

Transformative Media: A Critical Approach to Alt-right Media Appropriations

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Abstract: This paper distinguishes between several key features of transformative alternative left media and regressive alt-right media. In the exploration of alt-right media tactics, we map eight cooptation strategies by the alt-right that we categorise into three forms: (1) ideological discursive appropriation; (2) reversal capture; and (3) commodity cooptation. We contrast these strategies with transformative alt-left media practices rooted in intersectional justice and social movements, showing how offline organising, collective care, and fact-based storytelling protect movements from toxic disinformation. This work is vital to spot and disrupt alt-right appropriation and infiltration, fortify intersectional, truth-driven media, and mobilise authentic grassroots power. We argue for the enduring significance of offline organisation in transformative intersectional alternative media practices, where supporting strong relationships potentiates community building, deep affective labour, and positive social transformation.

Keywords: alternative media, alt-right media, intersectionality, media bias, disinformation, social movements

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1. Introduction

Alternative media was heralded in its early days as a media space in which grassroots groups could express their experiences, gradually bringing marginalised communities to voice. Skeptics ridiculed alternative media for its amateurism and lack of professional rigour, but a critical mass of alternative media developed that were considered legitimate despite these skeptics and their reservations. These include *VICE News*, *Huffington Post*, *Adbusters*, and of course *Indymedia*.

More recently, however, the freedom to write what you want about your own experience without gatekeepers has become an outlet for the alt-right, producing non-factual, conspiracy laden media full of “alternative facts” (not facts at all) and misinformation. Right-wing and alt-right media have been creeping in to claim the term “alternative media” in problematic ways. This has become apparent as our research team is sometimes asked if the theoretical frameworks we use (political economy, intersectionality, the revolution of everyday life) can be used to analyse alt-right media. The answer seems to be no, but are there some overlaps? Where do the distinctions lie? What are the mechanisms of appropriation? And how do we fight back against this process?

We first noticed the left-right shift of the term “alternative media” at a conference where a researcher engaged in participatory research with neo-Nazis sat on the same panel as Sandra Jeppesen, the lead author of this article. Jeppesen's work has long focused on the intersectionality (Collins and Bilge 2016) and political economy (Fuchs and Sandoval 2015; Mansell 2004; Sandoval and Fuchs 2010) of alternative media, which are research areas that strongly criticise right-wing politics (Jeppesen 2016a, 2019; Jeppesen et al. 2014, 2017; Jeppesen and Media Action Research Group 2018). At a later conference, Sandra was asked whether her conceptual framework for understanding the ideologies, theoretical formations and subjectivities of alternative media (Jeppesen 2016b) could be applied to alt-right media. Her answer was simply “no”. She had not studied right-wing media until then. That was about to change.

What seems a commonality among left and right alternative media makers “is a natural distrust of authority, a belief that most politicians are lying to them” (McHugh 2024, paragraph 1), and critique of mainstream media. The field of media and communication studies has had to respond to this, to be able to differentiate between left and right alternatives – as their content is drastically different, with divergent political commitments and a different relationship to the truth. Consequently, the *Journal of Alternative and Community Media* recently published a special thematic issue on alt-right media, as has the Canadian *Journal of Communication* analysing alt-right media's increasingly problematic prominence in the mainstream public sphere.

In this paper, we attempt to draw out some of the defining and distinguishing features of alternative left media and alt-right media. In our exploration of the creeping of the alt-right into the alternative media sphere, we have identified several mechanisms that tend to take three different forms: (1) ideological discursive appropriation (see section 4); (2) reversal capture (see section 5); and (3) commodity co-optation (see section 6). Analysing several mechanisms within each form, we aim to define what it means to make “transformative media” and specifically, what kinds of transformations are at stake.

2. Left Alternative Media

Alternative media originally arose as a leftist challenge to dominant forms of mainstream media (Atton 2002), seeking to provide a “voice for the voiceless” (Bailey et al. 2007). Alternative radical newspapers began production at least a century ago (McChesney & Scott 2004), often supported by left political parties or ideologies (Downing 2003). This ethos has been mobilised by community and pirate radio stations on a global scale (Hamilton 2004; Huesca 1995; Langlois et al. 2010; McKibben 2017; Renzi 2020; Riisman 2002; Rodriguez 2001). Video activism and livestreaming have become increasingly prevalent as technologies of production and distribution have become more portable and affordable (Harding 1998; Hermida and Hernández-Santaolalla 2018; Widginton 2005; Wilson and Serisier 2010). Facilitated by a diversity of media forms, alternative journalists continue to engage in transformative everyday practices while conducting credible investigative journalism (Atton 2002; Atton and Hamilton 2008).

For alternative media on the left to remain authentically radical and transformative, content is as important as process. For Atton (2002), alternative media is self-produced, whether by a group or individual. Bailey et al. (2007) highlight how alternative media serves a community, facilitating civic engagement, which leans toward alternative media being a collective practice. Lievrouw (2011) argues that activism is intrinsic to alternative media, as producers attempt to both reflect and change their worlds. The grounding of activism in the social worlds of alternative

journalists, moreover, allows video activists to engage in direct-action journalism (Jeppesen 2016a). Latin American communications scholar Clemencia Rodriguez argues that community radio remains crucial due to low barriers for participation, where the building of community remains fundamental to their activities, not just in but also beyond the radio station. Similarly, Dorothy Kidd notes the importance of intersectional political organising in community and alternative media, contributing to a shared communications commons (Kidd 1999, 2003a, 2003b; Kidd et al. 2006). Building on this history, media activists have widely adopted social media for political mobilisations and information sharing (Treré and Kaun 2021). A commonality across both genres and decades is that alternative media creators strive to transform dominant social relations to be more equitable on an everyday basis, with and within their media projects, typically working in conjunction with transformative social justice movements.

