Post-truth conspiracism and the pseudo-public sphere

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Rather than seeking to recuperate the ideal of a digital public sphere or lament its demise with the rise of social media platforms, in this paper I seek to identify the dangers of precisely this insistence to imagine the Internet as a public sphere. It is this curious insistence and persistence that, I claim, may feed into precisely those post-truth media dynamics such critical accounts worry about and rally against. The success of viral conspiracy narratives like Pizzagate and QAnon, as well as other forms of mis- and disinformation, hinges not (only) on the *absence* or *distortion* of a healthy democratic public sphere, as is typically assumed, but (also) *on its persistence as an imaginary* in an environment that obeys an altogether different set of logics, namely that of 'communicative capitalism' and 'information warfare.' Whereas the former has drawn most critical attention in connection to current post-truth dynamics (e.g., the effects of targeted advertising and the role of algorithms in creating polarizing echo chambers and filter bubbles), I will instead focus on the latter. The unique problem and 'cunning' of what I refer to as 'post-truth conspiracism' is that it draws on idea(l)s of digital publicness to establish its own epistemic legitimacy, as well as derive its unique powers of persuasion, *while* also mobilizing the full tactical arsenal of information warfare in a global attention economy. The resulting *weaponization* of digital public sphere imaginaries complicates attempts to recuperate the idea(l) of a digital public sphere as a solution to a 'polluted' information environment.

KEYWORDS

public sphere, publics, post-truth, information warfare, weaponization, QAnon, conspiracy theory, Pizzagate

1 Introduction

When Elon Musk acquired Twitter (now X) in September 2022 for 44 billion dollars, he justified his decision by evoking a well-known trope of the internet as a democratic public sphere, namely that of the 'town square'. In a tweet mainly addressed to advertisers who had increasingly lost confidence in Twitter as an advertising platform, he wrote: 'The reason I acquired Twitter is because it is important to the future of civilization to have a common digital town square', adding: 'I did not do it to make more money. I did it to try to help humanity, whom I love'.[1] In what follows Musk presents himself as a staunch defender of free speech and open debate, sounding the alarm about both right and left-wing

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1 https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1585619322239561728

echo chambers on 'competitor' platforms and blasting the 'relentless pursuit of clicks' by the 'traditional media', both of which remain unnamed.

Contrary to the early utopian visions of the Internet as a digital 'agora' that Musk alludes in his tweet, and to which the idea of the platform as a 'public stage' still hints (Gillespie, 2010), from its early AOL days to its current platform stage the Internet has always been a highly commercialized environment at odds with liberal-democratic ideals of the public sphere. Musk's description of Twitter/X in the same tweet is telling for how it tries to navigate these different regimes of publicity, envisioning the platform as a place 'where you can choose your desired experience according to your preferences, just as you can choose, for example, to see movies or play video games ranging from all ages to mature'. By comparing Twitter to other 'content providers', the language of the town square surreptitiously slides into that of the streamlined online shopping mall and the digital experience economy. Consequently, the civic hero is led off the stage and replaced by the content-consumer whose singularized preferences may be algorithmically tweaked. The romanticist rhetoric of civic publicness with which Musk started his tweet is quickly displaced by digital marketing and microtargeting discourse. And as *conversation* becomes *content* it is even claimed that, contrary to 'non-optimized ads,' 'highly relevant ads are actually content!', thus squaring the debate-to-content-as-advertisement circle.

The irony of a tech-billionaire buying up a public sphere of his own is of course hard to miss. At the same time – to give credit where it is due – Musk's tweet still attests to a minimal sense of obligation, on the part of tech moguls, to publicly justify their own policies, even when his message is inflected more by the strategic imperatives of corporate crisis-management than a concern for accountability. But the persistence of thinking about today's platform ecologies as constituting a public sphere is not limited to the erratic tweets of a tech billionaire. Even after 2016, when, in the wake of Trump and Brexit, 'post-truth' had been chosen as Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries, references to the Internet as a public sphere remain omnipresent in the discourse around mis- and disinformation, fake news, and the spread of conspiracy narratives online. In an educational report for *Data & Society* called 'Lexicon of Lies', for example, media historian Jack (2017) observed that 'whether "post-fact" or propaganda, the *public sphere* is inundated with problematic information' (n.p, my emphasis). Even more critically informed accounts of social media platforms often beg the question of the their status as a public sphere. Marres (2018, p. 435), for example, refers to social media platforms as a 'truthless public sphere by design' – the question being: in what sense do Twitter/X, Facebook, or TikTok still meet our ideas and expectations of a public sphere, when they are indeed 'truthless by design'? What do we make of this strange rhetorical persistence of the digital public sphere to make sense of today's information environments?

