Chapter 4: Trump's Digital Carnival: Media and Multidirectional Discourse

In November 2015, Donald Trump retweeted a fake graphic about African-American crime statistics (Hawley 2017; Sommerlad 2019), a favored 'information' style for the far right and white supremacists online from the neo-Nazi Internet forum Stormfront to the more mainstream alt-right publications. This wasn't a one off; Trump frequently retweeted alt-right, white supremacist, and other extremist users both before and after his presidency. On January 22, 2016, Trump retweeted a user with the handle "@WhiteGenocideTM," making a joke about Jeb Bush (Kopan 2016). It is well known that 'white genocide' was a far-reaching keyword for the alt-right online that would frequently argue that multiculturalism, diversity, and immigration are in fact a conspiracy to decimate the 'white race' (see, *inter alia*, Deem 2019; Ganesh 2020). These demographic conspiracies have long been a staple of white supremacist media, from the print work studied by Abby Ferber (1998) to the web cultures that scholars such as Jessie Daniels (2009) and Les Back (2002) have analyzed. Trump also retweeted Britain First's propaganda about violence and vandalism perpetrated by Muslims, which had nothing to do with Muslims or migrants (Sommerlad 2019). On July 2, 2016, Trump's account posted a picture mocking Hillary Clinton's campaign, embellishing the image with a red Star of David and text reading, "Most Corrupt Candidate Ever!" When challenged, a Trump staffer insisted that the six-pointed star was actually meant to represent a "Sherriff's badge" star, not the Star of David despite the background featuring $100 bills re-inforcing this antisemitic trope (see Sommerlad 2019). Trump did not get much better during the presidency; in June 2020, Trump even retweeted a video of a supporter shouting "White Power" before later deleting it (BBC News 2020).

We do not present these retweets as evidence that Trump is some kind of white supremacist. These retweets represent a fundamental aspect of the Trump carnival: the role of *multidirectional discourse.* As we discussed in the introduction, multidirectional discourse is central to Bakhtin's ideas about the carnival, which he imagines as a townquare with a cacophony of voices that disrupts the polite, aristocratic order of Medieval society. Reading Rabelais, it is doubtful that Bakhtin ever conceived of the multidirectional discourse that the contemporary American media sphere affords today. These retweets prefigure the point we wish to make in this chapter: that the carnival square is not necessarily a *physical* space in which the carnival takes place. Thanks to digital media systems, and social media in particular, we see that the carnival square is not fixed in space or time, but rather is dispersed across both dimensions. If we are to discuss a Trump carnival, then we

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must conceive of it as a *digital carnival*, one that brings a multiplicity of voices to the fore.

As the carnival fool, the trickster that brings the carnival together, Donald Trump's retweeting of white supremacists reveals to us how carnivalesque politics work in the light of Trump's transgression of fundamental political rules. Not being openly supportive of white supremacists has been one of these rules at least since 1965—this strategy is not undertaken simply to "own the libs" or to post a "joke". Rather, it is a strategy that has normalized a far-right and white supremacist ideology and it depends on resonance and repetition from thousands of accounts on social media platforms and alternative media sources. As is the case with the African-American crime 'statistics,' most of the information in these tweets is a fabrication, a half-truth, or simply emotive clickbait. Trump's retweets such as these systematically integrate far-right rhetoric in the mainstream (see Miller-Idriss 2018, 2020). This tweet, and Trump's subsequent refusal to delete it or admit that it was false, legitimized alt-right voices as part of the multidirectional discourse of his campaign and consequently, the American political landscape. The "shameless normalizing" of the far-right discourse (Wodak 2019) was not the only new feature of the Trump campaign when compared to his rivals and predecessors. Ganesh (2020) developed a theory of how, specifically on Twitter, decentralized alt-right publics and politicians, including Donald Trump, attempt to 'document' anti-whiteness, legitimize white supremacist voices, and reinforce their audiences' perception of the righteousness of their indignation. Other scholars have focused on how Trump performs classic agenda-setting maneuvers through his use of social media. Responding to the veracity of these claims, such as showing that the 'statistics' Trump retweeted were completely false, plays into his hands by making his transgressions a spectacle for all, only reinforcing the perception that the fact-checkers are biased, controlled by the leftists like the rest of the 'mainstream media.'

Our perspective expands on Bakhtin's ideas about the structure of carnival, but provides a pathway to bring white supremacist ideology into dialogue with the complex sociotechnical systems that characterize the contemporary media arrangement (Bennett and Livingston 2018). What is crucial to remember is that Trump, perhaps more than any other American presidential candidate, harnessed a dispersed, active, and extreme set of voices with whom his transgressions not only *resonated* but whom he also encouraged, legitimized, and licensed—across a wide range of platforms—to engage in these transgressions in turn. It is in this complex, transmedia system that Trump's carnival operates. This provided significant advantages that enabled the carnival not to be a gathering in a square, but one that stretched across space with media and digital technology. Furthermore, instead of the ephemerality of carnival, these technologies sustained the Trump

carnival over time. Indeed, it was a changing media system and new technologies —particularly social media—that enabled Trump's carnivalesque politics.

