

# Affective Politics of Digital Media

Propaganda by Other Means

Edited by Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis



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*Edited by Megan Boler and  
Elizabeth Davis*

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## DIGITAL PROPAGANDA AND EMOTIONAL MICRO-TARGETING

Interview with Jonathan Albright, Carole Cadwalladr, Paolo Gerbaudo, and Tamsin Shaw

*Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis*

*This interview was conducted on January 7, 2020, with additions and editing conducted in the following weeks.*

*Megan:* You have each kept your fingers on the pulse of contemporary politics vis-à-vis digital media in your scholarly and public press contributions. For example, Carole's crucial muckraking of Cambridge Analytica and the politics of the tech giants; Tamsin's work describing the fateful match of behavioural science and big data in "psychographics," and the threat of oligarchy for U.S. politics; Jonathan's prolific studies of disinformation in the digital media environment; and Paolo's work on digital media for emergent political parties and populism, and the role of Twitter in social movements. But, at a glance, each of you have come to address the role of technology in politics from quite different backgrounds. Might you each say a bit about how you came to the study of contemporary politics and technology, and, if relevant, what the relationship is between your prior work and your interest now in these contemporary questions?

*Jonathan:* From 2014 to 2016, I got into this through teaching students and listening to their feedback and talking about the elections, candidates, and emerging platforms. In my PhD work I was also looking at uses of social media, albeit positive ones. I was looking at how journalists used hashtags, and how hashtags acted as content vehicles, entry points into news, and linking mechanisms. I was examining some of the happy things at the start of the last decade, like the collaborative responses to natural disasters, for example the Japanese earthquake back in 2011.

Over the past five years it's turned into chasing the effects and data around negative events, and misinformation and disinformation, rather than looking at positive uses. I still acknowledge the many positive uses and benefits of social media—it's not all bad, it just seems a lot worse than it used to be.

*Paolo:* I came to this through activism back in the late '90s and early '00s, as the internet was emerging as a popular communication system and people were already starting to play with that and developing new forms of art and activism. For me the initial concern was a political as well as an activist concern: what can you do with these tools? How can you use them? What are the new forms of social experience, cooperation, gathering, and relationships emerging there, and how can these be used for the cause of social progress and social equality?

I developed a situated method, grounded in speaking with activists and practitioners. While the first decade of this century was a phase of enthusiasm about the novelty of these wondrous technologies, since the dotcom bust, the dominant sentiment became one of pessimism. Many people had this sense that the internet perhaps was overrated. And then social media came around 2006 and 2007, growing rapidly, and then the pinnacle or 2011, paralleled by new social movements. And after that there was a new wave of disillusionment, both on the tech and the movement front. So it was a series of ups and downs in terms of expectations about the power and shortcomings of digital technology.

*Carole:* I've had a feature writing contract with the *Observer* and the *Guardian* for about 15 years now, and that essentially means that I write across the paper. But I've specialized in doing long-form feature articles, although I did also write op-eds on politics and other topics at times. I became a techno-utopian in 2005, I think, when I went to a TED Conference for the first time and was exposed to lots of mind-expanding ideas. Speaker after speaker spoke of "the commons and social media" and this "connectivity" that would bring everybody together and afford new forms of creative collaboration. This really sparked my interest in technology, and I started writing about it for our feature section over the next decade. And for a long time the *Guardian* had a tech section which was very sort of gadget-y. It really wasn't a bit of the paper that had any interest for me. I began trying to write about technology from a more "lay-person" perspective, considering the social implications and effects of tech. Of course, during that time we all started going from tech-utopian to seeing the problems with tech, and, particularly, the problems around the monopoly of Silicon Valley companies, which



I reported on for a few years. For example, I went undercover in the Amazon warehouse, and wrote a big exposé on the hyper-capitalist nature of these companies. I did a piece on Ray Kurzweil, a futurist who had gone to work for Google, which really brought the ire of Google down upon me—and actually, upon the newspaper. One of the interesting things to me there was the very close relationship between Google and the news industry, actually.

Then, in October 2016, there was a spate of weird technology stories right before the U.S. election, which were confirming worries raised at a conference I'd recently attended, "TechCrunch Disrupt." Yet my searches for news reports on these concerns revealed almost nothing! And then we had the U.S. election and the shock of it, and in my comment piece I had written about the Macedonian teenagers writing fake news stories for profit. And soon, following the buzz, my editor said, "Can you start looking into fake news?" I wasn't sure where to start, and just started looking at Google Search and testing out various search results. The first search result I put in was "Jews," and I made that into a question, "are Jews"—and I got the suggestion from Google, "are Jews evil." And that led to the next suggestion, and that gave me an entire page of results, every single one of which went to websites which said, "yes, Jews are evil." Well this is very bizarre, I thought . . . And I began testing this across a whole array of subjects and discovered the same phenomenon: these extremely distorted results coming up, which would then lead to the next suggestion. If one simply types "Jews" into the search, "are Jews," led to "are Jews evil," led to the suggestion, "did the Holocaust happen." I took screen-shots as I proceeded, not really understanding the full implications—was everybody seeing this? What was the extent of these biased results? I began testing it across different browsers and on my phone.

