An Alternative to Facts

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In a January 22, 2017 interview on NBC's *Meet the Press*, Kellyanne Conway, senior advisor to President Donald Trump, introduced a phrase that would gain almost instant notoriety. Conway was responding to the heavy criticisms of White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's claims that the crowd in attendance for the 2017 presidential inauguration "was the largest audience to ever witness an inauguration—period" (Hunt). When Chuck Todd, the moderator of the program, accused the day-old administration of putting out a "provable falsehood," Conway's parry and riposte was that what had been offered were not untruths, but "alternative facts" (Meet the Press, NBC News). The alternate rhetorical universe of skepticism about the media (and mediation) that this coinage inaugurated has had an implausibly long after-life with even more implausible consequences. Popular language about visual media in particular has become possessed by suspicions about boutique facts and deep (and cheap) fakes. What was once self-evident has been consigned to a conspiracy of realism.

Transparency, objectivity, evidence, and fact, all terms that served as clay pigeons for critical theoretical target shooting, are now under fire from a position of power rather than critique. Images have been largely liberated from their referents and the "dream of

verisimilitude," once the prompt for more sensitive genealogies of media that debunked the

supposed convergence of the real and representation, appears like a virtuous fantasy from a

simpler time to which we would happily return (Sterne 4).[1] In his post-mortem of the 1968

protests and in response to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's optimism about the native radicality

of electronic media, Jean Baudrillard inveighed against a mass media that had turned "the

political" into a "category of *fait divers*" precisely for the sake of depoliticizing politics (283).

Through centralized, "vectorized" broadcasts of people marching in the streets, "riots," and

unrest, mass media falsified the clamorous heterogeneity of politics by making it news. The

news is now denounced as fake. The question is why this is—rather obviously—not a good

thing.

Nostalgia for a reliably untrustworthy mass media signals a crisis in the optimism of

negativity. What are artists and theorists of media to do when the mistrust in a belief in

unmediated facts that was the trademark of a critical project is now the playbook for state-

issued mis-misinformation? Even Theodor Adorno, the brand manager of negativity, knew that

"without hope there is no good" (276). Many, however, shared Chuck Todd's exasperation,

believing that the aerial photographs of the inauguration did indeed "tell a very different

story," implying that they documented a reality that was self-evident (Meet the Press 1/22/17).

Spicer and Conway, on the other hand, both contended that satellite and overhead images, as

well as public transit data from the Washington D.C. WMATA, were rigged by mass media

outlets to indicate a lackluster turnout when compared to previous inaugurations.[2] When it

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[1] Sterne's book is specifically about audio compression, but its insights about dominant techno-progressive beliefs is applicable to all new media.

[2] In the case of transit ridership numbers on the day of the inauguration, there were fewer opportunities for "alternatives" (although attempts at creative counting were certainly made).

came to the images evaluated by crowd scientists that became the conversational flashpoint, their power to define the fact of the event was both certain and up for interpretation. What emerged as a result were two competing, internally discordant beliefs about what images and media more generally do.

The images were seen simultaneously as proof per se of what they depicted. At the same time they were treated as highly manipulable instruments of deception whose truth was tied to protocols of fact production. Of course, in order to believe in the latter, one would also have to believe in the former, as images need to be accorded a special relationship to *the real* in order to worry about their ability to mislead. Conway's "alternative facts," if they can be taken as more than an absurdism, rely on the belief in the unique evidentiary status of "photographic" images and a faith in mass media to capture an external real, while also suggesting that not only could there be multiple, potentially legitimate protocols for creating and reading images, but that those protocols could yield multiple, irreconcilable facts.

Of course, the real problem was that the facts had been chosen in advance of their evidence. Initially, the claim that it was the largest inaugural crowd in history was floated with the proviso that "no one had numbers," only later turning to the images in an attempt to shore up earlier assertions. That the "alternative facts" were not actually constructed from the photographs themselves is perhaps best indicated by the administration's decision to shut down the National Park Service's Twitter account after it retweeted side-by-side images of the 2009 and 2017 crowds, seeking to suppress the very evidence that would become the crux of the eventual argument. Nevertheless, there is a feeling that we want to believe in images and the outlets that disseminate them, if only to have a stable object to critique.

Beyond this bungling sideshow of political legerdemain a new indeterminacy in the status of mediated facts (that is to say, all facts) lurks beneath our desire for faith in them. In October 2019, California passed AB 730, anti-deepfake legislation that bans the distribution of manipulated "image or audio or video recording" of political candidates that "would falsely appear to a reasonable person to be authentic" (California Legislative Information). If such a thing as a "reasonable person" exists, it appears that what it designates is someone with a healthy commitment to the stability of the signifier and signified, image and referent. The bill's author, Assemblyman Marc Berman, commented that the danger of deepfakes is that they "distort the truth, making it extremely challenging to distinguish real events and actions from fiction and fantasy" (Berman). As we know from *The X-Files*, "the truth is out there," and images should be legally bound to verifying it without the interference from pesky artificial neural networks. But the real fantasy of such legislation is in its yearning for a long-evaporated ontology of images that trusts pictures to capture rather than produce their truths.

In 1935 Ludwik Fleck, the microbiologist and historian of science credited as the forerunner to Thomas Kuhn, already noted that "both thinking and facts are changeable, if only because changes in thinking manifest themselves in changed facts" (Fleck 50). The forms of mediation from which facts are built have always been procedural in nature. They require a host of changing protocols for producing something like an image, recording, or video, including selections of framing, duration, depth of field, dodging and burning, envelopes, compression, and an infinite array of other technical steps. Deepfakes and alternative facts have simply made the operational nature of the media on which truths rely impossible to ignore. And yet our ontological default setting remains.

This was perhaps best captured in April 2019 when a supernova of stories about the "first image of a blackhole" spread across news outlets. The fuzzy orange donut that supposedly depicts the super massive black hole at the center of the Messier Galaxy 87 is certainly beautiful to look at. But what does it mean to create a picture *of* a black hole? The image was the result of coordinated observations from a global network of telescopes collectively called the Event Horizon Telescope using Very Long Baseline Interferometry (Lutz). Data collected from these many telescopes were then algorithmically sorted and synchronized, after which a visual representation that could be called a "picture" was ultimately assembled. This is an image of a vast series of protocols, not an object. And appropriately, as if a brilliant bit of NASA-funded metacritical media theory, the celestial object to which the image corresponds is definitionally impossible to depict.

In case it requires clarification, I am not creating any kind of equivalence between NASA images and Trump administration press conferences. What I am suggesting is that the politics of media, in practice and theory, is a question of protocols. Our most pressing social, political, and environmental (if these things can truly be separated) exigencies are now defined by representational practices that attempt to capture vast networks of processes through media technical processes that are themselves vast networks. The fakes may have gotten deeper, but the operations from which they arise remain real.

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