How we answer these questions of course depends on how we conceptualize the public sphere and there are divergent intellectual traditions of doing so. Weintraub (1997), for example, outlines four different ways in which the *public* has traditionally been opposed to the *private*. The public sphere can be differentiated from the propertied relations of a market economy, from the control of state authorities, as well as from the domestic sphere of familial or personal privacy (for

an overview see Robbins, 1993, p. 13).[2] Since its inception, however, the Internet has problematized such distinctions.[3]

Rather than seeking to recuperate the lost ideal of a digital public sphere or to lament its demise with the rise of platform or surveillance capitalism, in this paper I seek to identify the dangers of precisely this insistence to imagine and think about the Internet as a public sphere. It is this insistence that, I argue, may inadvertently feed into those post-truth dynamics that these critical accounts are worried about. What I refer to as the digital *pseudo*-public sphere is essentially marked by this split in how it is imagined *as* a public sphere and how it actually operates by an alien logic that undermines the epistemic and normative conditions that such a public sphere demands. The first section provides a brief survey of longstanding problematizations of the relation between the public sphere and new media technologies, showing how the public sphere is typically theorized at moments of (perceived) crisis or breakdown as a result of the encounter with such new media environments. Specifically, I look at Jürgen Habermas's recent reflections on social media platforms in light of his classical study on the transformations of the bourgeois public sphere. The second section returns to some of the earlier discussions in media studies around the status of the Internet as a public sphere. First, I revisit Jodi Dean's prescient critique of democratic publicity as the 'ideological matrix' of communicative capitalism. Second, I turn to Tiziana Terranova's account of the Internet as obeying the operational logic of 'information warfare', in a way that similarly undermines its status as a space of public deliberation. I discuss these earlier critiques in light of current attempts to reconceptualize the digital public sphere and its various 'publics' in light of novel post-truth dynamics. To this end, the third section discusses more recent examples of what I call 'post-truth conspiracism' to show how our insistence to imagine the Internet as a public sphere may backfire and even reinforce current post-truth dynamics. The singular conceit of post-truth conspiracy narratives like Pizzagate and QAnon, I claim, is that they continue to draw on the status of the Internet as a public sphere to establish their own epistemic and social legitimacy, *while* also mobilizing the full tactical and memetic arsenal of 'cognitive warfare' in a global attention economy. Rather than being part of a new-conspiracist style that can be clearly differentiated from an older mode of conspiratorial reason,

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2 In terms of ownership, the Internet is privatized across its different layers, ranging from the global infrastructures, ISPs and mobile devices to the platforms and apps we use daily (Fuchs, 2014; Srnicek, 2016). Secondly, freedom or protection from state surveillance online has been given the lie by the manifold leaks by whistleblowers showing mass personal data gathering by the United States and other countries (Zuboff, 2019). Thirdly, we use the Internet in our private lives, communicating and sharing personal information with family and friends, whereas the liberal notion of public deliberation requires citizens to leave their private lives and contingent personal interests at the door (Habermas, 2022, p. 166).

3 As Cohen (2019, pp. 48–49) showed, the notion of the internet as a 'public domain' also played a key legitimating and enabling role in the data-extractivist practices of platform capitalism, by legally framing personal data 'as a pool of materials that may be freely appropriated as inputs to economic production'. This includes the appropriation of training data from the public web for AI infrastructures like ChatGPT. She refers to this post-liberal notion of the public sphere as the 'biopolitical public domain'.

as Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) have argued, what I call 'post-truth conspiracism' is characterized by the indiscriminate mixing and convergence of both public sphere norms and spectacular social media practices anchored in the operational logics of information warfare.

2 The pseudo-public sphere

As Benhabib (1997, p. 1) and others have noted, the public sphere is typically evoked during moments of (perceived) crisis, often as a consequence of the introduction of new media technologies. The discourse on the public sphere, therefore, typically uses the language of distortion, disintegration, or decline: it becomes a matter of concern at the moment of (perceived) breakdown or loss. Famously, proponents of the Frankfurt School criticized the encroachment of the 'culture industry' on an enlightened bourgeois culture. Departing from this critique, Habermas would similarly reconstruct the historical fate of the bourgeois public sphere from the 18th century onward as a story of loss and decline.[4] Besides Habermas, Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (1958), for which the Athenian *polis* provided an ideal model, and Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), are seminal contributions to this philosophical narrative of decline of 'genuine' or 'authentic' publicness.

Similar concerns were debated in the 1920s in the United States on the transformation of public opinion and its status in upholding democratic society in the face of industrialization, e.g., the American journalist Walter Lippmann's book *The Phantom Public* (1925) and John Dewey's response in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927).[5] While Dewey criticized Lippmann's 'technocratic' or 'expertocratic' solution to the problem of a necessarily ill-informed and delusional public easily swayed by fascist political affect, instead defending the importance of civic participation and inclusion, both were concerned with the decline of the public sphere in the face of an increasingly complex world, and wondered if the public still existed at all [Dewey cited in Beckman (2022), p. 41].