The next day, I started making some phone calls and—luckily—someone told me, "We've just published a very interesting blog post on this disinformation network by Jonathan Albright." So I rang Jonathan and asked, "Jonathan, what the heck is going on here?" He had just done an initial network analysis of fake news sites, and we were both feeling quite freaked out, and then proceeded to freak each other out a bit more on the telephone. I was subsequently able to bring Jonathan's research to a wider audience in that first article. Two people that week told me about Cambridge Analytica, Jonathan being the first. All of this became a continuing line of inquiry and over the last three years I have essentially been following a single story with many different threads.

*Tamsin:* I first wrote about Cambridge Analytica in a much broader piece about behavioral sciences. My training is in philosophy and political theory, but I'd become interested in the fact that the field of psychology, especially social psychology (that term is used pretty much interchangeably with behavioral economics), was claiming to answer a lot of traditionally philosophical questions, like what we should value and how we should live. I was also interested politically in the tremendous self-confidence of a discipline that claims it has the authority to tell us not just what judgments we should be making but to manipulate us into making them. That doesn't characterize everyone in the field of course, but there seemed to me to be that general sense of entitlement.

So I was asked to review a book about Daniel Kahneman, the great pioneer in the field of behavioral economics. I became interested in the fact that he and his academic colleagues (including another Nobel prize-winner, Richard Thaler) had taken their research to the heads of the big Silicon Valley companies in 2007 at a retreat in California to teach them how to "nudge" (or manipulate) people in the direction of certain choices. Their model of exploiting people's unconscious biases had a huge impact on the tech industry. Then I started to look at the way the same techniques were being used by organizations like Cambridge Analytica to affect election results. It all seemed like a huge and troubling departure from the way citizens of democracies should treat one another.

*Megan:* Fascinating trajectories you've each had! Elizabeth and I have been researching the targeting and leveraging of emotions since 2016, and we've drawn significantly on the work of Tamsin and Carole and their cutting-edge investigative journalism. Indeed, initially we found very little scholarly work on these questions. We're wondering if you have any comments on how the private sector has led the way in terms of mobilizing emotionality through social media? Do you have comments about what scholars might need to be doing to catch up to those developments?

*Carole:* I'd been writing for a few months particularly around this subject around Google Search, and at the same time I had started getting these letters of complaint from Cambridge Analytica saying they'd never worked in the Brexit election. There was a great deal of back and forth, because there were all sorts of public statements where Cambridge Analytica said that they *had* worked with Brexit. I ended up going for a coffee with this guy named Andy Wigmore, who is the communications person for Leave.EU, one of the Brexit campaigns. In our extended coffee he was telling me about

how, in the Brexit campaign, they had used technology, and several times he came back to the fact that the cornerstone was the use of emotion. This was absolutely deliberate, he said, and indeed emotion was precisely what the other side didn't understand—that this was how they'd managed to get such amazing reach from their Facebook posts and videos, etc. He said that they and the Trump campaign were learning off each other, and that there was an absolutely similar methodology, and that it was obvious they were using the same sort of strategies and techniques. He mentioned that he sort of pitied the other side, actually—the Remain side—which had very much focused on these rational arguments around economic well-being and benefits, and that these “rational” methods simply were much less shared via social media.

Jonathan: At the time, I didn't know what their Facebook content was. And I still don't know some of it, but you can see their public Facebook content and videos and it's incredibly racist, inflammatory, fear-mongering—untrue posts, which were scaring people. Fear was one of their very key strategies, and apparently, it worked. I'll continue on Carole's thread. When I was teaching in 2015, one of the tools that I used in class was Apply Magic Sauce, a version of the Cambridge Analytica OCEAN model. I had my students pull data from it and observe the results. We also looked at the case studies from Facebook's data science team, which they published in 2013 and '14. It was incredible to see just how much data and how much insight could be extracted from looking at people's likes. I tried to reinforce the idea that Facebook in particular was a vehicle set up to extract and mine emotional data through their platform and through industrial provision of their [new] Graph API. So, researching social media wasn't just about content, and it wasn't just about implied statistics. Facebook had created a vehicle—an entire system—built for the purposes of emotional mining or sentiment data.

While academics currently have the ability to access some Facebook content in our work, for example with the SSRC [Social Science Research Council] Facebook data partnership, we don't have access to the mechanisms to understand how people react as they scroll, and crucial vectors of emotion, such as Facebook's reactions in particular (which are now algorithmically weighted higher than the like)—so, we really don't know how these things work. These mechanisms of sharing are at least as important as the content itself. A huge gap in academic work is understanding the interfaces in this reactive kind of browsing of Facebook because, of course, platforms measure and know exactly—based on your scroll rate—where you are slowing down and stopping on your news feed as you go through your

messages and timeline. And Twitter is probably similar. But academics and people who do public-facing research don't have access to any of this research intelligence. And the problem is getting worse as we move into formats like Facebook groups and smaller and closed (or semi-open or semi-public) versions of platforms, which is clearly the design direction taking place.

The upshot is: these platforms are built specifically for extracting emotional sentiment as much as they are for sharing content. So it's not just about sharing content—it's about connecting emotionally. And companies, businesses, and political actors in particular are going to leverage marketing APIs to extract that kind of information, because it's arguably the most important and the most vital intel they need to activate people to get elected.