But it is important to remember that we take a transmedia perspective on the Trump carnival, which means that while social media and far-right platforms played a crucial role in creating a carnival square stretched across space and time, the TV-broadcasters and the mainstream press were also caught up in the carnival. Through this complex media system, Trump was able to broadcast his transgressions and large audiences were able to partake in their own form on social media while broadcasters and the press continued to amplify his transgressive style and far-right ideology. As we discuss in this chapter, this served to normalize Trump's far-right ideology as well as legitimize his broader narratives of white victimhood. The digital carnival would not have been possible without the extensive changes that took place in the American media system primarily due to the role of the Internet, social media, and alternative media. This chapter sets the stage for the Trump carnival by showing how carnivalesque multidirectional discourse defined political communication, emphasizing the role of social media and its implications for democracy as well as exposing important actors in the media system.

In this chapter, we situate the Trump carnival in the context of broader changes in the US media system, particularly the rise of far-right media outlets and the changing role of social media platforms. This topic itself would merit a book longer than this, so we are only able to provide an outline of some key features, particularly as they relate to the Trump carnival. First, we start by discussing the notion of marketplace in the carnival, its condition of heteroglossia, and the role of multidirectional discourse in a transmedia perspective. Second, we discuss the Trump carnival in the contemporary media system, outlining broad changes in the US media network and how they enabled an environment of transgression by incorporating a multiplicity of voices. We then discuss the idea of anonymity and the carnival mask in contemporary form as processes that normalize far-right discourse. Picking this up in the context of social media, we use trolling to illustrate how we can understand how the Trump carnival is a complex, transmedia phenomenon that enables the transgression of fundamental norms.

4.1 The Trump Carnival in the Market Square

Scholars have been discussing the challenges that traditional mass media have faced in recent years for some time (Esser and Pfetsch 2004; Bennett 2015a; Klimmt, Vorderer, and Ritterfeld 2007; Syvertsen 2003; Van Dijck and Poell 2015; Dahlgren 2003; Zhao 1997). Media's gatekeeping role and the role of the market

have been especially emphasized as issues that have contributed to the immense changes to the media ecologies around the world. In the context of this book, it is important to emphasize that traditional mass media no longer have a monologic or even dialogic discursive relationship with the audience. Instead, (political) communication is primarily characterized by multidirectional discourse (Lee 2014; Wolfe, Jones, and Baumgartner 2013).

As Yates (2019) notes, the 2016 campaign was a year of "democrazy" and was more emblematic of the politics of spectacle, and not a democratic process. She further notes that the media were fixated on the coverage of extreme, personalized candidates who created spectacles and employed demagoguery. The latter was deemed particularly dangerous even by the Founding Fathers (Ceaser 2007), while a number of scholars warned against it during the 20th century, even before the advent of social media (Luthin 1951). Richard Hofstadter's quote from 1963 is particularly prescient:

> The growth of the mass media of communication and their use in politics have brought politics closer to people than ever before and have made politics a form of entertainment in which spectators feel themselves involved. (Hofstadter 1963)

In a spectacle, social media have been instrumental in skewing information streams to the benefit of demagogues and anti-democratic, alt-right voices. Fears of a "media-driven republic, in which mass media will usurp the functions of political institutions in the liberal state" (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) have been around for a while, and most media scholars contend that the US has reached the fourth stage of mediatization—"when political and other social actors not only adapt to the media logic and the predominant news values, but also internalize these and, more or less consciously, allow the media logic and the standards of newsworthiness to become a built-in part of the governing processes" (Strömbäck 2008, pp. 239–240). Social media are crucial in the mediatization process and as such play a pivotal role in the functioning of the democratic process. However, as journalists have found with regard to YouTube (Bergen 2019) and revelations following the documents released by whistleblower Frances Haugen (eg. Zadrozny 2021), social media platforms were aware of polarization, radicalization, and the far right on their platforms, but developed incomplete solutions or brushed these problems aside, reflecting the faults of the US media ecology in general.

In the so-called post-truth world (Parmar 2012; Stewart et al. 2016; Mocanu et al. 2015), multidirectional discourse predominates, providing a platform for Trump's carnivalesque transgression. As Elliot noted:

> The function of 'official culture' reappears in the image of the 'authoritative discourse' or 'monologic discourse': a one-sided world that claims absolute truth. 'Dialogic discourse' like the image of carnival activity responds and moves [...] 'Multidirectional discourse,' meanwhile, resembles the ambivalent and subversive language of the marketplace, simultaneously debasing and renewing, revealing and hiding, selling and entertaining. (Elliot 1999, p. 133)

A carnivalesque understanding of multidirectional discourse is especially helpful for the re-conceptualization of modern media ecology in several ways. First, the notion of the marketplace is key here. The carnival framework is not only a reference to the level of interaction—the 'lowering' of the discourse, according to Bakhtin—but was especially emblematic of the Trump campaign. The notion of "coarse and raw" language (Bakhtin 2015, Janack 2006; Holloway and Kneale 2002)—curses, oaths, popular blazons, profanity—defines the carnival square (Bakhtin 2015). Stripping daily interaction from political correctness can be seen as an act against ideology and hierarchy, exactly as one would expect in a carnival environment. One should not, however, forget that the carnivalesque erasure of political correctness is not an emancipatory act, even though it is seen as such by the white cis majority. Rather, it is an act that reinforces hierarchy and the abjection that minorities face within and outside of carnival, the subject of the following chapter. While a certain level of political correctness has existed in the English language, at least since the English Reformation (Hughes 2011), it has been primarily aimed at reducing linguistic violence towards discriminated/minority groups (Cay 1998; Andrews 1996). With the billingsgate language of carnival, there is no room for the sensitivities of marginalized groups, while the ambivalence of laughter (Bakhtin 2015) and the polysemy of metaphors prevalent in carnival offer convenient excuses for dog-whistling (Moshin 2018): it was only a joke, why are you offended?

