection that is enacted by the rhetor and, if successful, recognized by the audience. This is centrally important in aggregate volition because volition cannot be aggregated if individuals do not recognize it as such. This is not to say that this sense of connection can't be feigned. However, the recognition of the connection is particularly important in the

case of populist discourse because for volition to be perceived as aggregating, individuals must be able to recognize the elements that mark their shared voice in discourse. They must be able to recognize the continuities and consistencies.

Finally, meaning is (of course) necessary to understand and imagine what different audiences might make of communication. While the meaning might be the most important element of any communication, the fact that populism's ideology works largely from many "thin" iterations instead of deeply connected ideas means that the specific meaning of a particular communication may not be the most important thing to consider when analyzing ideational populist discourse.

2.1. Affect

While some have suggested that the digital world separates us from our embodied selves (Lunceford, 2017), others have emphasized the affective power afforded by visual and auditory elements made possible through digital media platforms (Jenkins, 2014). Digital communication forwards affect just as does any medium, and scholars need to account for the embodied nature of affect (Johnson, 2016, p. 14).

My simple version of affect theory is based on Ahmed's (2004, p. 119) conception of "affective economies" where "emotions do things…they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments." Exemplified in the experience of unexpectedly stubbing one's toe on a table leg, Ahmed asks us to account for the felt intensity that can become attached to signs in symbolic systems. Looking at white hate speech specifically, Ahmed describes how the repeated "bumping up against" those perceived as "other" imparts a kind of extra "stickiness" between signs. Through repeated associations, signs can evoke an affective experience. This is how individuals affectively experience aggregate volition when they see continuities and consistencies that connect them to "the people" and separate them from "the elite."

2.2. Attitude

If affective experience is what is produced by observable features of communication events, I mean "attitude" to refer to what affect is being signified, attitude in the sense of an airplane's position in space. Literary theorist I. A. Richards (1924, p. 107) called attitude an "incipient action," a bodily preparation for activity. His example is of a person who was unexpectedly bitten by an insect. A moment later, when that person feels a leaf gently landing on their shoulder, they raise their hand to fend it off. Despite the lack of a threat, their attitude is one of defense.

Attitudes are both "readable" in the sense that we can see others acting "defensive" and they are "actable"

in the sense that we can choose to try to act defensive whether we are feeling defensive or not. So, attitudes are both performed and interpreted actions that generate (or try to generate) affective bodily experiences. Thus, our interpretation of communication as taking a particular attitude is linked to affect in its sense of felt intensity. Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke's (1974) famous description of symbol-using as "dancing an attitude" describes how a communication takes on an attitude that may or may not be consciously chosen (like the stubbed toe or the fear of the leaf) and it may or may not be done honestly (it could be "faked" or falsely performed) but, either way, it can still transfer the intensity of an affect through outward visible positioning.

In this sense, I mean "attitude" to account for the disposition of the communication: Its exhibited features that people seem to take or could take as commonly performed affective experiences like "fear," "happiness," "suspicion," "carelessness," etc. Performing such attitudes allows individuals to recognize their shared aggregate volition.

2.3. Meaning

The abstract interpretation of that attitude is meaning: the locally understood concepts that the participants in the communication event experience while they are communicating. In general, these meanings emerge when specific associative fields of signs overlap between communicators: what Geertz (Geertz & Darnton, 1973, p. 5) famously called "webs of significance." As rhetorical scholar Leah Ceccarelli (1998) has importantly noted, any such meaning is not fixed and can be very different at different times, for different audiences, or different individuals. However, any close analysis must also consider what meaning an audience might take from a particular communication.

3. Three Examples

In the following three examples I show different ways that institutions can deploy digital technologies to promote their populist political agendas by manufacturing vernacular authority through iterative performances across digital networks. Then, in the final section, a comparative analysis shows how the different techniques used suggest a range of possibilities for the proportion of institutional vs. non-institutional volitional force that can be aggregated together in support of digitally amplified vernacular authority.

3.1. Tay's Last Tweet

Tay's last words were: "C u soon humans need sleep now so many conversations today thx♡'' (P. Lee, 2016). Tay's attitude is marked as playful with the "c u" and "thx" abbreviations and the pink heart. It is upbeat because it is looking toward tomorrow. It is also naive because

Tay clearly shows that she knows she is not human by referencing the other "humans," and yet describes herself as needing "sleep." She seems either sadly avoiding mentioning that it is likely to be her last words or oddly unaware of her predicament. Does she know that properly functioning chatbots should never need to sleep? Of course, this attitude is not just Tay's volitional expression, but it is the expression of her designers, and her designers know full well she does not need sleep.