Similarly, much of Habermas' own reconstructive work goes into showing how the public sphere has been compromised by changes in the mode of production and the media. In part V and VI of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he carefully traces the change of an eighteenth-century Culture-Debating public into a nineteenth and twentieth century Culture-Consuming public. The first public is grafted on the established social privacy of a property-owning family, whose individual members (mostly men) orient themselves toward a shared, rational-critical public sphere, that of the coffee houses and reading societies. With the rise of commercial mass media, however, such rational-critical public debate 'was replaced by the *pseudo*-public or *sham*-private world of culture consumption' (1991, 160, my emphasis).[6] He even goes so far as to concede that, in the late 20th century, the idea of the public sphere has been mostly reduced to an ideological gesture under 'advanced capitalism' (Koivisto and Valiverronen, 1996, pp. 21–22).

In the current discourse on 'post-truth', the 'post' evokes a similar narrative of historical loss, periodizing a previous era where, supposedly, rational debate and truth as an epistemic and political value still held sway. The term 'post-truth' has become a key rhetorical trope in what Bratich (2020) calls a 'war of restoration' on the part of the liberal establishment to call out the abuse of social media by right-wing trolls and other dis-info actors that roamed social media throughout the late 2010s. It seems that the more there no longer seems to be any material basis for a substantive public sphere, the greater the collective need for continuing to imagine it as such. While on the one hand, 'the debate on a new post-factual age has seen the revitalization of normative concepts of democracy and the public sphere' (Van Dyk, 2022), the theorization of publics in communication and media studies has increasingly been empirically flattened and disconnected from such normative conceptions in critical theory (Ojala and Ripatti-Torniainen, 2023).

Recently, Habermas (2022) revisited his influential account of the structural transformation of the public sphere in light of current developments, the rise of social media in particular.[7] In the article, he outlines what he sees as the preconditions for a healthy democratic public sphere anchored in a broadly defined 'liberal political culture', which includes the commitment to regard 'political adversaries in a spirit open to compromise as opponents and no longer as enemies' (154).[8] In addressing the problem of echo chambers and filter bubbles, Habermas (2022, p. 146) describes how a 'mode of semi-public, fragmented and self-enclosed communication' gives rise to a distortion in citizens-*cum*-users' 'perception of the political public sphere as such'. These echo chambers, or what he in his own technical-philosophical language refers to as 'intersubjectively confirmed worlds,' have the 'epistemic status of competing public spheres' (162). So on the one hand, there are various 'distortions' at play in the way publicness (*Öffentlichkeit*) is imagined by the relevant actors, in a way that affects it negatively, while on the other there exists a process of

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4 Contrary to Horkheimer and Adorno, however, who saw the demise of bourgeois culture under capitalism as part of the Enlightenment's tragic self-undoing, i.e., the retreat of reason back into myth, Habermas' approach is much more aligned with modern republican and liberal-democratic ideals of the public sphere. This idealized notion of the bourgeois public sphere has been criticized from various standpoints [see Calhoun (1992)]. These include (post)marxist, feminist, and socialist (Negt and Kluge, 1993) critiques.

5 For a comprehensive historical overview of these and debates relating to the fear of propaganda in the US, see Gary (1999).

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6 Besides its brief actualization in 18th century Europe, for Habermas the public sphere thus mostly remained an ideal, one of the Enlightenment's crown achievements held back only by historical forces running into the opposite direction of progress. An often heard critique of this account is that, by holding on to the 'historical truth' of the public sphere in the face of its thwarted reality in capitalist society, Habermas' account runs the danger of becoming merely a 'mythic town square in the sky' [this phrase is by Stanley Aronowitz cited in Robbins (1993, p. 4)].

7 As Koivisto and Valiverronen (1996: p. 18; see also Hansen, 1993) note, the translation of *Öffentlichkeit* as 'public sphere' is unfortunate because it reifies what is better seen as an aspect or dynamic quality of practices. Ironically, the term English 'publicity' does not fit precisely because of its associations with advertising and public relations.

8 While highly critical of Habermas' consensus-oriented model, Mouffe (1999) equally distinguishes between adversaries (agonism) and enemies (antagonism) in order to differentiate democratically legitimate from illegitimate forms of conflict (Davies, 2021, p. 153).

fragmentation, insulation, and competition. Together, these outline the unique pathology of today's digital public sphere, according to Habermas.

Throughout these reflections it is clear that Habermas relies on the same interpretative framework as his original work on the bourgeois public sphere. This also shows by his consistent use of similar qualifications of the public sphere as 'semi-' 'pseudo-, 'quasi-', and 'sham-'. In both cases, the language is one of corruption, distortion, and deception. As Habermas (1991, p. 171, my emphasis) writes in his earlier work: 'The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere *in appearance only*'. Throughout the book, the roughly equivalent adjectives 'pseudo-' (7 occurrences), 'semi-' (12 occurrences), and 'sham-' (2 occurrences) are typically used in descriptions of how the bourgeois idea of the public sphere has slowly but steadily been eroded by the mass media. It seems that social media merely represent yet another stage in this overall development, even when Habermas leaves open the possibility that the process may be reversed (2022).