Second, carnival's marketplace foreshadows the growing commercialization tendencies in society and media consumption in particular. As Pickard (2019, 2016) notes, market forces coupled with accelerated advances in technology in the United States have decimated newsrooms and imperiled a democratic society that depends on professional journalism to inform the public. The commercialization of mass media, especially news media and the pursuit of viewership that translates into more advertising contracts and higher revenue, has had an especially profound effect on the media system. With publicity materials often substituting for content through native advertising practices, it is not always entirely clear whether a person is consuming 'legitimate' content or a marketing strategy. To Bakhtin, advertising is an important part of the multidirectional discourse, as

> it is not always possible to distinguish the tones and images of trade advertising from the advertising tones and images of the farce barker, a seller of medical herbs and an actor, a charlatan, a compiler of horoscopes at a fair. (Bakhtin 2015, p. 86)

One need just remember that one of Trump's major announcements concerning his *birther*[5] convictions transmuted into a presentation of his new Trump International Hotel Washington DC, which was dutifully reported on by the mass media for hours (Nelson 2016). The Trump persona, combining elements of both the businessman and the politician, caters to the carnivalesque understanding of ambivalence , while it is the ambiguity that makes it hard to distinguish between the provision of information and the peddling of goods.

Third, simultaneous "selling and entertaining" was especially visible when one accounts for the motivation behind major American news networks in the US giving Trump so much airtime. As the former CBS CEO, Les Moonves admitted in early 2016, "the money is rolling in and this is fun [...] bring it on, Donald. Keep going" (Greene 2018). Trump's campaign was entertaining, and entertainment sells. The high ratings of late-night shows, already a staple of American TV, and the convergence of celebrity and political journalism (Boydstun and Lawrence 2019) demonstrated that Trump navigated a multitude of channels that guaranteed him optimal coverage. Trump's campaign was not an example of dialogical discourse. His tweets, rallies, interviews, and political ads were amplified, refracted, and, most importantly, covered by all major TV networks, 'quality' and 'yellow' newspapers, and on social media, which together constituted a quintessential example of multidirectional multiplatform discourse. The transmedia nature of information is a useful lens through which to study the issue of multidirectional discourse. Media narratives follow a very complex transmedia route with constant cross-pollination (Gürel and Tığlı 2014; Jenkins 2010; Gambarato 2012). Verbal discourse from major television networks and high-circulation newspapers is often transformed by the audience on social networks, and sometimes visualized through memes, thus making social network users 'prosumers,' and not just passive consumers of content. Traditional media amplify narratives that are circulating on social media. Simultaneously, blogs reflect and refract TV narratives, creating a mutually reinforcing multiplatform discourse.

Another important issue relates to the documented algorithmic bias on social networks that favors racist and far-right content (Noble 2018) and may lead to self-radicalization. Social networks have been known to balance the popularity of certain accounts and groups of users despite their violation of community guidelines, and they have generally deployed piecemeal strategies and at times a relatively light touch on the far right (see Ganesh 2021, Diaz and Hecht Felella 2022, Siapera

5 Birtherism is a racist campaign spreading a conspiracy theory suggesting that Obama was not born in the United States and therefore was ineligible to be president according to the Constitution, which requires the president to be a natural-born citizen.

and Viejo-Otero 2021). In other words, social networks are materially interested in locking the users on their platform by monetizing on racist and abusive content (Leidig 2023).

4.2 The Trump Carnival and the Media System

Political communication is its own scholarly field that is in itself quite wide, studying how politicians represent themselves to the electorate, forms of political advertising, and how lobby groups and political parties spread their messages and ideologies. Political communication can be defined as "the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics" (Graber and Smith 2005, p. 479). For much of the 20th and 21st centuries, the media system was primarily organized around the press and broadcast, and even into the 2016 election, most Americans still received their news and information about politics from television and news websites (Gottfried et al. 2016). This began to change in the late 20th century, with the rise of partisan cable news, particularly in the US. The web dramatically changed this picture in the early 2000s, and by the 2010s, Barack Obama's and Narendra Modi's campaigns were among others across the world that were lauded for their deft use of social media campaigning. In the early 2000s, promissory narratives about social media corporations were ubiquitous, making dramatic claims about their potential for innovation in democracy and freedom of expression. The reality is that social media—particularly through advertising—were effective propaganda machines, for two reasons: first, their 'democratic' nature enabled an immense array of alternative information, news, and entertainment sources; second, their lax regulation for electoral campaigning, their advertising policies, and their rather naïve free speech absolutism offered a new frontier for political communication without the normal oversight that protects electoral processes. This enabled lobby groups, Democrat and Republican alike, to run thousands of advertisements without disclosing that they were paid for by campaigns or PACs (see Kim et al. 2018). But social media also enabled a kind of participatory culture in politics, transforming parties into platforms, and extracting likes, shares, and retweets as tiny acts of political labor that would allow audiences to connect with campaigns (Gerbaudo 2019; Falasca, Dymek, and Grandien 2019). And perhaps most importantly, they made it possible for alternative media—run by far-right partisans like Breitbart—to position themselves as serious competitors to established journalistic outlets.