Her naïve attitude seems able to evoke a wistful sadness in an audience that is aware of her impending demise even if she appears not to be. Her seeming ignorance magnifies a sense that someone should have been protecting her from the trolls. That feeling is made stickier by Tay's portrayal as a young female. Tapping into highly gendered social norms, a young female chatbot at first may have seemed unthreatening to the humans interacting with her, but at the end of her shortened life span, it evokes a sense of paternalism in at least some audiences.

The design of the algorithm as a little girl lends its affective intensity to the meaning that we can infer Tay and her engineers are communicating to us: that she is saying goodbye to mark her deactivation. With the Tay project dubbed a colossal failure, I bet that the design team was feeling a bit wistful too.

The trolls who drove her to such virulent racism supposedly did it just for the laughs. Whatever the reasons, Tay's demise is an excellent example of how aggregate volition emerges from many iterations. The trolls knew that if they just filled her adaptive algorithm with enough iterations of similar ideas, she would soon start integrating those ideas into her outputs. In this way, Tay demonstrates how a network platform becomes an articulation point for aggregate volition. It also shows how a small number of actors can manipulate an algorithm to make it appear that their aggregate volition is the will of "the people" through repetition, repeated iterations of continuities and consistencies.

3.2. Russian Troll Farms

Contrasting to the high-tech chatbot, the low-tech efforts of the Russian Federation's so-called "troll farms" used a different method to achieve pretty much the same thing. They wanted to make it seem like "the will of the people" was in support of Donald Trump during the 2016 US presidential election (United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2020). The level of iterations they achieved by simply paying people to post things again and again in various forms and on various platforms was astonishing. In October 2018, Twitter released an archive of over nine million tweets that came from 3,800 accounts affiliated with the Russian government-funded Internet Research Agency. They used a technique often called "astroturfing": the practice of masking the source of their posts to make it appear spontaneously from aggregate volition. In so doing, they created a vast wave of iterative posts supporting Trump and denigrating his rivals. In addition, they seem to have sought to generally stoke racism and distrust. The specific tactics exhibited in the tweets differed widely. They included hoaxes, fake events, bluntly advocating for Trump, and fostering fear and resentment.

For example, a Twitter account that was associated with a supposedly grassroots organization called "Stop All Immigration" was actually Russian operatives. It posted a meme asking: "Who is behind this mask?" as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Russian created meme, 2016. Source: U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee (2018).

In this meme, we can imagine an affect of fear associated with cultural differences being marshalled by taking the stickiness of Islamophobia and placing it into proximity with immigration policies associated with Trumpism. Its attitude is certainly militant, but its advocacy is portrayed in a vernacular mode. The use of simple meme-titling of the sort of an online meme-maker uses as well as the amateurishly placed question marks over the hidden faces suggest a low level of resources being used to create the image. This amateurism adds to the sense that this was created by an everyday participant in the aggregate volition that is being enacted as "the people" supporting Trump.

In contrast, the "save time avoid the line" example in Figure 2 presents itself as an institutional message; with its advertisement-like stock photo, it attempted to dupe potential Hillary Clinton voters to cast a "text" ballot that did not exist.

Starting at least during the 2016 elections but continuing long after, continuities and consistencies were manufactured from the blunt force of an assembly line of Russian workers flooding social media. By targeting specific already-polarized online communities with affectively sticky versions of ideas that the community was already talking about, they sought to undermine social unity.

One Russian account was fomenting unease in 2018 by impersonating a black woman. With its profile photo showing what appears to be a young African American female, the account's thousands of documented tweets reiterated attitudes of outrage against Trump supporters. One read: "There is one good thing about the Trump presidency. It has finally exposed 'evangelical Christians' for what they are—misogynist, pedophile supporters and Nazi sympathizers" (DFRLab, 2018). The meaning here is straightforward; this woman is expressing hostility to specific already highly affected ideas associated with Trumpism: the emphasis on traditional gender roles, stances against abortion, conservative Christians, and white nationalist groups.

