Episode 3: Reactionary Digital Politics Part 1

Digital technologies are increasingly used as ideological weapons of misinformation, manipulation, propaganda, and radicalization. But how exactly are social media platforms and memes used by ideological extremists? And what are they trying to achieve? In this episode, Dr. Sara Grimes (Director of the KMDI) chats with three researchers from the Reactionary Digital Politics Research Group, Dr. Alan Finlayson, Dr. Robert Topinka, and Dr. Rob Gallagher In the first of a special two part series, the Reactionary Digital Politics team discusses some of their findings, as well as key arguments advanced in Dr. Finlayson's recent article, entitled "Neoliberalism, the Alt Right and the Intellectual Dark Web."

Dr. Sara Grimes (00:00):

The political landscape in Canada and in so many parts of the world has shifted dramatically. It's become more extreme, more polarized, more violent. Digital technologies might not be causing the shift, but they've been used in powerful ways by politicians, activists, terrorists, data firms, and countless others trying to shape our politics, our ideologies, and our lives. We're all familiar with long-standing research showing how our social media feeds can function as echo chambers of confirmation bias. For example, people who vote liberal mostly see posts that support liberal policies and opinions; a result of their own liking habits and interactions with friends who share their politics. But there's a lot more going on in these spaces. A recent study of YouTube viewers, published by the Anti-Defamation League in 2022, showed that for people with existing fringe beliefs and discriminatory views, the echo chamber can morph into a rabbit hole where increasingly radical content escalates into extremism.

Dr. Sara Grimes (01:13):

Digital technologies can be used as ideological weapons of misinformation, manipulation, propaganda, and radicalization. The growing prevalence and ubiquity of these phenomena are having a profound impact on our society, on our mental health and

wellbeing, on the outcomes of our elections, and on our trust in governments and each other. Yet there's still a lot we don't know about these processes. There are so many factors and players involved, so many seemingly conflicting ideas and agendas. How exactly are social media platforms and memes used by ideological extremists, and what are they trying to achieve?

The Reactionary Digital Politics Research Group has spent the past five years trying to answer these questions. They've tracked the complex and, at times, contradictory ways that political ideologies, rhetorics, and aesthetics are reshaping politics in our increasingly digitized world. Through this work, they've examined the impact of cultural influencers turned political opportunists, the reach of far-right extremists and their links to cultists and conspiracy fanatics. Using a groundbreaking, deeply interdisciplinary approach, this project delves into a profoundly troubling area of digital culture and of contemporary society.

The group is led by three amazing scholars: Dr. Alan Finlayson, Dr. Robert Topinka, and Dr. Rob Gallagher. Dr. Finlayson is a Professor of Political and Social Theory at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, England. He is a notable political theorist and the author of numerous publications, including the book, Making Sense of New Labor, published by Lawrence and Wishart in 2003.

Dr. Sara Grimes (03:17):

Dr. Robert Topinka is a Senior Lecturer in Transnational Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck University of London. His areas of expertise are in technology, the city, post-colonialism, and race. His recent book, Racing the Street: Race, Rhetoric, and Technology in Metropolitan London, 1840-1900, was published in 2020 by the University of California Press.

Dr. Rob Gallagher is a Lecturer in Film and Media in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. His research focuses on digital cultures, online communities, and interactive media. His book, Video Games, Identity, and Digital Subjectivity was published by Routledge in 2017.

The research collaboration between these three scholars focused on bringing together experts and knowledge from multiple fields to map the current toxic state of digital politics in the UK and across the Western world. As part of their project, they created an eight-episode podcast about their findings called Reactionary Digital Politics.

Dr. Robert Topinka (04:32):

So maybe facts don't care about your feelings, but for Qanoners, it's your feelings that send you out looking for facts.

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Dr. Sara Grimes (04:38):

So today we're going to do something a little different. Instead of inviting just one of the members of this research team to speak with me about their work, we've invited all three, and to make sure everyone gets a chance to share their incredibly important insights on this massive topic, we're doing this interview in two parts, over two separate episodes. Each episode will focus on a different article written by a member of the research team, but all three will respond to my questions and to each other.

Here's what they each sound like:

Dr. Rob Gallagher (05:12):

Me, Rob Gallagher.