This media system provided the perfect opportunity for populist transgression, which Trump's campaign and its adjacent alternative media system were

quite successful in exploiting. Optimists were convinced of the emancipatory power of the Internet and anticipated "Twitter Revolutions" around the world and expected that the coming age of 'big data' would provide computational solutions to myriad problems (e. g., Anderson 2008), not least how to win an election (Zittrain 2014). On the face of it, platforms like YouTube that made it possible for any creator to reach a large audience promised to challenge the power of traditional gatekeepers and editors in the news industry. On the other hand (and in hindsight, of course), it is clear that by giving everyone a voice, these platforms began to erode the value of scientific expertise. Social media, then, drastically changed the possibilities for what Bakhtin refers to as multidirectional discourse or *heteroglossia.* The democratization of these platforms—while they certainly opened up space for more voices—enabled the rise of the far right as well as transnational solidarities between its partisans.

As Jessie Daniels argues, white supremacists and far-right partisans in the US have long exploited technical innovations, using new digital technologies over the course of the last four decades (Daniels 2018). In one of the most comprehensive studies of the Anglophone far right on YouTube, Rebecca Lewis demonstrates that an alternative information network, composed of microcelebrities in subcultural niches, talk show hosts, and influencers, became highly partisan sources of information to audiences on YouTube (2018). In their comprehensive work on the US media system and polarization, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) make a convincing argument that right-wing alternative media played an important role in Trump's success against other Republican competitors, catapulting the Trump wing to the forefront of the party. Central to this process is what Benkler and colleagues refer to as a "propaganda feedback loop" in which media outlets compete on the basis of identity confirmation, (rather than by presenting the truth), often conflating news and opinion. The public seeks out news that confirms their identity biases, and the media deliver favorable coverage to those politicians that conform to the identity biases of the public and the very same media outlets. The model Benkler et al develop is not designed to understand a particular side of the political spectrum, instead they convincingly argue that this feedback loop is strongest on the right in the US. This is facilitated along in an attention economy in which traditional media outlets such as broadcasters and newspapers are in competition with upstarts, such as digital media outlets including Breitbart or the Daily Caller, and a cohort of reactionary influencers that Lewis and others have studied. They argue that this propaganda feedback loop is a

> steady flow of bias-confirming stories that create a shared narrative of the state of the world; a steady flow of audiences, viewers, or clicks for the outlets; and a steady flow of voters highly

> resilient to arguments made by outsiders on outlets that are outside the network. (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018, p. 80)

While Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) are careful to stress that Fox News plays a central role in this feedback loop, it is also clear that social media platforms have significantly reshaped the attention economy and drastically increased the incentives for identity-confirming news and the publics that seek it.

At the same time as established and new right-wing media outlets were building and expanding an identity-confirming media system, social media platforms also offered a variety of opportunities for multidirectional discourse. As many scholars have noted, the 'democratic' nature of social media platforms is only a myth as social media platforms are anything but democratic in their design (see Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018), amongst others). It significantly reduced barriers to entry for a wide range of commentators and pundits and made it possible for a broad assortment of far-right users to gain traction and audiences online (e. g., Lewis 2020; Ganesh 2018). As research into the "alt-right" has revealed in the past years, social media platforms provided an opportunity for extreme voices to gain large followings (see Ganesh 2020), which narrowed as platforms took action against them in the late 2010s (see Rogers 2020). Algorithms at these platforms played an important role in expanding the reach of these voices. For example, in an experiment Whittaker et al. (2021) found that YouTube amplified extreme content that involves stark dehumanization and calls for violence to users that engaged with more 'moderate' forms of far right content. Others who have studied such content linking for far right content on YouTube have come to similar results, with Schmitt et al. (2018) finding that the algorithms on YouTube even frustrate countermessaging strategies, while O'Callaghan et al. (2015) observed that YouTube recommendations on extreme right content were likely to send users into a 'rabbit hole'. This was also the case on Facebook, where researchers found that "64 percent of people who joined an extremist group on Facebook only did so because the company's algorithm recommended it to them" (Statt 2020). Thus, social media platforms played a dual role: they flattened authority and enabled a whole host of extremists to establish a presence as trusted commentators and 'microcelebrities' at the same time that their algorithmic systems often supported the growth of the audiences of these extreme narratives. Thus, the 'democratic' nature, then, of social media is better understood as the enabling of a multidirectional discourse that greatly expanded opportunities for far right partisans to participate in political discourse in the country.