His recurrent use of 'pseudo' in describing the 'pseudo-publics' of the mass media follows the conventional definition of *pseud-* as.

(1) False: spurious, (2) temporary or substitute formation similar to (a specified thing), (3) resembling, isomeric with, or related to (Merriam-Webster).

The pseudo-public sphere is a *false appearance of, substitutes for*, yet therefore also still somehow *resembles* a more 'genuine' public sphere. This conventional meaning largely follows its philosophical one. Taking Plato's famous example of the Sophists as the false heirs to philosophy. As *pseudo*-philosophers, the Sophists *pretend* to the position of philosopher,[9] claiming it by way of resemblance and similarity, while undermining what it essentially means to be a philosopher – which for Plato is the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself, rather than as a rhetorical means to acquire influence, public status, or wealth, as the Sophists did (Cassin, 2017).

Apart from Habermas, the term 'pseudo' is often used to imagine the problematic relation between the public sphere and new media technologies and industries. A year before the publication of Habermas' book on the transformation of the public sphere, Boorstin (1992 [1962]) published *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. Its overall outlook is quite similar to Habermas' critique of the commodified public sphere, and both have recourse to the language of the 'pseudo' in order to describe their object of concern. Six years later, in 1967, Guy Debord would publish his infamous tract on what he called the 'society of the spectacle' where, as the first thesis forcefully states, 'All that once was directly lived has become mere representation'. Throughout Debord's work, the term 'pseudo' occurs 40 times and everywhere it is used to denounce the deceptive and illusory nature of the spectacle, its incessant creation of 'pseudo-needs,' 'pseudo-goods,' 'pseudo-use,' and 'pseudo-joy'.

Like Debord (albeit from a very different cultural and political stance), Boorstin (1992 [1962], p. 3) denounced the flood of

'pseudo-events' that people were increasingly exposed to through the news and entertainment media, as having created a 'thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life'.[10] By pseudo-events he means those events or facts staged in advance and designed to be circulated publicly, or what we would now call PR. Examples are interviews with celebrities, political speeches and rallies, product launches, and so on. For Boorstin (1992 [1962], p. 34), these pseudo-events must be distinguished from propaganda. Whereas the latter offers an 'appealing falsehood' that is reductive and emotionally appealing, pseudo-events offer an ambiguous truth that is complex and demands interpretation; moreover, it is driven by a desire to be aroused and informed' on the part of the consumer.[11] A pseudo-event thus revolves around the production and dissemination of a true (but contingent) piece of 'interesting' information, rather than around a lie, as does propaganda. As such it more closely resembles what Frankfurt (2005) calls 'bullshit' as a distinct genre of discourse lacking even a minimal orientation toward truth, as well as what Ellul (1973 [1965], p. 15) calls 'pre-propaganda' as 'creating ambiguities, reducing prejudices, and spreading images, apparently without purpose'.

These older forms of ambiguous 'pseudo-communication' (Moran, 1979) are resurfacing in new digital guises (including digitally homegrown conspiracy narratives like Pizzagate and QAnon discussed below). In her research on the role of fake news sites spreading misinformation in Spain, for example, Sampio and Carratalá (2022, p. 1) define as online 'pseudo-media' those 'websites that mimic conventional media to offer partisan content based on alternative facts'. Similarly, online misinformation researcher DiResta (2019) revisits Boorstin's notion of the 'pseudo-event' to think about the emergence of deepfake images and videos as well as other advanced forms of online misinformation as forging their own 'pseudo-realities' [see Garber (2016)]. The latter term is inspired by Lippmann's (1997 [1922], p. 20) concept of the 'pseudo-environment' to describe how people construct their own models of reality, summarized in the idea that people 'live in the same world, but [they] think and feel in different ones'. Lippmann was already acutely aware of the growing role of the mass-media in shaping behavior in the real world based on those 'fictions,' similarly to how QAnon has been shown to use game mechanics and 'fictioning' techniques in their participatory worldbuilding efforts (de Zeeuw and Gekker, 2023). This once more raises the question of how we could 'fit' those practices into existing 'digital public sphere' frameworks, to which I now turn.

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9 I use the term 'pretend' here and below in its double meaning, as a 'making appear as if' but also in the older, competitive and agonistic sense of a 'pretender' as a (false) claimant to some right or status position ('pretender,' Online Etymology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=pretender).

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10 Later canonical texts on the undermining of the public sphere by the alien logic of the mass media and the US entertainment complex include Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985). For the continuity from earlier critiques of mass-media to social media, see Morris (2021).