Dr. Robert Topinka (05:13):

Me, Rob Topinka.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (05:13):

And me, Alan Finlayson.

Dr. Sara Grimes (05:16):

The focus of today's episode is an article entitled, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web," written by Dr. Finlayson and published in the journal, Theory, Culture & Society in 2021.

One more thing. This episode has a content warning. The research project we're discussing focused on uncovering and tracking an affiliation of ideas, political groups, and individuals that espouse extremely discriminatory beliefs, including racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and antisemitism. The point of the project was to better understand how these ideologies are circulating online and influencing real-world politics. Neither I nor anyone from the Reactionary Digital Politics Research Group share these beliefs. In fact, we completely reject and condemn them.

I'm Sara Grimes, Director of the Knowledge Media Design Institute at the University of Toronto and host of the Critical Technology Podcast. Today, I'll be speaking with Dr. Alan Finlayson, Dr. Robert Topinka, and Dr. Rob Gallagher about their investigation into the alt-right and affiliated extremist political ideologies online.

So, let's just jump right in. What are Reactionary Digital Politics?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (06:50):

Well, we started out researching specifically the alt-right, but what we found pretty quickly was that that term was a little bit restrictive in terms of what we wanted to look at, and also not easy to give a singular definition to. And we found really a much broader, wider field of discourse, if you like, in which terms and ideas and concepts and memes and images were kind of flowing around.

We used the term "reactionary digital politics" to really capture quite a broad range of different political positions and locations and individuals that runs, on the one hand, from perhaps seemingly, to some people, moderate figures like Jordan Peterson, a prominent Canadian former psychology professor, to explicitly far-right militia-type movements in the United States, not because we want to say they're the same, but because we say they share in common a certain approach and attitude to politics that's also found amongst offline political movements, the so-called paleoconservatives and Christian nationalists, for example; in Europe, far-right movements like generation identity; but also, more specifically online kinds of formations that you find on the posting board 4chan, for example; that you might find in the so-called alt-right, different individuals and posters producing comments on YouTube, whether that's Paul Joseph Watson from the UK, to the now banned Stefan Molyneux, a race realist from Canada, a whole range of different kinds of people.

And while we don't want to dismiss the differences between these people, we think it's helpful to think about them as part of a larger continuum, if you like, united by sharing certain kinds of orientations and attitudes towards politics.

And in trying to understand that, moving from relatively mainstream conservative politics to very extreme mainstream politics, what we found was that you could think of them as connected in being reactionary in the sense of resisting progressive movements, resisting the general historical development of principles of democracy and equality. And that also helps signal a continuity between contemporary online reactionary politics and the kind of classical reactionary politics that one might associate with, initially, resistance to the French Revolution, to the spread of democratic participation and so on.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (09:02):

I don't know if it's worth adding that it's not been entirely uncontroversial when we've talked to other scholars working in this area. Some feel like "reactionary" has this valence that kind of denies how radical some of these individuals and groups are. But for the reasons Alan's outlined, I think we all decided that it did the work economically in terms of the issues that we see as most important.

Dr. Robert Topinka (09:24):

And I think another important thing to add about a lot of these groups is that even if they don't share ideas and ideologies, or if they do or if they have contradictory, self-contradicting ideologies, even within certain formations, they share a certain political style and tactics and orientation to politics. It's often conceived of, as in the phrase Alex Jones used, a kind of info war. There's a battle between a set of enemies that need to be defeated, and there's a tendency to see one's ingroup as heroic and on a quest to overturn a relatively coherent enemy that often has a name, like the cathedral or the new class. The cathedral is Curtis Yarvin's term for mainstream academics and mainstream media, the new class that Alan writes about in his paper, and also a tendency to kind of name themselves as outsiders in some sense.

And that's something that the intellectual dark web accomplishes. Even though they're very different in some ways from the more extreme versions of these groups, they share a kind of orientation to politics as we're persecuted, but we're also heroic and we're on a quest to defeat our enemies.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (10:36):

I think that's a really important point that Rob brings up because part of what characterizes reactionary politics is that it's less concerned about making a positive case for whatever politics is advocating than it is with undermining whatever it treats as being the politics at the moment that it wants to resist or push back on. That shapes the rhetoric and as well as the style of these movements very much.