*Paolo:*

Yes, I also think that emotions are central to all this architecture. Partly this has to do with the very nature of social media as personal media—media where we are supposed to express ourselves and our intimate feelings, though while doing that in public, right. When Facebook was initially developed, it was almost something like Tinder, where you could find possible sexual or emotional partners. And ultimately, that remains the zero degree of social media. It's about friendship: our contacts are defined for a very specific (design) reason, upon which all the rest is built. But the substratum is personal relationships, one-to-one relationships that are based on affection and bonds of kinship, friendship, family, etc. And that is reflected in politics. In my research, I use qualitative and quantitative methods, and from a qualitative perspective, it was really interesting to see, for example, in 2011 how an emotional component was an explicit strategy of activists. For example, Wael Ghonim, the admin of the Facebook page Kullena Khaled Saeed in 2011, very much conceived his posting as an exercise in motivational psychology. Fundamentally speaking to people's despair, speaking to people's depression, and providing them a sort of redemptive narrative:

I know things are very bad. Identify with me, as someone just like you. We are suffering the same hardship as you are suffering. We are the generation that is being, in a way, devalued by our parents, grandparents, by the establishment. But I promise you there is hope going forward. There is something we can do about it and we will do it.

Social network analysis misses the specific ways that contents—and not just information packets—incite people's deepest fears, hopes, a sense of compassion, outrage, and so on. The Indignados in Spain,

for example, did something similar as well—firing up people’s hope. Also using metrics, for example, by saying “Look how many likes we get. It means that we are many! We can do something about it!”

And that continues then with more right-wing movements, with Brexit, with Donald Trump, and psychographics that understand how to use social networks to create this “mass invitation effect” done with racism, through which racism is made more and more acceptable. Uttering racism more explicitly becomes more acceptable. People are encouraged to express things that are very homophobic, that are very racist, that are very against women. And there is this spiral of imitation and contagion that is very emotional.

And that connects also with reactions, a focus of my future work: reactions as a key logic of social media. What we see in much social media politics is that politicians want us to react. It’s not just about hearing a message, being persuaded about something; it’s not just a cognitive process. They want us to enter a certain emotional frame, outrage, for example: like Salvini in Italy telling people, “Look at all these migrants scrounging our welfare, coming to our shores, not accepting our culture, isn’t that unacceptable?” Inciting emotions of rage, outrage, fears of cultural and ethnic loss.

Of course, in some ways this has always been happening in politics. Politics has always been emotional, but it’s now emotional in new ways—ways that are specific to social media. Specific to this weird social experience is that it simultaneously targets us in terms of our individual experience, while also as a collective fantasy. The experience is individualized, in front of a screen, often by oneself. But at the same time the phenomenon is social, happening in public, with us witnessing what other people are doing, what they are “liking,” how other people are co-reacting as we react to contents. We participate in a sort of collective emotional drama, as it were.

*Megan:* Yes, what Elizabeth and I have called “affective feedback loops,” and the “culture of likes.”

*Jonathan:* I love the idea of reactions, because one of the things that I have been interested in looking at is reactions as a form of selective endorsement. Because every time that we do react, every time that we do “like” something, I consider it a form of selected—not necessarily public—but very targeted endorsement. I have not seen academic work or studies that look at this from a selective endorsement frame. It would be interesting.

*Paolo:* Yes—and in terms of defining endorsements—I’ve been thinking a lot about Facebook reactions, and how each of them is quite culturally defined. For example, French people are known to “ha-ha” more than anybody else.

And actually, “ha-ha” is actually a quite ambiguous reaction. It is often used for trolling. It has an ambiguous emotional meaning in the sense that it can be supportive, communal, and a convivial type of reaction, as in “I am laughing with you.” But it can just as easily be “hey, I am laughing at you”—used to ridicule people, and thus to make a serious statement. This dismissal, via laughter, is frequently used, for example, to downplay Greta Thunberg’s influence around the world.

It’s a very interesting phenomenon, something both designed by the system developers, but also something that develops in a way more organically out of social customs, people’s interactions, and how meanings change and develop as online practices evolve.

*Carole:* Yes, and all of this links to a comment Jonathan made earlier about the architecture of emotion, reminding me of a very key news article I read during my journey from tech-utopian to tech-dystopian, about the Facebook experiment conducted on people’s news feed to manipulate their emotions. This was before I’d done any particular thinking at all about Facebook, and I just thought it was the most supremely creepy thing ever.

Indeed, over recent months I find myself thinking about the emotional impact of technology. I find myself thinking about how reporting on technology has meant immersing myself in this same technology. Because I absolutely use Twitter as an amplification device and feedback loop essential for circulating my investigative work, but it has an emotional impact. So only just recently I’ve started really thinking about what I believe to be an under-researched or under-reported effect: the kind of very core impact the negative side of these technologies have upon one’s personality and how one interacts with the world. Reporting on this story has taken a significant emotional toll. Because it does feel like you are at this sort of war: writing about disinformation makes you the subject of disinformation, and that’s quite a difficult process to navigate.

You know, again back to the point of what has been blackboxed—the one experiment which has been open to us was the experiment conducted by Facebook without people’s consent.<sup>1</sup>

*Tamsin:* Yes, I remember reading that at the time too, in 2014—and being horrified.