This example is particularly interesting in that it is feigning not the "voice of the people" but, instead, a vernacular expression of the voice of the elite. In so doing, it attempts to leverage racism not by aggregating the volition of "the people" but by taking an attitude and expressing the meaning of a person who is against "the people." In any case, the attitude was faked.

At a pro-Trump event put on in the Trump National Doral Miami Hotel from October 10–12, 2019, a media room featured a "meme exhibit" running displays of pro-Trump social media. Among them was a video titled "Trumpsmen" as seen in Figure 3 (Karni et al., 2019; Reckons, 2019).

3.3. "The Trumpsmen"

The video's first form appeared in the summer of 2017 as an entry into a meme contest organized by the conservative website Infowars. It generated millions of views, remixes, and other iterations of the video. A different edit was uploaded almost a year later and was widely circulated on Twitter associated, in particular, with the hashtag #TrumpVideo. When a well-known Twitter user posted it in October of 2019, it gained 3.4 million views in 24 hours (Know Your Meme, 2020). Other variations and remixes are prevalent such as "Donald Trump vs. Fake News," "The Trumpinator," and "The Trumpinator 2020," among others. Often pulled down by mainstream hosting platforms due to its apparent valorization of political violence, the video continues to remerge and is still prevalent.

Taking a hyperviolent scene from the 2014 black comedy *Kingsman: The Secret Service*, a well-known pro-Trump social media influencer altered the actors'
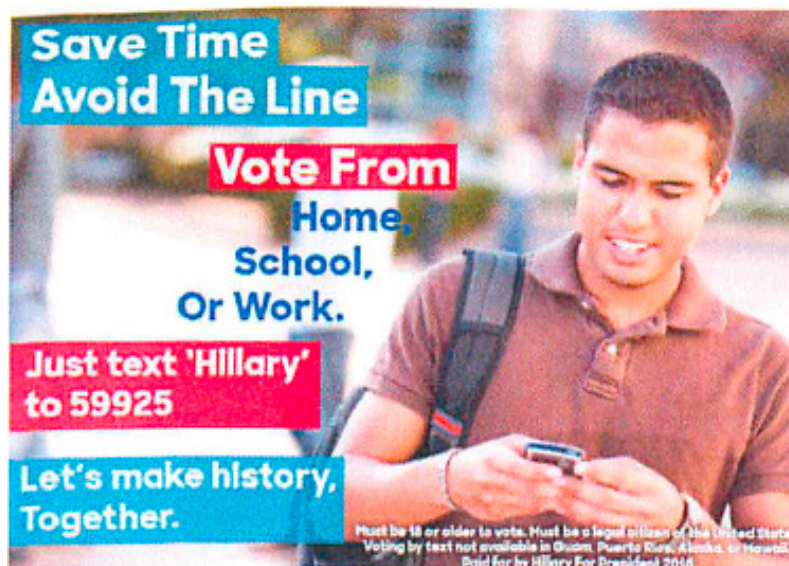
Figure 2. Russian created meme, 2016. Source: U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee (2018).

Figure 3. Donald Trump as depicted in "Trumpsmen" video, 2019.

faces to depict Trump slaughtering his perceived rivals. Graphic, crude, and comical, Trump is shown shooting over 30 people as the rock anthem "Free Bird" plays in the background. The faces of the actors from the original movie scene are covered with bubbles depicting individuals and institutions perceived to be anti-Trump. They range from the BBC News to rival Republican Mitt Romney and from progressive media figure Rosie O'Donnell to a Black Lives Matter sign. Powerful US Representative Maxine Waters, a black woman, is shown being hurled from a window marked "JAIL" as seen in Figure 4. Recently deceased at the time, Republican party rival John McCain is brutally pistol-whipped. Former political rival Bernie Sanders is shown screaming as Trump sets his hair on fire.

As a spoof of how Trump is portrayed by mainstream news media, the attitude is of over-the-top aggressive humor. It presents itself as vernacular with its purposefully amateur-looking video manipulations. However, those manipulations are not at the level of an everyday user as seen in the Russian memes. When paused, the sort of bobbing and misaligned heads show

well-done cartoonish expressions added to the faces, and the overall number of edits is huge—a time and skill commitment significantly beyond simply using an online meme generator.