Dr. Robert Topinka (10:57):

Yeah. That's an important part about reactionary and why we think the term reactionary is useful. Because often, the sort of political program that they want to enact is relatively stable and uncontroversial, or that's how they conceive of it, as something they want to restore what's natural. And they might have very different ideas about what is natural, but there's this idea that the past has fallen, it's corrupt, we've lost our way, and what we want to restore is whatever is natural. So that might be the genetic determination of racial difference or the natural gender orders with a dominant male and a submissive female, and definitely two genders, that sort of thing.

Oftentimes, their conception of what they want to accomplish is what they see as self-evidently natural and doesn't really need to be argued for or explained, so they expend a lot of their energy on critiquing their enemies.

Dr. Sara Grimes (11:51):

You use the term natural order in your answers just now to describe an idea that the reactionary political groups in your study all seem to frequently refer to. What does natural order mean in this context?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (12:05):

So in a way, we're using the term natural order in a political sense rather than any kind of scientific or any other kind of sense. It's really a way of thinking about what politics is and what politics can do.

What the reactionary wants to do is to halt politics, stop it from happening, and one way to do that is to insist that there are certain things you can't do because it's not natural. And the emphasis really in the use of that, "not natural," is unblocking something, stopping it from happening, rather than making a systematic case about what the limits of our natural condition are. So it's very different, for example, from saying there are certain things we can't do with the burning of fossil fuels because of the nature of the environment and the rules of physics. It's really a way of saying, "No, there's a hidden underlying order that everything must be able to conform to," because of course, the reaction when we're talking about nature understands that people are doing things against nature that we're breaking through it but then wants to haul us back for it.

And that might be justified by appeals to fairly spurious claims about so-called evolutionary psychology, for example. But more often, I think the implication is a kind of mystical hidden order that has distributed people to the right places in society, some above, some below, some with certain roles and others with different kinds of roles, and that we mustn't depart from that. And ultimately, for a lot of the reactionary movements, that's ultimately a God-given order and they really want to return to something that is given by divine revelation, but others who are not perhaps so committed that religious view can still utilize the same discourse as a way of preventing certain change or justifying the status quo crucially to say, when someone says, "But why are some people really rich and some people not at all?" to say, "Oh, well it's just natural. It's because they're better. They worked harder, they had more clever ideas. That's why it's happening." And then you can attribute the outcome to nature rather than trying to explain and understand how economic processes might work.

Dr. Robert Topinka (13:53):

I would just add that when you see these claims to the natural order in the wild, when you see these groups making these claims, they often appeal to either God, as you were saying, Alan, some kind of a mystical order ordained by God, or to a really oversimplified and misleading conception of genetics and how it shapes our lives because it's often linked to evolutionary psychology and the way evolution has shaped our capacities, but

in entirely misleading ways.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (14:23):

Yeah. And in some sectors, there's a desire to seem like the rational ones, the ones who are obeying the dictates of science, but also, a lot of pseudoscience. The whole idea of the alpha male, which is discredited; the whole idea of racist pseudoscience, eugenics, also discredited, but part of the rhetorical arsenal that makes things sound sciencey when you're talking about wanting to roll back progress.

Dr. Sara Grimes (14:48):

Alan, in your article, "Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web," you use the term ideological entrepreneurs to describe some of the conservative digital content creators driving a lot of this rhetoric. What are ideological entrepreneurs and why is this a useful framework for understanding contemporary politics?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (15:08):

So the concept of or term of ideological entrepreneurs is trying to do a number of things at once really. On the one hand, the emphasis is on the word ideological. So it's trying to stress the people we are interested in, people we're looking at, and a characteristic of online reaction, political phenomena is they don't just offer a position or a take on particular issues. They're offering something larger, a much broader way of thinking about how politics in society and economy work, the way of analyzing it that their viewers, followers, listeners, and supporters can take onboard and apply to particular cases themselves, so the word ideological is important there.