*Carole:* And only recently have I fully become aware of the fact that I myself am an experimental subject. And there is no control. And for all I know, there are people out there who actively try to manipulate me or manipulate my emotions. That is, after all, what trolling is. It’s about discouraging you—and depressing you. And guess what? You know, it kind of works.

I was having a conversation yesterday with somebody about the worst backlash I've had online with regard to one particular subject. And I sort of said, well I am just not going near that again, it's just not worth it. Pretty much, with regards to everything else, I will fight the fight. But I was just like, "OK, that's it," you know? Hands up—the trolling and backlash were just too much.

*Tamsin:* Yep. I've had the same experience of just leaving certain topics alone because the trolling was too much. It works, as you said.

The Facebook experiment Carole mentioned was eye-opening for me too, partly because I suddenly had the sense that I was actually part of the experiments being conducted by the psychologists I'd been reading about. Before I was ever interested in the uses of psychology online, I had an interest in the positive psychology movement started by Martin Seligman. People often associate it with self-help books with smiley faces on the cover and it does involve studying the psychological traits and habits that foster well-being, resilience, happiness. But it has also always had military applications (for example screening for psychological traits associated with resilience in soldiers) and after 9/11 became very bound up with counter-terrorism efforts. Seligman himself felt this was the most important function psychological science could have and the internet could help us to develop ways of identifying and combating the psychological origins of extremism. The Department of Defense picked up on this in 2008 with something called the Minerva initiative, and one of the behavioral scientists involved in that was in fact also involved in the Facebook emotional manipulation experiment. So that one experiment revealed this huge blurring of lines between military behavioral technologies and commercial ones.

The World Well-Being Project at the University of Pennsylvania—under the direction of Seligman—really led the way with developing these technologies in a way that could be commercialized. They pioneered the online use of things like the OCEAN personality test (categorizing people in terms of their Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism). This was the basis for Cambridge Analytica's psychographic profiling, and it was taken to them by positive psychologist Aleksandr Kogan, who ran the Prosociality and Wellbeing Center at Cambridge University. Seligman was also involved with the psychometrics projects over there. A younger colleague of Kogan's, Michal Kosinski, developed the app Jonathan mentioned earlier—"Apply Magic Sauce"—based on the OCEAN test, and this is essentially what Kogan took to the Cambridge Analytica guys. So the technology was transformed very rapidly from something that purported to serve the public interest to a mere tool for

manipulation that anyone could buy. And no one had any idea, until 2016, that they were subject to these attempts at manipulation.

*Elizabeth:* One of the threads that we have noticed following these developments—and each of you have touched on this already—is how the emotional politics link up with the politics of tech in a way that continues to have unequal effects on socially oppressed groups, whether we are talking about women, or people of color, immigrants, undocumented people. But it seems the buzz around the biggest “post-truth” news stories—Brexit, Trump, Cambridge Analytica, Russian hacking, et cetera—has often obscured this dynamic of who is actually being targeted and affected. So, we are wondering how, if at all, you have seen racial, gender, and other social justice issues show up in your work following tech and politics, and also, how you think journalists and academics might foreground this more adequately?

*Jonathan:* That’s a very tough question. You could separate it into how journalists should cover technology and politics, and also separate it into how academics support this effort. I don’t know if they always relate. As an academic who helps journalists and who often works alongside journalists with data collection and helping them find certain ways of reporting through data, I don’t typically go out looking for issues. I often find them embedded in stories, studies, and in results that I obtain. There are so many limitations in traditional news reporting, such that stories in *The New York Times*, for example, end up simply stating “people were manipulated by Facebook,” and can’t allocate space to engage with questions of marginalization and practices of targeting certain groups, including trolling campaigns focused on specific ethnicities and gender qualities.

*Tamsin:* I think it’s very important for journalists to publicize the work in this field that targets people specifically on the basis of their race, gender, or sexuality. As Jonathan says, it can be difficult, technical stuff to report. But we’re already seeing these manipulative technologies being developed in a way that could potentially have very bad implications. Michal Kosinski, for instance, left Cambridge and went to Stanford where he developed what has been referred to as a “gaydar,” using facial recognition technology to tell whether people are gay. He claimed to be able to do this with some accuracy just from online photographs. If you think about the attitudes of authoritarian regimes around the world towards gay people, and their desire to target them, that’s very worrying.

One thing to keep an eye on is what the field of psychology more broadly considers to be “measurable traits.” Theories about the relationship between race and IQ first suggested by Charles Murray were for a long time accepted to be thoroughly debunked,



but some psychologists are currently trying to revive them. This “race science” (though its claim to be scientific is dubious at best) has been given respectability by influential figures like Steven Pinker, who believe that many topics concerning race and gender have been understudied because of pressure from people whose concerns about social justice supposedly “suppress free speech.” That narrative has, unsurprisingly, been incredibly popular on the far right and has gone hand in hand with a renewed interest in eugenics. So when we see a broad political agenda like that emerging within a discipline we have to start thinking about its implications for behavioral technologies, even if it’s bad science—because those ends and those dogmas may guide applications of behavioral sciences that are genuinely harmful.

*Elizabeth:* And, Paolo, you’ve looked at some of these questions under the rubric of populism, yes?