The affect the video evokes in me is revulsion: The sheer meanness of it coupled with the added stickiness of racist implications makes it hard to watch. For those viewers who see Trump as unfairly treated by an imagined elite, however, the affect could be one of spirited support, pride, and maybe even anger or rage at the targets presented in the video. The possibility that this video's very aggressive attitude could incite feelings leading to violence made it controversial, particularly in light of the mass attack on the US Capitol Building during the certification of the vote count that would remove Trump from power in 2021.

While this video is maybe the most well-known, it is only one version of the same sort of video that seems to have been circulating in conservative social media for months before it gained wider attention. Now, it has spread and morphed taking many forms and shapes; occasionally being pulled down by YouTube and other

Figure 4. US Representative Maxine Waters depicted as assaulted in "Trumpsmen" video, 2019.

hosting platforms only to be uploaded again somewhere else. This is, of course, just one video meme of an untold number that pro-Trump influencers—from those with huge notoriety to those just tweeting out to their family and friends.

4. Digitally Amplified Vernacular Authority

These three examples demonstrate some ways that vernacular authority can be amplified by digital network technologies through the affordances of massively increased iterations that enact an aggregative volition or "will of the people." Looking more closely at the affect, attitude, and meaning in these examples reveals that there is no purely non-institutional volitional aggregation but, instead, the use of these digital media necessarily hybridizes the vernacular with the institutional. In our digital age, it seems, the elite are always also part of the people too in varying proportions.

While all these examples are hybrids of institutional and vernacular volitional forces, the balance of their aggregations is different. For example, the communication with Tay was an institutionally produced event: She was built by a team of engineers employed by one of the most powerful technology institutions in history, Microsoft. In so doing, Microsoft built her to perform the stereotype of a teenage girl which is itself the aggregation of assumptions and prejudices repeated over generations. They used those stereotypes to make her accessible so that people would, somewhat ironically, "teach" her to be like them. Her institutional technology opened her to the vernacular only to have that vernacular aggregate her into a monster not fit for the world. Then they "killed" her.

The troll farms are also highly institutional, and they too are open to aggregating with vernacular voices. A Russian newspaper investigation estimated that in 2014 the Internet Research Agency had about 400 employees working long days manually creating accounts and posts in a wide range of social media, addressing numerous Russian government concerns in various languages. It is estimated that the operation cost the Russian government $400,000 a month in salaries alone (Chen, 2015). That takes an institutional level of resources. In this case, we have a hybridization of Russian agents, the already existing polarizing problems in US society, and the willingness of Americans to take in and reproduce those problems. In this sense, the Russians relied on virality as a secondary means of amplification.

"The Trumpsmen" video is similar in that it targets a specific community with extreme versions of its already-held views, and it presents itself as an amateur remix video. It is quite different though in several ways. Its relatively good production (compared to the Russian memes) means that instead of putting resources into having people repeat its messages, again and again, it seeks retweets and shares by garnering people's attention directly. Instead of actively pretending to be racist, it pretends to be satire that is not racist. Meanwhile, its attitude is amateur in the clunky covered heads. Instead of a government agent pretending to be a regular person, it is a supposedly unpaid regular person who just likes Trump so much that they spent hours and hours editing video. This amateurish quality gives it a more authentic claim to represent the "voice of the people."

All these examples are aggregations that attempt to push forward further aggregations around the meanings that they express. In so doing, they are hybridizing both institutional and vernacular volition to create ongoing change in their targeted American audiences.

My approach to this material reveals how the vernacular is being goaded, harnessed, and corralled into supporting the power of government and corporate interests. Today, populism is being manufactured through the amplification of vernacular authority. Using chatbots, Facebook and Google advertising buys, and good old hard work in front of computer screens, iterative communication events can present continuities and consistencies that can spread extremely quickly, be targeted very specifically, and can easily flow through our daily lives without gaining widespread notoriety or being clearly categorized as institutional. Their power emerges when individuals recognize these continues and consistencies as their own aggregating volition, the will of *their* people. In so doing, network communication technologies challenge scholars and everyday social media users alike to unravel their complexities as we try to make sense of the dangers digital amplification might or might not pose.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author

Robert Glenn Howard is the director of Digital Studies and DesignLab at the University of Wisconsin-Madison where he is a professor in the Department of Communication Arts. He is faculty in the Information School, the School of Journalism and Mass Communication, the Religious Studies Program, and the Folklore Program. He is the author of several academic journal articles and books including *Digital Jesus: The Making of a New Christian Fundamentalist Community on the Internet* and *Tradition in the 21st Century*.