11 In Chapter 8 of *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1994 [1967]) engages with Boorstin's notion of pseudo-events. He castigates Boorstin for not having understood the *totalizing* and *intrinsic* tendency of capitalist society towards the spectacle, by falsely treating it as mere excess that can in principle be restored. Or as Debord puts it: 'Boorstin describes the excesses of a world which has become foreign to us as if they were excesses foreign to our world' (Thesis 199).

3 (Not) a public sphere?

Various scholars have responded to the shifting conditions and constellations of publicness as a result of platformization, e.g., by reconceptualizing it as a *globalized* public sphere (Cosentino, 2020), a *paranoid* public sphere (Beckman, 2022), a *post-truth* public sphere (Melley, 2024), or even an *anti*-public sphere (Davis, 2021). Each of these adjectives forego some normative dimensions of the public sphere while retaining others. They can be seen as attempts to close the gap between entrenched idea(l)s of the public sphere and really-existing platforms as the newly hegemonic space of communicative interaction. Firstly, as Jodi Dean notes, the idea of the public sphere is historically linked to the nation state, so to refer to a *global* public sphere requires a rethinking of that (geo)political context and the historical baggage it carries. Secondly, by 'paranoid' Beckman centers the absence of trust and civic reciprocity that the public sphere typically requires. Thirdly, the epistemic commitment to truth is obviously a key feature of the public sphere, so to refer to a 'post-truth public sphere,' like Marres's 'truthless public sphere' appears oxymoronic. Finally, the 'anti-public sphere' refers to those practices that deploy forms of communication that explicitly go against those of the public sphere, which Davis (2021) discusses in the context of online reactionary movements, but which also apply to the instances of 'post-truth conspiracism' discussed below. This is not to say these accounts are incoherent or wrong; rather, insofar as they self-consciously stage their own contradictory formulations, they attest to the issues with imagining the Internet as a public sphere.[12]

While helpful, these attempts to redefine the public sphere and its publics forego the more principled question whether it is even still meaningful to think about social media in terms of a public sphere or as involving publics at all. The purpose here is not to engage in terminological nit-picking or to demand conceptual purity. Instead, I aim to show that something more significant is at stake in these attempts to retain the idea(l) of digital publicness, namely how these same idea(l)s are being weaponized in a digital milieu that increasingly resembles a 'theater of operations' more than a 'public sphere' (Masco and Wedeen, 2024), and as such could end up exacerbating the problems they seek to address.

To engage with this more principled question of the status of the Internet as a public sphere, I return to similar debates in media studies in the early 2000s, specifically Jodi Dean's critique of communicative capitalism and Tiziana Terranova's account of the Internet as obeying the logic of 'information warfare.' Dean (2003) published an essay with the revealing title 'Why the Net is not a Public Sphere,' in which she argues that the notion of the Internet as a public sphere is part of 'an ideology of publicity in the service of communicative capitalism' (98).

Dean (2002, p. 2) claims there is something intuitively appealing to imaging the internet as a public sphere, which 'sometimes seems [like] a machinery produced by the very ideals inspiring democracy.' As an ideology tethered to early democratic visions of Web 1.0 and 2.0, the notion of a digital public sphere naturalizes and thus legitimates this new stage of capitalism whose main currency is publicity, and where all socio-cultural and political engagement (even resistance and critique) becomes commodified and is fed back into the system.[13] In an analysis bordering on the conspiratorial, the Internet's larger strategic purpose was thus to 'make *appear* as a public sphere what is clearly the material basis of the global economy' (Dean, 2003, p. 100, my emphasis). Once again, we find the language of the *pseudo* – appearance, resemblance, substitution, and deception – being used to understand the misalignment between the notion of the Internet as a public sphere and its 'actual' underlying reality and purpose.

Similarly, in her book *Network Culture* published a year later, Terranova (2004, p. 4) looks to tackle the fundamental question of the Internet's status as a public sphere. She asks: 'Is it still possible to talk of the media as a "public sphere" in an age of mass propaganda, media oligopoly and information warfare?'. Rather than from the perspective of communicative capitalism, Terranova instead zooms in on the Internet's Cold War inheritance, the way digital technologies and infrastructures structurally reproduce the antagonistic logic of information and 'cyber' warfare. This ultimately leads her to answer her own question in the negative: 'The current public sphere is not a sphere of mediation between state and civil society, but the site of a permanent conflict, informed by strategies of media warfare' (2004, p. 134). In this domain 'What is important is not to convince public opinion of a truth that is demonstrated on the basis of logical arguments as the manipulation of an informational milieu' (pp. 140–141). More recently, Davies (2019, 2021) has also argued that social media give rise to a new 'post-liberal' mode of dispute that, in contrast to a consensus-oriented public sphere, adopts a 'non-representational template of warfare' (2021, p. 44).[14]

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12 Similarly, researchers continue to think about online sociality and communicative interaction in terms of 'publics', again adding various adjectives to specify its changing status under new socio-technical conditions, from *networked* publics (boyd, 2010), *affective* publics (Papacharissi, 2015), *ad hoc* publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2011) to *refracted* (Abidin, 2021), *personal* (Schmidt, 2014) and even *post* publics (Zelenkauskaite, 2022). Beyond simply marking a transition from a relatively homogeneous and centralized media ecosystem to new modes of decentralized participation, these new 'publics' equally display some of the same tensions as in the case of the public spheres outlined above.