*Paolo:* First and foremost, obviously gender and racial dimensions are very much present in all social media politics. And, you do see, for example, quite misogynistic attitudes in certain online forums that are male-dominated, such as, for example, incel (involuntary celibates) subcultures. A key element of right-wing populism is hate. Of course there is no politics that doesn’t entail some notion of the enemy or the adversary, whatever you want to call it.

With populism however, the construction of the enemy is particularly important. You find a lot of online vilification in populist movements, both left and right. So, on the right it’s quite obvious who are the targets of attack. Matteo Salvini provides a potent example of how this works, with the strategy of targeting (young) women who dare to criticize him, and thereby exposing them to public fury.

For example, recently there was a girl who happened to sit next to Salvini on the plane. And the girl was very young. She was 17 or something. She took a selfie of herself while he was sleeping and she gave him the middle finger. Salvini reposted a screenshot of the Instagram post in which you could see the Instagram nickname handle of this girl, who then became the object of online abuse by all his supporters. He does this again and again. And Greta Thunberg obviously has become a target. Other women who have criticized Salvini have become a target. And he does the same thing with migrants. Any small negative news that involves migrants, typically crime, robberies, burglaries, is amplified and presented as the manifestation of something much bigger.

And what is interesting is the way in which social media is used in these instances, because usually this targeting strategy accompanies Facebook posts that have a picture showing the object of outrage.

A migrant who has done something bad or a woman who is too outspoken, with a question at the end, typically “what do you think about this? What’s your reaction to this?” And then the comments section is just pure poison. But in a way, it just lets his followers, his fans, do what he cannot do or doesn’t dare to do. Namely, engage in the most vicious discourse: rape threats, all manner of misogynistic discourse.

To me what is really interesting—and frightening—is this kind of social psychology, which creates a sense of solidarity within a community that in turn establishes what things can be said. Things that you perhaps wouldn’t say in public or even in private actually. Things you wouldn’t dare say in front of your mom or your wife or your sister. You can say them online, because everybody is saying them, and increasingly feeling entitled to make this kind of toxic remark. And it’s incredibly mobilizing. As we know, the comments are the thing that the Facebook algorithm likes the most—a form of participation that produces a more organic reach.

*Megan:* Really interesting—in my present mixed-methods research, one thing we’re examining is how “feeling rules” police which and how emotions can be expressed on each platform. And how these vary depending on political orientation, as well.

*Paolo:* And yes, indeed a related question this poses for me is also how the left can try to use some of these same dynamics from the opposite direction. For example, hate for billionaires and their golf courses and their yachts and their boats, which for me is completely legitimate, as ultimately these are the people responsible for the hardship others are experiencing. You can see the left trying to do a little bit of that on social media, like Bernie Sanders saying billionaires should not exist. The problem is that it doesn’t get as visceral as it does on the right with migrants and women. And to create this online hate augmented with viscosity is of the essence.

So that is perhaps to conclude one element of weakness of online populism on the left vis-à-vis online populism on the right. In a sense, it is far easier for the right to find easy targets of online resentment that people feel entitled to speak against.

*Carole:* I’m not quite sure where to begin on this. One of the things it comes back to is that with the very architecture of everything that has come out of Silicon Valley, the people who are most affected by the downsides of this technology—so minorities, people of color, women, etcetera,—simply weren’t in the room when it was being created. These consequences are structural and ongoing.

I would add as well, that there is a higher bar for women and minorities to speak out, and that we know that they are disproportionately attacked and trolled and deterred. I worry a lot about the silencing effect of these technologies.

*Megan:* Elizabeth and I have also been paying attention to the role of militarism and military psy-ops in the development of contemporary politics of digital media—and both Carole and Tamsin’s reporting have been crucial here. And we are really hoping to see this get more attention in scholarship and public spheres.

We have been writing and researching what we have been calling the “trifecta” of how economic, political, and military interests share in the logics engaged to conduct this kind of micro-targeting of emotion and affect. And we find very, very little published about how these three link up, nor about military interest in micro-targeting or uses of these affective strategies. So, we were wondering if you have thoughts about that? What you might like to see covered in scholarship and journalism regarding the potential intersection between emotion and these large scale interests, particularly in terms of military interests?

*Carole:* This is a really interesting point because, as you say, it’s very under-reported and, I think, still very much seen in the realm of conspiracy theory. You know, so much of my reporting is being characterized as hyperbolic, and certainly for the first year and a half I was writing on these issues, Cambridge Analytica was just a great conspiracy theory. It was just what every company did, and it didn’t even work, et cetera, et cetera. Funny because these responses I was getting were very contradictory. “They all do that” and “it doesn’t even work,” were the two repeated and contradictory responses. I would respond: “Do you know of many other companies which work in elections that also work in Afghanistan? How many other military contractors do you know who have been working for political parties in the past?” And that was the one thing which made people go, “Oh, okay, yeah—maybe there is something slightly different there.”

But at the same time, the language which comes from that sphere, such as “information warfare,” is still seen as completely over the top. There has been a natural and healthy cynical resistance to the idea that there are nefarious, shady forces out there doing some sort of mad brainwashing, and somehow manipulating our brainwaves to make us vote differently. Of course. But this strand of criticism, still very predominant, is predominant particularly with young male technology writers on Twitter. But this poses a barrier to more informed investigations of the bleed from

these different areas into one another, from the commercial to the military.