But they're also doing that in a way that's different, we think, from how that's happened before. There's the intellectual function of political movements that's long been understood and long been around, but the people we're talking about, online ideological entrepreneurs, they're not tied specifically to political parties. They may be connected to them, but they're not members that are governed or organized or reprimanded by them or restricted by the demand of those parties. They're also journalists of sort, but they're not members of journalistic profession or of news institutions that, again, might exercise some kind of governance over what they do and shape what they're allowed and not allowed to do. Nor are they, although they may be parts of universities, they're also not governed strictly speaking by the rules and procedures of the academy. So, you have people who are free of those work codes and rules of conduct for intellectual public activity.

What do they do instead? Well, they make money. They're also on digital platforms, which are commercial platforms that are funded by advertising or by a subscription. They

may sell merchandise alongside that, and that could be quite an important part of their revenue. And that's important because it both maintains that separation from traditional civic political institutions, but also, it gives a certain incentive to respond to your audience and try to build your audience to generate more revenue and generate more success. That is a different sort of incentive, I would argue, to what is present perhaps in more traditional political intellectuals. And it can mean that if they're accountable at all, then ideological entrepreneurs, as it were, are accountable to the bottom line or to the audiences that they have a very immediate relationship with, and that may intensify the ways in which they seek to bind that audience to them and to their politics.

So, that isn't necessarily to say they're just instrumental. I think there is a lot of instrumentalism around, that's an important part of it, but there's a new way in which the instrumental self-interest of the entrepreneur, the ideologist, the intellectual role and how that's governed and relates to public political life, that's a different assemblage that produces different kinds of discourses and different kinds of political rhetorics.

Dr. Sara Grimes (17:46):

Rob Gallagher, I know you have something to add here.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (17:49):

I think maybe another term that's helpful here, and I believe it's one that Becca Lewis coined or certainly one she uses, is alternative influencers. And in a sense, what's going on on a lot of these channels and platforms, not dissimilar to people building a brand around their makeup tutorials, the kind of influencer marketing techniques that have come out of the monetization of platforms like YouTube are being used here, but they're being used to sell people on politics or even more on a kind of vision of self-improvement, but one that's rooted more in these kinds of ideologies than it is self-care or getting better in using cosmetics or whatever it might have been.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (18:30):

Yeah, that's an excellent point that part of the label ideological entrepreneurs connects them to a whole other world of online speakers and communicators in the kind of Venn diagram shows how part of what's happening is that politics is becoming, in some respects, a little less like politics and a little bit more like a certain kind of commercial self-help, as Rob says, entertainment kind of media. And that's just absolutely fundamentally important if you want to understand what's happening here.

Dr. Sara Grimes (18:56):

In the article, and in the podcast, and in your answers here today, you emphasize that

this is actually about a range of political ideologies, including conservatism, nationalism, libertarianism, fascism, and many others, converging or at least uniting against a perceived common enemy, which you call, "The new class." Alan, what is the new class and how is this idea mobilized by reactionary political groups and their followers?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (19:25):
So any political movement, particularly a political movement that have rather diverse sets of demand and interests, is going to need to posit some kind of external agency to which it's opposed. And in the case of reactionary digital politics, that is, as you say, the new class. And I think it's important to think about that, to understand what that is because that's also a way in which we try and locate this phenomenon within real historical social change, as well as in what people think about and how they understand that real social change.

So a clear sociological economic phenomenon of the Post-War Period, post-1945, but particularly since the 1970s is the massive expansion in the number of people working in white collar, technical, cultural, managerial kinds of employment in large corporations, but also particularly in state or public sector employment. And that's true across Europe, it is also true in the United States, as it is in Canada. And particularly recently, that's also been intensified by the expansion of people involved in comms, communication, advertising, human relations and so on. So that's fundamentally changed a lot of people's experiences of work, for example, and changed the kinds of experiences of power and control in workplaces.

Certainly in the UK at the moment, I would perhaps polemically say there's no such thing as industrial relations anymore, whether we are having a wave of strikes, problems at work are resolved through human resources and personnel management. So that's very much changed economic and occupational experience. At the same time, there's also been a huge expansion, a number of people who work in the cultural sector, advertising, comms I've already mentioned, but what's more broadly in media and different areas of design and so forth. And that really changes people's experience and understanding of culture as culture becomes something that's primarily commercially produced and disseminated.