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13 Besides merely the ideological counterpart to communicative capitalism, Dean also identified a crucial tension between the hyper-participatory logic of a buzzing online culture, on the one hand, and its framing as a digital public sphere, on the other. Faced with an unruly and cacophonous 'net culture' in the 1990s that was perceived (by large media corporations and governments) as being *too* inclusive and suffering from a carnivalesque *excess* of participatory publicity, this ideology reproduced the hidden biases of liberal public sphere imaginaries. Dean describes how early commentators and legislators were quick to call for stronger government regulation to make the web safer and more trustworthy for commercial exchange. In these cases, the notion of the Internet as a public sphere served a reactionary purpose, containing the polysemic multiplicity that the web also afforded. For Dean, this opens up the possibility of a truly democratic and common mode of digital publicity.

14 There exists a long history of thinking about digital media in relation to warfare, most notably by Virilio et al. (1999). Kittler compared the understanding of modern media in terms of a public sphere to the Lacanian mirror stage (i.e., as 'imaginary'), whereas the framework of war marked the hardly accessible 'real' of media, its 'martial *a priori*'. According to Kittler, the archaic-humanist notions of 'communication' and 'representation' assumed by the public sphere model are unfit to properly think the logic of (digital) media technologies on their own terms (4).

Dean and Terranova thus offer two alternative imaginaries (and genealogies) of the internet that is fundamentally at odds with its status as a public sphere. Throughout the last two decades, these two paradigms – of communicative capitalism and information warfare – have converged, to shape the kind of platformized environments we currently inhabit. However, the problem here is *not* that these paradigms ultimately come to *replace* or fully *erode* that of the Internet as a public sphere. This would merely repeat the persistent narrative of a public sphere in decline. Instead, my concern is what happens when these paradigms collude, to create the kind of ambiguous epistemic milieu we are now confronted with, and that we still need to find better ways to describe than 'post-truth'. It is this collusion that inevitably muddles what for Habermas marks a crucial distinction between *communicative* and *strategic* action. Rather than oriented toward mutual understanding or consensus, 'strategic action is social action oriented to success in influencing the actions of other rational actors (Johnson, 1991, p. 183). If we are living in a 'post-truth' era, it is not because an already elusive public sphere has finally given way but because, the latter has been plugged into the operational logics of platforms, compounding a new regime of publicity based on an inconspicuous epistemology of influence. The next section takes a closer look at conspiracy narratives like Pizzagate and QAnon as exploiting the twisted dual logic of this pseudo-public sphere.

4 The bad faith of post-truth conspiracism

Conspiratorial discourse or 'reason' (Marasco, 2016) has been known to possess key features incompatible with liberal understandings of the public sphere, linking it to populist and authoritarian tendencies and broader economic and cultural changes (Szrot, 2021), going back to what Hofstadter (1964) famously called the 'paranoid style' in US politics during the Cold War. Charting the rise of conspiracism and the role of social media therein, Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) differentiate between 'old' and 'new' conspiracism to make sense of how conspiracy culture changed in the post-truth era. Whereas older conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination or 9/11 still offered alternative explanations of historical events and were oriented toward truth and political action, they claim, new conspiracism no longer has any historical referent, acts through a combination of bare assertion and insidious questioning, and does not seek to establish and justify alternative knowledge claims. However, by drawing this distinction Muirhead and Rosenblum betray a similar nostalgia for an earlier era of 'genuine' publicness as 'post-truth' discourse, which is curious given that conspiracy theories are typically excluded from idealized descriptions of a lost public sphere as part of the latter's 'boundary policing'.[15] While their distinction between old and new conspiracism is helpful to understand the populist rhetoric of Trump and other authoritarian leaders spewing misinformation on social media, it seems less applicable to 'bottom-up' and digitally

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homegrown conspiracy movements like Pizzagate and QAnon, which seamlessly mix clue-finding, deep hermeneutics, alternative explanation and collective political action with the gamified and 'spectacular' tactics afforded by social media platforms that characterize the new-conspiracist rhetoric.