In opening out the possibility to reach an audience, and in a propaganda feedback loop (as Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018 put it), Trump's digital carnival enabled the enactment and performance of a specific kind of populism. This popu-

lism is less a referent to a 'people', but rather a repudiation of expertise and authority in favor of popular perception and belief. This enables transgressions against authority and a rejection of the claims of experts, associating the state, scientists, and civil servants as all part of an evil 'elite.' Multidirectional discourse, often pushed along by Trump, as well as other right-wing politicians, lobbyists civil society groups, influencers and microcelebrities, managed to make the use of hyperpartisan media itself a transgressive act. Beginning in the late 2010s, and especially during the coronavirus pandemic, social media platforms were pressured into action against the growth of these hyperpartisan media outlets, and they increasingly began to take down the accounts of the far-right and conspiracy theorists and those promoting COVID-19 misinformation (see De Kuelenaar, Magalhães, and Ganesh 2023). This action also became to be seen as part of the 'elite' clampdown on the voice of the people. Indeed, as research has shown, the act of ejecting these accounts from the platforms drove an economy of alternative tech platforms catering to far-right users (Donovan, Lewis, and Friedberg 2019; Rogers 2020). Just like jihadists (Pearson 2018), far-right users that were deplatformed considered their banishment from Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter as a medal of valor, authenticating them as the *real* truth-tellers who stand up to the 'woke' elites, who certified their practices as transgression.

In many ways, Trump's populist appeal and the highlighting of fringe far-right groups and their discourse fulfilled the promise of a multidirectionality. As a gatekeeper of what could potentially make it to the national discourse, Trump became an amplifier of far-right rhetoric, even without the coded racist language that had been present in the GOP vernacular beforehand (Brown 2016). His no-longer-veiled racism was essentially an articulation of the existential anxiety experienced by the white majority over 'demographic shifts' and fears of 'replacement' that have been circulating within and outside of the American establishment for over a century. Turn-of-the-century white supremacist ideologues such as Madison Grant or Lothrop Stoddard, fearful of the disenfranchisement of the white population, warned against the "rising tide of color." Their talking points found their way again into mainstream media as Trump opened the floodgates for the tide of racist rhetoric, allowing the heteroglot perspectives of the far right to permeate political discourse, thwarting the main purpose of media in a democracy—to inform the people.

4.3 Multidirectional Discourse and Carnival Masks

Any language, in Bakhtin's view, stratifies into many voices: social dialects, characteristic groups, professional jargon, generic language, language of generations and

age groups, tendentious language, language of the authorities and of various circles and passing fashions (Ball, Freedman, and Pea 2004). Heteroglossia [raznorechie] is thus a condition of language as it is deployed in varying ways to evaluate, conceptualize, and experience the world (Blackledge and Creese 2014). Despite Bakhtin's somewhat idealistic portrayal of the popular culture of Renaissance carnival, not all voices are heard in (political) communication (Spivak 1999). The true marginalized voices, the ones that become the focus of carnival's displaced abjection, remain silent and their experience of the world is excised from the general merriment of the town square. From a communications standpoint and in the case of Trumpian carnival this erasure does not take place as the multidirectional discourse of social media has ensured the presence of some marginalized voices. At the same time, the paticularities of the presidential American voting system —majority white states voting first in primaries, the existence of an electoral college, and numerous cases of voter suppression and gerrymandering—are evidence that the disenfranchisement of the American electorate is not directed at the white majority at all (Scher 2015). Moreover, if one looks at the 2016 election results by group, it becomes clear that the favorite candidate of the minority groups (e.g., Black, Latina), the subaltern voices, did not become president.

A principle promise of carnival is its seeming reversal of social hierarchy, supposedly rendering it democratic. Bakhtin himself discussed the democratic promise of carnival based on its folk roots. Other researchers note that Bakhtin's somewhat idealistic understanding of popular culture as the privileged bearer of democratic and progressive values leads to a quintessentially populist vision of Renaissance carnival culture being a harbinger of an as yet politically unrealized democracy (Shevtsova 1992; Hirschkop 1986). Moreover, Bakhtin's critics note that he romanticized popular culture and language and neglected the fact that true subalterns were never allowed to participate in a "march of the deposed gods"(2015, p. 148).

In carnival, the subjects of speech are not people, but anonyms hidden behind the masks of the discourse that constitutes them, as Julia Kristeva aptly noted (Kristeva 2000). This observation is extremely relevant for social networks, where even real people use their own accounts to cultivate a persona, sometimes whitewashing or outright lying in their posts, not to mention altering their looks by means of filters or Photoshop. Apart from a genuine person behind an account, there are a host of other possibilities, including teams of public relations specialists, automated accounts (bots), trolls assuming an online identity, paid commentators (so-called 50-cent commentary trolls), or even a suspicious spouse browsing under their partner's name. One way or another, accounts on social media can be seen as masks in the carnival with their polysyllabic and polysemantic symbolism.

As Kristeva notes, carnivalesque discourse breaks the laws of language censored by grammar and semantics (Kristeva 2000). However, this transgression is still somewhat 'controlled,' as even in the case of Trump breaking language taboos, 'transgressors' are still partially censored by mainstream media, while journalists often engage in the "translation" of Trump's linguistic mistakes and malformed sentences into digestible, conventional English, as Parks astutely observed (Parks 2019).