So what you have is the emergence of different kinds of groups that are exercising different kinds of social power, which people can experience very directly, more directly than they might experience the power of billionaires or the shareholders of large corporations because we're seeing the TV products, we're seeing the advertising, we are reading the things that the doctor says that the government says we should do, we're surrounded by that much more often.

What the reactionary digital politics does is give that, all of that, a very diverse range of activities, a single name: the cultural elite, the administrative state, the liberal media, and

so on. They give them a series of names that then unifies them and then also characterizes them as being driven by concerns that are peculiar to them, anti-racism, equality politics, gender politics, and tries to make those concerns seem as if they belong just to those kinds of people and not to everybody else, the ordinary working class or whatever they might characterize it. And then they'll often assign to that class a somewhat darker motivation that actually, they're doing all these things for some other reason that we are not quite being told about. It's part of an agenda, it's part of a larger strategy to undermine traditional values, traditional communities, the nation, and so on and so forth.

And then they can begin to talk about how they look like, what they sound like, will they speak in a certain way? They have certain tastes, you can identify them. They're obviously all in the universities or came through the universities, which exists just to manufacture more people like them. And in that way, the new class can become a name that shapes an attack on all kinds of public activities, governmental or non-governmental public activity, in a way to all kinds of collective action, all of which can be dismissed as just the expression of the particular and peculiar views of this class that is trying to tell us what to do. And of course, that's also a way of not talking about very, very large, important kinds of economic power.

Dr. Sara Grimes (23:05):

Rob Topinka, I'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

Dr. Robert Topinka (23:08):

I think maybe one thing to pick up on that Alan just said is a number of people working in something like communications, advertising, marketing, and the way those roles have a connection, not that everyone who works in those positions is university-educated, but a lot of people have gone through the university system, so it makes the university a point of emphasis, and also what HR is doing a point of emphasis. As Alan said, industrial relations happens a lot through HR, and there's a sort of tricky political question around the commitment of large corporations to anti-racism or to diversity initiatives.

So I think a lot of times when people are critiquing reactionary digital politics or responding to it, especially within the mainstream liberal discourse, the response to these reactionary groups is to say, "Okay, they're reacting against identity politics, they're reacting against political correctness, they're reacting against wokeness. So maybe part of the problem is these things have gone too far," and that misses that really what these groups want is about rolling back democracy and equality. It's not really about wokeness. Critiquing that is just a means to the end of undermining democracy itself.

But the tricky bit is that a lot of people do experience things like diversity initiatives through HR. Olúfẹmi Táíwò has recently written a book called Elite Capture, which is about this critique of this from the left and from an anti-racist perspective that a lot of people are experiencing diversity initiatives in this really hollowed-out HR discourse. And then they're also seeing it happen through corporations saying, "We support Black Lives Matter," or tweeting out something in support of Pride.

So the sort of reactionary response to that is to say, "Look, they're all in on it and they're all trying to control you." And then there's a mistake that's often made to say, "Oh, actually what's happening here is these groups are connecting with people because there is something like a white working class person in the provinces who doesn't like this stuff," and they kind of miss what reactionary politics is really about, and then they also miss the actual function of the new class.

What Olúfẹmi Táíwò calls elite capture is where large corporations take on diversity discourse and use it basically for PR and marketing purposes. And then because so many people work in PR, marketing, advertising, and communications, there's a way that diversity initiatives become collapsed with corporate power. And then the reactionary groups can take advantage of that and call it a plot, right? And what's missed is that this is a kind of hollowed-out form of identity politics and diversity, and also that these reactionary groups are actually concerned with rolling back democracy and equality itself.

Dr. Sara Grimes (25:52):

And Rob Gallagher, you've mentioned that tech companies also play a role.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (25:56):

I was going to say, I guess digital tech companies themselves figure in this in quite a complex way. On the one hand, there's this idea that they embody this kind of Californian Silicon Valley woke liberalism, which they don't necessarily, and there are controversies about the kinds of content they might ban and/or employees like James Damore at Google and the controverts over his comments about female engineers. But on the other hand, obviously these platforms are seen as offering a voice to this notion of the voiceless populist mass. So they kind of figure both as an exemplar of this kind of new class to some extent, but also a potential solution depending on how people are framing it.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (26:39):

Part of what we are trying to get at in these answers is that the new class, as it were, is real. There's a real phenomenon. There's a real socioeconomic phenomenon here, and it

has real effects, and some of those effects ought to do with the inequalities of power that it perpetuates.