One of the things I encountered when I started this research is the difficulty in finding independent experts on propaganda to consult, because the people who worked in the defence industry had then migrated to academia, but they also had a commercial gig on the side.

I have so many questions about this topic of the military aspects. If I come back to one of the profoundly under-reported aspects of the Cambridge Analytica story: the fact is that this company was a British government contractor. It was an American government contractor. It was a NATO contractor. Some of those contracts were live whilst they were doing political work on citizens using taxpayer-funded methodologies. I mean, that is fundamentally completely crazy and it's also not been covered, not been understood, not been further explored. We still have very little insight into this and what other companies are doing with governments. How that data which has been collected for one purpose—commercial purposes—was then used in politics, and then they get the government contract and that data then migrates into the government agencies, which is potentially used for surveillance purposes. There are some really key questions which are not being asked and which are not being covered.

This is an area that Tamsin has investigated, the relationship between those Silicon Valley companies and the U.S. defense sector. The question of the lack of regulation by the American government: every country around the world is affected and impacted because of that relationship between the government and Silicon Valley—and the lack of regulation.

*Tamsin:* Yeah, there's so much cross-over now between the military and the private sector, with people going back and forth to jobs in one or the other, there's been a big blurring of boundaries, especially in cyber, between technologies intended for civilian or national security purposes. There are behavioral technologies being patented by private companies, for civilian use, that have obvious uses in psychological warfare (you can see what Google's patenting, by searching for Google patents and "Behavior modification methods and systems," for example). And you can also see how techniques in psychological warfare will be very useful for the commercial ends of the big tech companies. The line between "nudging" people and coercing them is being erased.

So we try to think about these problems but we're always operating with partial information. In trying to come to grips with what

occurred in 2016 the media has focused a lot of attention on the large social media platforms, but I think there are larger social and political problems that won't be solved by regulating or breaking up Facebook and Google, because Silicon Valley has evolved into a leaderless system for technological development, one that lies beyond the reach of policy. Instead of being guided by public debate, the direction of this development is determined by commercial competition and international military competition for cyber-power. Both forms of competition incentivize not just secrecy but disinformation about the ways in which key technologies such as AI are evolving. We are constantly told that AI and Machine Learning will fundamentally alter the world we live in, yet all of the essential developments and decisions are being taken behind closed doors.

*Jonathan:* We can't overlook the fact that DARPA essentially sponsored and helped build the framework for the modern internet. But equally important, when you look at current research funding and you look at current centers—at least in the United States—the presence of military and state-sponsored research is incredible. I don't have the time to do it, but I should take every call for proposals and call for applications, and put them in a separate email folder, because that's how many I've seen. And many of the new and emerging academic centers focused on disinformation evidence substantial links to the State Department, DARPA, and to the DoD. So this disinformation effort goes beyond just news media, and misinformation and platforms. Of course, the military investment in video games has been going on for decades, such as the Call of Duty sponsorship by the military. These organizations have been involved in technology from the very beginning.

It's important to look at the connections between actors in consulting contracts and in the grey areas between the public and private sectors. And looking towards the future: what are they funding? How are these entities connected? What forms of research are they promoting? Especially in terms of algorithms for detection, sentiment analysis, and shaping future research and academic work—there's a lot of money moving into these sectors.

*Carole:* As well as, of course, much of the fundamental research which became the kind of Cambridge Analytica methodology from Cambridge University. American defence money funded, for example, a lot of Michal Kosinski's initial work on this.

*Megan:* Indeed, in our research on this topic we find such a lack of scholarship about military involvement. When I've made inquiries to colleagues about how to approach the lack of scholarship on military influence in the tech sector, their suggestion is, maybe all you can

do is follow the patents. Because what happens, as you know, when a tender goes out, a consulting company can take that job. That consulting company might solely be a commercial entity, it might have academic links, but it's often just its own stand-alone. And then something might get patented related, say, to sentiment analysis for the military. But then, quite often, that entity dissolves. So, it becomes very hard to follow.

*Paolo:* I suspect that the US, and in particular California, Stanford, MIT, and other U.S. universities, may provide the best vantage point to see these things at play. I think here in Europe, at the periphery of the empire—well, the more you move to the periphery, the more things get muddled. Also, there is no funding to speak of for most of us; many people in universities have so little funding these days that they would just kind of love to have military funding.

Also, we shouldn't underestimate the moral implications of corporate funding. Corporate funding of academic research has ulterior motives, concerned with their image and profit. To a degree, one cannot blame some academics for seeking corporate funding, as public funding is being squeezed to the last drop. The political economy of academia is definitely pushing many scholars to go that way.