> The mask is associated with the joy of change and reincarnation, with cheerful relativity, with the joyful denial of identity and unambiguity, with the disavowal of stupid conformity to oneself; the mask is associated with transitions, metamorphoses, violations of natural boundaries, ridicule, and a nickname (instead of a name); the game's beginning of life is embodied in the mask, it is based on a very special relationship between reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient ritual-spectacular forms. (Bakhtin 2015, p. 26)

The mask can embolden wearers with the anonymity it provides as well as enable the expression of true feelings and the manifestation of repressed desires. No wonder that it is the mask of anonymity 'worn' by some Internet commentators that allows for vicious attacks, though of course many do not require the mask of anonymity to express hatred. Putting on a red baseball cap in a sense has become a carnivalesque act of donning a carnival costume and a mask. The red cap became an avatar for an entire ideology to such an extent that even academics published books featuring it, marking the belonging and the meaning to such an extent that there are scores of red baseball hats with completely antithetical messages on them, auch as "Made ya look: Black Lives Matter" or "Lock Him Up."

Among the masked participants of the carnival, the trickster stands out, a mythical figure whose attraction and fascination lies in an ability to embody two opposing principles within a single person (Evans-Pritchard 1967)—a selfish buffoon (Carroll 1984), who seeks the immediate gratification of physical desires, be they sexual intercourse, feasting, or excretion, but also a transformer of social relations (Martin and Jensen 2017). Being an oxymoron is a feature of the trickster figure. Thus, the usual attempt by TV pundits or late-night comedians to criticize Trump's hypocrisy have failed, because as an archetypal trickster figure he is immune to this type of criticism. As empirical chapters will show, these oxymoronic features are common in Trump's discourse. He rarely deviated from the materiality in his speech that his voters mistook for authenticity. As Bakhtin notes,

> the tricksters and fools were their constant participants and parody duplicated various moments of serious ceremonies (glorification of winners in tournaments, ceremony of transfer of feudal rights, initiations into knights, etc.). (Bakhtin 2015, p. 3)

This 'ceremonial' presence of fools that accompany serious rituals may explain why Trump's candidacy was initially welcomed by virtually all late-night comics, who saw his campaign as a source of entertainment. As a ceremonial fool, Trump was not taken seriously by his fellow primary contenders, which guaranteed him light-hearted coverage without a serious focus on his policies. There is a literature on Trump being the ultimate trickster who managed to con the American people (Martin and Krause-Jensen 2017), but whether as a genuine contender or as an unceremonious fool, Trump was a constant feature of the political communication in the 2016 election campaign. Bakhtin noted that in a trickster figure, "all the attributes of the king are turned upside down, rearranged from top to bottom; the trickster is the king of the 'inside out world'" (Bakhtin 2015, p. 140), but the inside-out world suddenly became the real world.

Given the level of mediatization (Strömbäck 2008) of American society, it is important to pay attention to the way traditional mass media responded to Trump's agenda-setting campaign efforts. As carnival is a laughing culture, it is important to include the analysis of late-night comedy as one of the voices of the multidirectional discourse. A number of researchers have emphasized the significant role that late-night shows play in American political communication (Young 2019; Hart 2013; Postman 2006; Moy, Xenos, and Hess 2005). In the spirit of carnival and the general disaffection and polarization of the American electorate, these shows were instrumental in priming and popularizing the Trump campaign. At the same time, traditional media, such as quality newspapers and regular TV news, served as fodder for the Trump campaign, which accused the 'lamestream' media and "the failing *New York Times*" of peddling misinformation.

What Trump succeeded in doing was to expand the discursive space to include normally censored voices and topics, which partly confirms Bennett's indexing hypothesis that the range of views that are covered as "acceptable or normal" by media outlets depends on the range of views expressed in Congress (Bennett 2015b). However, public spaces are becoming more and more disrupted (Bennett and Pfetsch 2018), especially through the practices of political *astroturfing* (Howard, Woolley, and Calo 2018), when lobby groups masquerade as grassroots initiatives. Through this, it is easier to manipulate the range of topics covered by the media. By framing some of his rhetoric as a backlash against so-called 'coastal elites'—a typical populist frame that juxtaposes 'pure people' against 'corrupt politicians'—the Trump campaign embodied what Ruth Wodak calls the "shameless normalizing" of the far right discourse (Wodak 2019), making far-right positions truly mainstream.[6] Trump was not alone in this endeavor. Even post-presidency,

6 It should be noted that white supremacy and some derivatives of far-right rhetoric have been

he managed to mainstream many extreme positions that have become part of the US Congress. Jewish space lasers, stolen elections, great replacement theories, and other conspiracy myths have now been fully entrenched on Capitol Hill.

4.4 Carnival, Social Media, and Trolling

Early theories of political communication often discarded the role of the public, who were frequently seen as passive consumers of politicians' speeches, mass media, or opinion leaders (Katz 1987). The advent of television did not change the asymmetry between politicians and their audiences that relied primarily on an allegiant model of citizenship and conventional public participation (Milbrath and Goel 1977; Campbell et al. 1960). However, with the emergence of social media platforms, changing views on political participation that gradually included active and deliberate behavior (Fox 2013) and diverging modes of political communication evolved. Social media created different ways of producing content, distributing information, and consuming media (Klinger and Svensson 2015), influencing gatekeeping and the commercialization of information.