In the UK, one of the examples of it is the famous remark by the government of Mr. Michael Gove during the Brexit withdrawal from the EU campaign when he declared people have had enough of experts, which has been widely and rightly mocked. But of course at the same time, lots of people will encounter certain kinds of experts coming in and telling them how to do their job, how to run their household, interfering in their community and their council estate, whatever it might be, and thinking that they know best, not having a very democratic attitude towards finding out how things are for people on the shop floor or on the street.

That is a real phenomenon and one that was, of course, identified a long time ago by critical theorists and left activists of different kinds. But somehow, that's flipped over and become used by the right as a way of justifying, as Rob says, and as both Robs say, a very systematic and much larger scale attack, not just on the distribution of cultural power, but on substantive claims people make for democratic equality.

Dr. Sara Grimes (27:51):

A crucial contribution of this project is the finding that although the figures and various ideologies involved do diverge in some ways, they share a common belief in human inequality or anti-equality. Can you please speak a little more about this?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (28:08):

I take the view as a political theorist that the essence of conservatism really is not a commitment ultimately to tradition, but as a commitment to inequality. That's part of why it exists, and it partly exists to resist moves towards equality as they happen to be at any particular time. So how equality is resisted and how inequality is justified changes, of course, over time, and also changes depending on the kind of inequality that's being justified. But it's sufficiently broad and general a concept, I think, to help unite the very diverse range of reactionary political formations that we've already been talking about.

So I think a way to understand this diverse range of movements is precisely as united around a common commitment to inequality, and as Rob said earlier, a commitment to an idea that there is some kind of natural order, some natural hierarchy, that is being improperly and dangerously disrupted by the interventions of the state, the new class, the liberals more broadly.

So that might be a natural inequality that is inherent in the distinction between the sexes, or it might be the natural inequality as understood to inhibit in relations between races. But it might also, and this is quite important, be the inequality that is revealed naturally

through free, unrestricted market competition in which one's talents or competencies can be truly revealed and given their true price.

So for the reactionary political formation, anything that cuts across that natural expression or tries to bypass it or suppress it, whether that is liberal ideas about equality or market regulation of some kind, is at a deep level a kind of offense against nature and it is going to be disastrous. It's going to be chaotic and is, by definition, unjust.

So this position can unite otherwise completely different kinds of people from deeply Christian traditionalist and paleoconservatives on the one hand, to libertarians who want no restrictions or regulations at all, to neoliberals who are mostly concerned about the ways in which markets function. But they can be united at this very basic level of saying, "There's a natural order to things, and when we allow that natural order," which we might think of as being God's plan as some of them do, or evolution's plan as some of them do, "once we allow that to express itself, everything will be fine. And the reason why things have gone wrong is because someone's been messing about with that."

And importantly, that can also then be an explanation for individuals as to why they're not successful in this society that's told them they should be successful, that everyone is free and equal to participate. They can say, "Well, it's not me. I am truly one of the great people in the world, but it's because the market, the competition has been rigged for all the other people by the liberals with their hiring policies and their diversity practices and so on. They've made it really hard for me and that's why it's all gone wrong. It's their fault. It's not actually anything to do with markets as such."

Dr. Robert Topinka (31:02):

I think it's worth linking this back to ideological entrepreneurs because this view of the world as naturally unequal and a marketplace of competition creates an opening for ideological entrepreneurs, both for those who can identify the way that market has been hindered or undermined or corrupted by the new class or mainstream liberals, but also for those ideological entrepreneurs who can offer a version of self-help, as Rob was talking about. Because there is a lot of concern in these groups, particularly online, with finding a way of maximizing one's potential through diet, through exercise.