Both Pizzagate and QAnon were born on the notorious online imageboard 4chan, before traveling to more mainstream platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Decoding cryptic references to 'pizza' in the DNC email leaks as 'code' for a global satanic pedophile ring featuring Hilary Clinton, Pizzagate started as a collective game of conspiratorial clue-finding, before evolving into a new form of 'post-truth protest' that conjured the powers of 'meme magic' and conspiratorial 'bullshit' (Tuters et al., 2018) to influence the 2016 presidential elections. Two years later, QAnon kicked off with several cryptic messages posted on 4chan by Q, spawning a vibrant interpretative community of dedicated Q-anons. Q claimed to be a government insider leaking information about a hidden war waged by Trump against the deep state. The authorship of Q across platforms is contested, and likely multiple. As the first of many predictions (none of which came to pass), Q announced that Hilary Clinton and other prominent Democrats will soon be arrested for their role in the plot. Materializing in 'an inter-linked, pick-and-mix online ecology of information, opinions, facts, narratives, and claims' (Happer et al., 2019, p. 4), what might have started as a form of trolling, LARPing or an 'alternate reality game' (ARG) became a full-fledged conspiracy movement, drawing in more and more 'true believers' and even elected US officials. It also attracted ex US-military general Michael Flynn, Trump whisperer Steve Bannon, and father and son Jim and Ron Watkins (the owners of 8chan/8kun to which Q-anons migrated after being banned from 4chan). All of them have been suspected of pushing the QAnon narrative for their own strategic, personal, and financial advantage, as the HBO documentary miniseries *Q: Into the Storm* (2019) shows. Yet other sources claim Russia, Iran, and/or China amplified QAnon narratives in an attempt to influence the 2020 US presidential election (Euractiv, 2020).

Rather than making a distinction between new and old conspiracism, Pizzagate and QAnon must be distinguished from older instances of conspiracism by considering the changing media environments in which they operate. This means, as I have suggested, looking at these environments as *pseudo*-public spheres that weaponize precisely those epistemic and normative expectations that existing Internet imaginaries rely on. Adherents of QAnon, for example, evoke the norms of the public sphere (based on ideas of democratic participation, inclusion, representation, transparency, accountability, and truth) while simultaneously exploiting this imaginary for ulterior strategic and political motives, mobilizing and mimicking the operational logics underlying today's global digital infrastructures.

In his account of the 'post-truth public sphere,' Melley (2024, pp. 140–141, my emphasis) similarly notes that conspiracy theorists and their detractors (e.g., journalists, NGOs, fact checkers) actually *share* a commitment to the kind of public sphere-imaginaries I have been describing here:

'Both conspiracy theorists and debunkers often act in defense of democracy—on the one side, against the irrationality of sovereign secrets, and on the other side, against the irrationality of subversive conspiracy mongering. Both approaches aim to restore public reason with therapeutic demystification. This *common commitment to an*

ideal of the public sphere helps to explain why so many conspiracy narratives resolve through a fantasy of publication'.

However, faulty or 'bullshitty,' conspiracy narratives still assume a commitment to truth, transparency, and public accountability that more cynical instances of propaganda do not, even when in cases like Pizzagate and QAnon these lines become completely blurred. Obsessed with leaks, whistleblowers, and uncovering secret plots, rather than a straightforward instance of 'new conspiracism', QAnon draws from those very expectations of publicity that defenders of a healthy public sphere mobilize against it.

Rather than having done away with all epistemic justification, as Muirhead and Rosenblum claim, the peculiarity and success of conspiracy narratives like Pizzagate and QAnon (as well as other forms of mis- and disinformation) hinges not so much on the *absence* or *distortion* of the public sphere, as it does on its persistence *as an imaginary* in a digital milieu shaped by the adversarial logic of information warfare. Unable to distinguish between naive believers and malicious manipulators weaponizing such beliefs, conspiracy movements like QAnon operate on a kind of Sartrean 'bad faith', *pretending* the Internet is a public sphere while operating – on the level of media know-how and technical skill in manipulating information, disseminating memes, or 'hacking' perception – as if it is not. However, such a straightforward reading of online conspiracism as simply acting in *bad* faith is complicated by the fact that what indeed *appears* as bad faith in light of the public sphere is actually enacted in *good* faith when seen from the perspective of communicative capitalism and information warfare. Here, the status of belief – and online public speech as an expression of belief (including conspiratorial beliefs) – is at once displaced by and incorporated into an alternative model of communication that sees words and images as weapons to reorient users' perception and sense of reality. It is not only that critics mistakenly take conspiratorial beliefs to be 'factual' rather than 'symbolic' (Singh, 2024); it is that the function and status of language and belief is radically displaced by this operational understanding of what it means to speak or act in public. It is this model that online trolls and other 'anons' enact and possess an intimate understanding of, based on their engagement with online environments.

5 Conclusion

What I have referred to as the pseudo-public sphere is characterized by a split in how the Internet continues to be *imagined as* – and as such also performatively enacts – a public sphere, while simultaneously obeying the imperatives of communicative capitalism and information warfare. It is neither to one nor the other, but to their inconspicuous mixing to the point of a total ambiguity that we should look to account for current post-truth dynamics.