When Shanti Elliot described carnival as a "cosmic openness" where "nothing is fixed but everything is in a state of becoming" (Elliot 1999, p. 130), she probably did not have social media in mind as they were only just beginning to sprout all over the world at the time of her writing. Yet, this portrayal is quite pertinent for the description of a digitized media system. Social networks embody this multidirectional discourse. This fast-paced and transient environment not only offers instant gratification, a very powerful psychological driver (Shao 2009; Wu et al. 2013), but also confirms the temporality of carnival. Fake news, memes, product placement, gifs, cat videos, and quality journalism co-exist on a seemingly equal footing where it is almost impossible to sort the wheat from the chaff.

Testimonies presented to the US Congress have shown that microtargeting, inflated video content viewership numbers (Machkovech 2016), and a lack of regulation of political advertising on social networks has left much room for manipulation, including by foreign powers (United States Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017). This is extremely relevant in regard to the multidirectional nature of the carnivalesque discourse. With political advertising produced by actors outside of the American political system who masquerade as American citizens, it

observed in the US Congress for some time, with a blatant example being Republican Representative from Iowa Steve King who repeatedly endorsed white supremacy. The Republican Steering Committee only removed him from all House committee assignments in 2019, though of course Steve King is not the only member of the GOP that openly supports such extreme views.

is also clear that political communication in the US is by no means a dialogical process. It is also apparent how a mere semblance of authority, and not authenticity, is sufficient in a carnival setting (Yates 2019). In Trump's case, he succeeded in consistently attracting disaffected voters with his "impression of bare-knuckle authenticity" as a "blue-collar billionaire" (Wells et al. 2016).

Another major change ushered in by the emergence of social media relates to the illusion of closeness to the political process (Kruikemeier et al. 2013), which is fundamentally important to the carnival framework. After all, carnival is the time when "Ivan Ivanovich [formal] turns into Vanya [less formal] or Van'ka [informal]" (Bakhtin 2015, p. 11) and the market square supposedly flattens hierarchy, bringing everybody together. The ability to tweet at somebody, send them a direct message, and comment on their posts creates an ultimate populist fantasy of 'people's candidates,' even though most campaigns have teams of social media experts that come up with situationally appropriate 'burns' and 'zingers.' Donald Trump's Twitter account, with its characteristic patterns of random capitalization, semantic, lexical, and punctuation blunders and misspellings, provided a level of anti-elitism with which no other candidate—and especially Hillary Clinton—could compete (allthough her "delete your account" Tweet was a solid burn in June 2016).

Another element of 'carnival square' that suddenly became part of the main carnival square of Trump's political communication included discussion groups on Reddit as well as 'imageboards' such as 4chan and 8chan. These platforms seek to preserve the anonymity of their users, taking pride in upholding the once almost universal anonymity of the Internet during its earliest days. For instance, 4chan hosts numerous public boards dedicated to a wide variety of topics, including anime, gaming, music, fitness, politics, sports, and pornography. According to 4chan's 'Press' page, 4chan serves over 22 million users a month and as of October 2023, has approximately 4.6 billion posts in total, reported on its homepage. Registration is not possible and everybody is forced to post anonymously, with threads receiving recent replies being 'bumped' to the top of their respective board. The platform has been a significant hub for Internet subculture and activism, both from the left and from the right, but it gained notoriety specifically as a hot-bed for the so-called alt-right movement (Nagle 2017).

The anti-authority spirit pervaded the alt-right movement, amplifying Trump's bid for presidency. Their new brand of conservatism essentially rejected its more mainstream iteration in its open acceptance of white supremacy somewhat uniting neo-Nazi, populist, anti-feminist, homophobic, anti-immigration, anti-Islam, anti-semitic, and incel[7] streams. While extremely amorphous and diverse, the alt-

7 So-called "incel" culture refers to "involuntary celibate," an online culture whose members de-

right converged on their shared opposition to obeisance to political correctness (PC) and the supposed damage it does to the white cis majority. Unlike some of the anti-PC spaces on 4chan or Reddit, where those identifying as trolls seeking to provoke other users into an emotional reaction by their challenging of social norms, the core of the alt-right and the person who coined the term—Richard Spencer—are dead serious in their white supremacist rhetoric that has already led to mass shootings, murders, riots, and vandalism (Nagle 2017; Winter 2019). Their support for Trump has been exemplified by the endorsement of David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan (Domonoske 2016).