On pickup artists groups, which are groups primarily of young men who want to pick up women, they talk a lot about looksmaxing. So it's about eating right, going to the gym, sometimes plastic surgery, although not usually. Mostly it's about diet and exercise. So there's this sense of oneself as endowed with certain capacities that allow one to compete on this marketplace for jobs, for sex, for clout, and then the need to maximize one's capacities. And that's what ideological entrepreneurs help people do. That's what they're offering. How do you improve yourself in this marketplace? Which is not to say that self-help is inevitably reactionary, but there's not a lot of tension between a

reactionary worldview and self-help discourse. They tend to enhance one another.

Dr. Rob Gallagher (32:30):

And this also of course applies to the competition for attention on digital platforms with all of their metrics and their subscriber counts, the accusations of virtue signaling or stolen valor or grievance politics are framed in terms of, this is people cheating to get attention online and it skewed the playing field, giving airtime to ideas that don't have any substance. And these are only really cynical attempts to game these digital systems.

So again, there's a degree to which the digital platforms aren't just the vehicle for this; they encode this logic that's then reflected in the way that people approach politics and understand their own place within it.

Dr. Sara Grimes (33:09):

In your article, Alan, you argue that the intertextual nature of digital technologies and genres enables different ideas and isms to "flow across forums and forums picked up by individuals plotting their own path through them." What role does this intertextuality, or flow, play in the spread or even mainstreaming of reactionary political ideologies?

Dr. Alan Finlayson (33:35):

So there, I'm trying to get at, again, a number of things all at once.

One of them is to do with the so-called barriers to entry into political discussion. So a lot of people talk about how the internet reduces the barriers to entry into public sphere. Anyone can set themselves up as an ideological entrepreneur and start running a YouTube channel, but it also lowers the barriers to entry for individuals just looking to find out about politics. 30 years ago, if I wanted to go to find out about a particular political movement, I might have to go across town, find where they were meeting, sit in a room with people I didn't know, pay money for their literature, and then if I wanted to go to another one, I had to cross back to this side of town. Now, I can move between all of these different political tendencies in a click with no great effort. So that begins then to break down certain barriers between ideological discourses and movements, and begins to create a kind of flow of different ideas and terms between them.

So then what can begin to happen then is that what moves around is fragments of a political discourse. It might be memes and images, it might be the names, like new class or cultural elite or liberal conspiracy or whatever it might be. These things can flow and move around in ways that are, at one level, quite unique to the individual who's surfing the internet, but also end up having certain kinds of commonalities and taking shape.

Now, on the one hand, that can mean that someone might pick up an idea or a term or a phrase or a meme with no idea of where it's come from. Lots of people will share a meme online with no idea that it was invented by 4chan crazy people. That's a technical term. One doesn't necessarily know that it came from the far right or wherever it came from.

Now, at one level, that's because it has broken free of its original context, so maybe we don't worry so much about it. But on the other hand, it means that when you are drawing on that for your own political thinking or in your own discussions or communication with other people, with your family, with your friends, on Facebook, you are bringing a little bit of a discourse in that maybe brings things with it that you weren't entirely aware of. And conversely, somebody else on the internet might see that thing you've shared and go, "Oh yeah, well that's the thing that so-and-so shared," and not realize that they've fallen into a different kind of political space, bringing them into contact with all kinds of other sorts of ideas, and may not even see as being particularly extreme.

And I think one way to understand how reactionary digital politics work is in terms of the movement and flow of these kinds of fragments, these kinds of memes, as opposed to whole systems of thinking, although they do carry ideological connotations. The example I always think of is just the term "cultural Marxism," which begins way back before the internet as a largely anti-Semitic conspiracy theory in which somehow Adorno and the Frankfurt School are responsible for the sexual revolution in rock and roll and lots of other things that they definitely weren't particularly keen on, but then spreads through forums like 4Chan and other places on the internet as a name for them, for the liberal elite, for the people pulling the strings of all the social cultural changes that have happened over the last 30 years.

Dr. Alan Finlayson (36:37):

And certainly in the UK, for instance, I remember seeing that begin to pop up in below-the-line comments in online newspapers and magazines. So posters there saying, "Oh yes, this is about the Cultural Marxist, this is what's happening." And then I saw it flow above the line and appear in the op-ed columns of people in quite prominent and respectable magazines and publications. And now in the UK, it's been used in the speeches of people who are leading cabinet ministries, by a foreign secretary, by a chairman of the Conservative Party, and so on.