*Tamsin:* When I wrote in the *New York Review of Books* ["Beware the Big Five," April 5, 2018] about the military and intelligence venture capital funding for Silicon Valley companies, I found that very few people I spoke to outside that world had any idea that tax-payer dollars were being used in this way. The big tech companies, Apple, Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Microsoft, built their monopolies with the help of tax-payer dollars, through mechanisms such as the Small Business Innovation Research Program and the non-profit venture capital funds established by U.S. defense and intelligence agencies (the most successful being the CIA's pioneering fund, In-Q-Tel). This venture capital helped to create products that were needed for national security, but companies were also encouraged to find commercial applications—and of course they did, on a huge scale. Most of the components of our iPhones were originally developed for military purposes. In-Q-Tel have a website on which they list many of their initiatives, the companies they support, the technologies they're investing in [[www.iqt.org](http://www.iqt.org)]. The DIUx [Defense Innovation Unit] website is another place where you can see the intersection of national security needs and emerging technologies [[www.diu.mil](http://www.diu.mil)]. And the Defense Intelligence Agency has a website called NeedipeDIA where they solicit proposals for funding and list their current priorities [[www.dia.mil/Business/Needipedia/](http://www.dia.mil/Business/Needipedia/)]. The Defense Innovation Board, chaired

by Eric Schmidt, gets together people from the big Silicon Valley companies and from the military and intelligence agencies to discuss the overall direction of development. They have a website, release reports, and hold public meetings, so some of the information is accessible.

So there are some efforts being made towards transparency. But apart from following the money, the biggest problem, from the civilian point of view, is how on earth policy can keep up with the technology.

Most of the hardware that the Department of Defense uses is now controlled by software, or as Gilman Louie put it, “the software defines the hardware.” Thirty years ago a plane or a tank and its electronic systems would require maintenance but little updating over its life-span. Now software updates for all technologies, weapons systems, logistics systems, embedded computers, have to happen at an extraordinary pace. Software is in continuous development. The rapidity of change requires much greater flexibility than the military has been used to. The DIB’s [Defense Innovation Board] rather awkward public position was to recommend in their report the fostering of “digital talent” within the military, so that, for instance, alongside the strategy of providing venture capital to start-ups, the DoD retains access to the source code of software they purchase and can do their own security checks. But it was also acknowledged at the live meeting that once you’re riding on the commercial sector you have no choice but to be fully on board.

A deeper problem, however, derives from the fact that the commercial sector isn’t driven by national security concerns—it’s driven by profit. And it’s shaped by competition from other countries, particularly China, who also want to capture global markets. Silicon Valley companies are competing with foreign companies in the same commercial space.

I think we’re only just starting to come to grips with the way China and Russia will exploit our own technologies and my guess is that barely anyone in Congress has a clue about the nature of the problem let alone what to do about it.

*Elizabeth:* In terms of regulation that seeks to address the problems of disinformation, and the power of tech and social media companies, we are wondering what you hope to see, and how you envision perhaps a balance of responsibility between different actors such as Facebook, governments, consumers? What’s on the horizon now, politically, or in terms of regulation?

*Jonathan:* Yeah. So this is just such a complicated question in the U.S., it’s frustrating to even think about this question. I mean, we are just

held completely by Section 230 of the Communications Act and by First Amendment issues.

Most of the responsibility has unfortunately been managed through shame, through public shaming, and through PR crises for technology companies. Although there have been productive steps. I don't know how we answer the regulation question until we see a new administration or a change in leadership and also on the Supreme Court. I mean, these things are bound in very complex legal frameworks that are unpredictable. Until we get a change in the U.S. administration, I am not sure how we can address these issues for long-term regulation.

Globally speaking, Mark Zuckerberg said in late 2019 that Facebook might algorithmically tailor and/or filter and distribute content, according to each country's, or each state's, specific local laws all at once. If that's one of the goals, platforms might be able to algorithmically manage and distribute certain types of content and restrict certain types of speech through mostly automated means, which is extremely worrying, because it implicates the other problems that we've had with algorithmic prioritization and (re)distribution of content and emotions. But doing it on a global scale, I think these are the larger questions that we will run into.

I don't know how you can regulate something like the internet and global platforms, especially as large as Facebook, at the national level anymore. In Germany, for example, public displays of swastikas and other hate paraphernalia are banned. There are things that are not permitted, because they are not facing the same legal questions we do in the U.S., related to the First Amendment and free speech. But, when I signed in through a VPN in different countries to check and see on Instagram and Facebook if certain images banned in the United States were available there, sure enough, when I signed in to a different geographic location, Germany, France, etc., they were still visible.

The burden of regulation in a global context is extreme. Localized algorithms will eventually distribute, prevent, prohibit, and prioritize certain content, based on each state's or nation's policies and whims, as determined by the changing administrations. It's very complicated. But when you have CEOs mentioning that they can manage content [hyper]locally through a kind of mass distribution of on-demand AI, it worries me. And in terms of accountability, this creates even more problems than we currently face.



*Carole:* I find answering questions about regulation really difficult. Because such questions suppose some fantasy realm whereby we don't have these populist authoritarians who rely upon these platforms to increase their popularity. And they seem to look forward to a future when these authoritarians are not in power and when we can have sensible discussions around policy and regulation. And I just don't see that happening any time immediately in the future in Britain or in America.

I find what Jonathan mentioned about shaming as a form of regulation really interesting. And I agree—I actually think this is one of the most significant levers that exist to influence policies and practices. Indeed, I hope that we can shame Facebook into banning micro-targeted political ads. Because this is one of the most pernicious forces out there at the moment, given that Zuckerberg made the decision not to ban politicians or political parties from spreading misinformation in these ads. And of course Twitter has taken this step, changing its policy to not accept political advertising and not permit paid promotion of politicians' tweets as advertising.