'Genuine' trolling is a carnivalesque phenomenon, with the trolls' quest to 'affect authority' creating a spirit of disruption, playfulness, humor, and profanity in the 'low' discursive part of life. As Merrin notes, "trolling, therefore, is a baiting, a sport, a playing, that more than anything aims at those who get above themselves, or set themselves above others—at those asserting, or in, authority" (Merrin 2019, p. 202). The fundamental idea of carnival is the reversal of hierarchy while poking fun at those who are in authority. Trolling could be considered a hallmark of Trump's campaign, with trolls consolidating a significant part of the electorate that might not have anything to do with Internet subcultures through the so-called "Great Meme War"—that is, the flooding of the Internet with pro-Trump and anti-Clinton memes. As Schreckinger notes,

> There is no real evidence that memes won the election, but there is little question they changed its tone, especially in the fast-moving and influential currents of social media. The meme battalions created a mass of pro-Trump iconography as powerful as the Obama "Hope" poster and far more adaptable; they relentlessly drew attention to the tawdriest and most sensational accusations against Clinton, forcing mainstream media outlets to address topics—like conspiracy theories about Clinton's health—that they would otherwise ignore. (Schreckinger 2017)

The pro-Trump 4chan and Reddit communities tried to produce memes that would also appeal beyond the boards—to the public (the 'Normies'), by first testing them on Reddit before pushing them onto Twitter (Lukito 2019). The memes were then amplified by bots, creating a multi-platform disinformation campaign that actually led some people to believe that Hillary Clinton engaged in satanic rituals (spirit cooking meme) and was involved in a child-trafficking sex ring in the basement of a DC pizzeria (Pizzagate). While the grotesque nature of these memes could

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fine themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. Incels are characterized by extreme misogyny, racism, resentment, and self-pity. The Southern Poverty Law Center describes them as "part of the online male supremacist ecosystem."

be seen as emblematic of carnival, especially misogynistic medievalesque accusations of witchcraft addressed to Hillary Clinton, they nonetheless led to real-life consequences, including an armed assault on the Comet Ping Pong pizzeria that does not even have a basement.

There are some indications that 4chan's support for Trump was at first caustic (Merrin 2019), with trolls enjoying the idea of supporting the election of a joke candidate for president—very much in line with the carnivalesque glorification of the carnival trickster-fool (Bakhtin 2015, p. 164). In carnival culture, the glorification, worship, and coronation of the king are done tongue-in-cheek. All the participants understand that the new 'king' is hardly up to the task in the real world. However, as the Trump campaign progressed, the trolls converged with the alt-right voices: "For a lot of people, on the first day it was like, 'This would be fucking hilarious,' and then when he started coming up with policy stuff—the border wall, the Muslim ban—people on the boards were like, 'This can't be real. This is the greatest troll of all time'" (Schreckinger 2017). 4chan's attitude towards Trump fits neatly into the carnival's perception of the trickster—he is, after all, "roi pour rire" (Bakhtin 2015), a "king for laughs"—almost literally the "lulz" motto of the trolling crowd. Moreover, focusing on the pleasure of laughter regardless of the hurt and damage it might cause is yet another hallmark of the carnivalesque discourse, where ideology is in plain sight of the alt-right mockery (May and Feldman 2019).

While the humanity of some of these Trump supporters may be questioned, others definitely possessed none at all. Bots, or software automatons, are involved in the creation, transmission, and controlled mutation of significant political messages over expansive social networks (Howard, Woolley, and Calo 2018). While bots, with their discursive power, had been harnessed in political communication for almost a decade (Ratkiewicz et al. 2011), only in the run-up to and in the aftermath of the 2016 election did bot hybrids become the focus of media and academic attention (Sindelar 2014; Pomerantsev and Weiss 2014; Thorsen 2018; Yan, Pegoraro, and Watanabe 2019; Keller and Klinger 2019). So-called Kremlin trolls are not 'classic' trolls identified in the literature who seek to aggravate users. Even though Kremlin trolls may ultimately provoke their targets emotionally, their main purpose is ideological, while regular trolls are usually devoid of ideology (Hardaker 2010). Kremlin trolls are real people who work in shifts for the Internet Research Agency, an organization allegedly under the control of late Russian oligarch, Yevgeny Prigozhin, reputed to have had close ties to President Putin (Bastos and Farkas 2019; Financial Times 2023). Their aim is to promote Kremlin-friendly discourse (Lukito 2019) while masquerading as 'organic' users. Both of these phenomena are quintessential simulacra, carnivalesque creatures who thrive in the setting of the carnival square—in the case of the Trump campaign, these were Reddit and Twitter users whose memes occasionally went beyond their PC-free world

into the mainstream discourse, often through Trump himself or his more prominent supporters.

The phenomenon of Internet trolls is a perfect embodiment the performance-oriented culture of carnival, with their roots traced to Nordic folklore and trickster culture (Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus 2014). As Quattrociocchi, Scala, and Sunstein (2016) note, the so-called 'echo-chambers' on social media reinforce selective exposure and group polarization, further radicalizing the political debate that is already polarized in the US (Westfall et al. 2015; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). With 62% of American adults getting their news from social networks (Gottfried and Shearer 2016), many rely on social media for news coverage (Weeks and Holbert 2013), as patterns of misinformation and their amplification via echo chambers are becoming an everyday phenomenon.

While multidirectional discourse and social media in particular seemed to have held a democratic promise, the anti-hierarchy nature of the carnival eventually led to other carnivalesque features becoming much more prominent in the Trump campaign. It was the anti-establishment battle cry that principally appealed to Trump voters (Berman 2016) but we should not forget about the main victims of the carnival square - its abject.