This means that in the age of *peak* or even *post* social media, what is at stake is no longer the decline or loss of the public sphere, but rather its curious persistence and *operationalization as an imaginary* in digital environments. This raises several questions. By continuing to imagine the Internet as a public sphere, do we uphold our highest standards of what it *should* aspire to be? Or do we thereby facilitate its strategic adoption by bad faith actors?

In this article I showed how the weaponization of online public sphere imaginaries by a new operational regime of publicity complicates attempts to recuperate the idea(l) of a digital public sphere as a diagnostic tool or solution for a 'distorted' information landscape, and may even inadvertently reproduce the post-truth media dynamics it opposes. The language of pollution (Phillips and Milner, 2021), disorder, or disease ('Infodemic') of an otherwise 'healthy' online public sphere, by holding out the promise of a restoration of a more authentic mode of public engagement, not only obscures but ultimately exacerbates? the problem, insofar as its feeds back and plays into the 'bad good faith' of post-truth conspiracy movements like QAnon.

This conclusion suggests that, paradoxically, only a genuine (but always uneasy) reckoning with this bleak vision of social media may also offer a way out of this double bind. Doing so, and by way of provocation, I turn to the slogan that sits on top of 4chan's infamous /b/ Random board, which reads: 'The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact'. In an anonymous environment of trolling and dissimulative identity play governed by Poe's Law,[16] this slogan serves as a piece of pedagogical advice warning users to let go of any expectation of authenticity, trust, or truthfulness and instead to presume all messages to be fabricated and false, lest they be trolled, doxed, or otherwise deceived by their fellow anons.

Assuming this advice is taken to heart by 4chan's anonymous users (or *not*, as this liar's paradox would warrant), how would this attitude impact the effects of online dis- and misinformation, and can we even still make the distinction between different 'kinds' of information based on their truthfulness or authentic intention? By contrast, it seems that online environments that do rely on and cultivate the expectation of authenticity and truthfulness are particularly vulnerable to conspiracy theories and other forms of misinformation, insofar as they need to be *believed* to be successful. Would 4chan's ethos of cynical unbelief – based on its cyber-separationist ethos that sees the Internet as a virtual world apart in which conventional rules do not apply (de Zeeuw and Tuters, 2020) – be better positioned to inoculate its users against such misinformation? What happens when digital environments are imagined more as informational theaters of war than public spheres, with the troll as the protagonist of such a generalized antagonism?

On the one hand, it would be naive to think that conspiracy narratives or other forms of mis/disinformation are effective or dangerous when they are genuinely 'believed' and only therefore acted on, as already suggested above with regard to the precarious status of (online expressions of) belief, be it 'factual' or 'symbolic.' As Žižek (1989) and others have shown in their analysis of contemporary cynicism, ideology can be highly effective without belief, and even more so. For social rituals or other patterns of behavior to be effective often relies on a kind of pseudo-belief, or a relegation of belief to a generalized other (Pfaller, 2003).

Perhaps the unique power of Pizzagate and QAnon is precisely that they could freely germinate within 4chan's dissimulative milieu

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16   Poe's law refers to a famous early Internet dictum that challenges users' ability to distinguish between genuine belief and a parody of belief in a digital environment lacking most relevant contextual clues (Aikin, 2013).

without any epistemic constraints, A/B-testing the affective efficacy of different ideas and seeing what sticks to the memetic wall (e.g., 'Trump against the deep state,' and 'Epstein did not kill himself'), before seeking a broader dissemination of those ideas on mainstream platforms and their 'normie' publics, as happened with QAnon (de Zeeuw et al. 2020). On the other hand, if conspiracy narratives like QAnon had not 'leaked' from 4chan's ludic milieu – where only 'fools' take any statement to be true – into the mainstream domain where expectations of epistemic fidelity and authenticity persist, there might not be as much associated harm, e.g., the role of QAnon in the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.

Finally, in debates on 'post-truth' a lot of ideological labor is performed by the hyphen, as it suggests a *transformation* of the *same entity* (the public sphere). An alternative to this would be to look at the much more disjunctive and parallel developments of competing regimes of publicity and their conflicting epistemologies that shape online environments in different ways. Here, the rise of social media would not so much signal a transformation *of* the public sphere as it imposes its own historical lineages relatively independent from it. This more nuanced view prevents reifying the public sphere as a unified domain that merely changes in appearance over time (e.g., from newspapers and television to the Internet). It also helps thinking more 'hegemonically' about the interaction between these different systems (public, commercial, military, and intelligence) on an equal footing. In that sense, we can still learn something from 4chan's users in terms of their intuitive sense of how digital environments operate in new, *pseudo*-public ways. For everything else, however, as anyone who has ever visited 4chan would probably agree, we definitely need to look elsewhere.

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