That's not to suggest that those people using that phrase thought, "Oh, here's a way I can smuggle in an anti-Semitic conspiracy theory." I don't think they thought that for a minute, but it's moved across the internet, or perhaps from the bottom of the internet and up, into mainstream political discourse. It brings things with it, and it also can be a way in which people can be drawn into wider discourse and begin thinking, "Yeah, what is this about? Who is this Foucault and how has Foucault brought the world down?" That's a

real example. Our foreign secretary complained about Foucault in a major speech as if somehow Foucault was responsible for everything that was going wrong in the country.

So what that's about is the different ways in which ideas and fragments of ideas are flowing, and it's a question as to what they bring with them and what they allow to happen.

Dr. Sara Grimes (37:44):

Does technology design of, say, the algorithm that determines the contents of your social media feed also play a role in these processes? Rob Gallagher, Rob Topinka, your thoughts?

Dr. Rob Gallagher (37:55):

I think here as well, although the role of the algorithm has maybe been overstated in this, and it's sometimes a way of depoliticizing this as if people don't have any agency in what they're seeking out and why, obviously these systems that exist to organize and return content to searchers who are doing their own research pick up on the fact that certain terms and certain figures are related and that this might be the sort of thing that this sort of person is looking for. So, it's not all driven by these individuals as kind of curators or bricoleurs patching together politics. That also informs how the systems that everyone's using understands the world.

Dr. Robert Topinka (38:35):

Right. I think that links to what I was saying earlier, defining what reactionary politics is and what it's about, and it's about an information war. So there's an effort to, sometimes quite explicitly game the system, game the algorithm, game search results so that when people search for certain terms, they'll get certain results, and also so that people will attach certain meanings to certain terms.

So one word that comes to mind in the UK context where I am, is wokeness and a moral panic around wokeness. And this is a term that entered the mainstream British discourse over the last year or two, and it's had a strange career, right? Because woke is a term that originates among Black Americans for a way of describing remaining alive to the oppression one faces on a daily basis. And it was spread particularly by an Erykah Badu song in 2012. It came out, she sang about staying woke, and that sort of became a phrase that people would use. It was popular on Black Twitter, and then it sort of made the leap to the UK, not from Black Twitter, but from reactionary groups responding to it and critiquing it and saying, "Well, wokeness is now the official discourse, that everyone is woke, compulsory wokeness. The universities are enforcing wokeness, that the corporations are enforcing wokeness."

So, this is an example of the reactionary right winning an info war. And I think a lot of people in the UK are unaware of the term's history, and in a way, at this point, in the UK at least, it's become so detached from its origins that maybe in a sense, it doesn't matter what its origins are anymore because the reactionary right has won control in some sense over that term. They've shifted its context and it means something different and is connected to a different kind of politics.

And that can happen very quickly. Things will sometimes make that leap that you don't expect to make the leap. One of these is the great replacement, which has been covered in the US pretty thoroughly because Tucker Carlson has been advocating, without quite saying it, for the great replacement theory on his talk show, which is the most watched cable news show in the US. And that used to be a really obscure fringe, extreme-right idea that percolated through the internet and then made the leap through Tucker Carlson to mainstream. So, I don't think many people would've predicted that five years ago even, that something like that would be aired on Fox News.

So it's difficult to predict what will make that jump and what'll make the leap and what won't, so it's hard to track these things, but that's what an info war is often about is shifting the context of a term or an idea and sort of smuggling it into the mainstream discourse.

Dr. Sara Grimes (41:13):

A big thanks to Professors Finlayson, Gallagher, and to Topinka for joining us today. We'll be airing the second part of this group interview with the Reactionary Digital Politics research and podcast team in episode four of season three of the Critical Technology Podcast.

The Critical Technology Podcast is produced by me, Sara Grimes, with support from the KMDI. Audio mix and sound design by Mika Sustar and Mehrdad Ranjbar. Music by Micki-Lee Smith. Theme song by Taekun Park. Our logo was designed by JP King, and the artwork for today's episode was created by Kenji Toyoka.

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