So in terms of shaming as a lever—it's only when we people achieve mass understanding of the nature of this problem and demand change from politicians that we're actually going to see action. This is what I believe is most helpful to talk about—as distinct from our wish list regarding regulations—because it's something I can kind of believe in, rather than the fantasy figures who are going to suddenly, magically make up these regulations, when we don't have anybody in power in the least inclined to do that.

*Paolo:* In the beginning these platforms pretended they didn't have any responsibility for content—"We are just tools people are using and we don't have any bias." And now they are forced by circumstance, public pressure, and public opinion to self-regulate, to enforce moderation procedures, and moderation is quite expensive for them. They are creating moderation centers everywhere, like in the Philippines, Greece, Portugal with Facebook. And this shows in some sense that these companies realize they cannot entirely ignore the kind of content that they are hosting. They need to implement some forms of moderation in order to maintain reputation and public image necessary to their extreme reach and role. And the same now goes for Twitter, for example, deciding not to run any political ads. So, in a sense these companies have reached a plateau, and need to consolidate. They cannot grow any more. And in order to consolidate, they need to reassure the public that they are not as dangerous as they are deemed to be.

Regarding what comes next in terms of politics—the same thing is happening in the sense that certain tactics that were very novel just a few years ago, are not new anymore. Therefore, it boils down to their novelty, their disruptive effect. You have got this mobilization effect affecting activism of different persuasions. But populist politicians also face this challenge, right? As do online hate tactics. At some point opponents figure out counter-tactics to fight against these people's tactics. Plus, the public also becomes inoculated vis-à-vis certain tactics. Salvini, for example, is still pushing his agenda of hate, but he is challenged to adapt and change it. He desperately needs to find ways not to bore the public. So, it's this constant rat race to find ever more effective tactics, but within a system where things are, in many ways, stabilizing. We may well see in two years a new generation of media tactics—for example, perhaps Chinese social media, like TikTok, becoming more prominent and actually posing a really serious competition to U.S. platforms.

The worlds of social media now require that scholars across disciplines keep up, and take heed—political scientists increasingly recognize they cannot understand politics anymore unless they are understanding what is going on online. The same for sociology, economics—they can hardly understand work organizations, social movements, without an understanding of social media.

We have a lot of excellent research and well-informed informatics research into algorithms, platforms, etc. But I would like to see more conceptual work and analyses: what is automation? What is an algorithm? What is artificial intelligence? Is there such a thing as artificial intelligence? If we are to develop a more critical understanding of all these issues, abstract theoretical philosophical research is of the essence. Because otherwise, the empirical research we do is increasingly unfounded, and lacking significance and context—we don't know what kind of categories we are using.

*Megan:* Indeed, you've hit on a central aim of this book—new frameworks and theorizations necessary to understand digital propaganda and platform politics.

*Jonathan:* Maybe the last thing that I'll say is that for our type of research, traditional academic journals and the traditional methods of publishing work for peer review are very difficult and challenging precisely because this scholarship needs to be informed by so many disciplines.

There are many types of inquiry and study designs. I remain surprised that there hasn't been a journal, or at least a popular one, able to capture questions around disinformation, misinformation,

manipulation, and to start seeding some cross-disciplinary dialogue. Because this kind of work we are all doing is responsive and it can be multidisciplinary to say the least. And it covers such a wide gamut of different issues—politics, social issues, movements, platform design, and user interfaces.

So I am still surprised that there hasn't been something like an academic-type journal that is open and built specifically for the type of work that needs to be done on mis- and disinformation. But it's probably time for such opportunities to be launched.

*Tamsin:* Yes, I think we're in the very early days of figuring out how academics should respond to a set of issues which, as Jonathan said, don't fit into our current disciplinary boundaries. But I know a lot of philosophers now want to engage with the big problems tech has created for us as a society and are working in areas like AI, propaganda, and disinformation, crises of legitimacy. The will is certainly there.

We live in times where the press are increasingly under attack. Journalists (including Carole) are subject to bullying lawsuits. Politicians, including the U.S. President, attack the free press and even try to undermine specific publications. In that context I think tenured academics have a special responsibility. Because we have tenure (though of course academic tenure is under threat too—but we have it for now) we have a kind of protection that journalists don't. And our work doesn't have to serve a profit motive. So universities are really the place where the research has to take place that enables us to hold politicians and tech companies to account. We need to be much better at communicating that to the world and figuring out how it can inform policy. But pursuing the truth in an age of disinformation is step one and we have to take that responsibility very seriously now.

## Note

- 1 It is worth noting that in 2018, Facebook agreed to give a limited number of researchers access to 38 million URLs (which Facebook shared publicly between January 2017 and July 2019) that relate to civic discourse—though it took them almost two years to grant this minimal and limited access. See Jeffrey Mervis, "Researchers finally get access to data on Facebook's role in political discourse," *Science* (a publication of the AAAS) February 13, 2020, [www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/02/researchers-finally-get-access-data-facebook-s-role-political-discourse#](http://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/02/researchers-finally-get-access-data-facebook-s-role-political-discourse#).