These movements connect through meta-issues, engaging interactive digital affordances in the newest waves of transformative media, where movements are both technopolitical and intersectional (Jeppesen 2022). Technopolitics is defined as the integration of technologies into social justice movements, serving as both the terrain and tools media activism (Caballero & Gravante 2017; Kurban et al. 2017; Treré and Barranquero 2018). Intersectionality is defined as the ways in which specific issues, identities, and systems of oppression are understood to shape each other in distinct ways (Collins and Bilge 2016). Meta-issue movements engage intersectional technopolitics combining digital technologies and intersectional media strategies to address race, class, gender, LGBTQ+ identities, colonialism, and more (Jeppesen 2022).

Taken together, intersectional technopolitics are foundational to transformative media, enabling media activists to articulate the differential impacts of their experiences, articulated through intersectional identities (hooks 1982). These uneven impacts are caused by interlocking structures of oppression that create varying layers of violence on a global scale – through war, gender-based violence, colonial racism and genocide, and more (Razack et al. 2010). This is what transformative media is resisting.

Transformative media facilitates rhizomatic grassroots resistance to dominant ideologies and power structures. Uzelman (2005) argues that alternative media is rhizomatic, like a bamboo shoot that proliferates underground, often invisible to dominant groups as its tendrils form connective tissue, weaving together a global alternative-mediascape. Deleuze and Guattari's (1989) concept of the rhizome has been used to argue that culture as a whole is rhizomatic, including the arts, housing, gender relations, parenting, labour, media, and so forth, all constructing ideologically similar left alternatives through global underground rhizomatic networks, grounded in alternative value-practices (Jeppesen 2010).

Alternative values are founded upon an intersectional approach to liberation which is used in horizontal media organisational structures created by intersectional activists (Jeppesen et al. forthcoming). These practices of relationality aim to create equality in the here and now, including through an ethics of care and healing justice (Magee 2019) where practices of care become integrated into social justice movements. These practices are fundamental to alternative media on the left, creating profound personal, interpersonal, and societal transformations in everyday life (Breton et al. 2012). These transformations take place through meetings, discussions, decision-making, and hanging out that happens as alternative media is being produced.

3. Alt-Right Media

Marginalised grassroots intensities are increasingly channelled by crisis capitalism toward political ends on the left and right alike. Alt-right media may look like alternative left media to some, even sharing some similar structural critiques, but it does not potentiate the same positive work of transformation and liberation. We argue that alt-right media provides a direct course for the capitalist monetisation of all aspects of human life, all based on lies and deceit.

John Downing calls alt-right media “repressive media” which he argues is linked to authoritarian populism (Downing 2001, p. 91). Alt-right media mobilises regressive ideas, denouncing feminists, trans people, woke culture, Black Lives Matter, anti-fascism, Palestinian protesters, all retrenching the status quo. Being a “social justice warrior” has become twisted by the alt-right into a pejorative, where “wokeness” is also assaulted, once a signal of positive enlightenment arising from anti-racist movements. To bolster this hate, alt-right media spreads disinformation, misinformation, and fake news (McKelvey et al. 2022).

This alt-right authoritarianism is linked to right-wing extremism. In the global north, it is common for right-wing extremist groups to support eugenicist doctrines of white supremacy, religious supremacy, and ethnonationalism (Jones 2018) as well as traditional gender norms. Right-wing extremists tend to exploit political tensions by employing ultra-nationalist resistance to democracy, where authoritarian stratagems propagate inequality (Carter 2018) through five key characteristics: “nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and the strong state” (Mudde 1995, as cited in Carter 2018, 161). This is evident in the content of alt-right media such as *Breitbart* and *Rebel News*, and podcast and radio commentators such as Joe Rogan and Alex Jones.

Regressive media mimics the tools, stories, and strategies of alternative media (Wasilewski 2019) but their rhetoric is often based in disinformation, sensationalism, fake news, and outrage, creating what we call media toxicologies. Toxicology is the study of how toxins create pathologies by infiltrating the human body, alt-right media can be understood as a toxin that creates media toxicologies by infiltrating the alternative mediascape – in ways becoming increasingly evident in mainstream media as well (McKelvey et al. 2022).

The right-wing reimagining of alternative media captures and reframes the established discourses and aesthetics of alternative left media, constructing emergent global alt-right publics in forms posing as liberatory (Wasilewski 2019). As the values, myths, symbols, and ideologies of antiauthoritarianism are mobilised on both the left and right – on social media, talk radio, podcasts, YouTube, and so on – repressive intersectional identitarian structures are capturing left intersectional practices and meanings, repurposing and reframing them for fascist, misogynist, racist, heteronormative, cis-gender, and ethno-nationalist ends that are not transformative but instead static, regressive, and repressive.

Below, we describe three distinct forms of appropriation: (1) ideological discursive appropriation of key terms (see section 4); (2) reversal capture of victimhood (see section 5); and (3) aesthetic commodity cooptation (see section 6). Within each of these three forms, we map several specific mechanisms of alt-right media creep.

4. Ideological Discursive Appropriation

In the ideological form of appropriation, conservatives delegitimize resistance movements by reframing their subversive practices to serve dominant ideologies,

removing challenges to power by emptying discourses of their counterpublic political claims. With respect to punk subculture, Hebdige (1979) observed that when punks were showcased on TV, mainstream commentators would say they were just like other kids, only dressing a little differently, undermining the sociopolitical critiques that punks express toward capitalism and conformity on a much deeper level than fashion. This mechanism is homologous to what the alt-right does to delegitimize left discursive power particularly as it relates to alternative media.

4.1. Standpoint Politics Becomes “Alternative Facts”

Postmodernism problematised the concept of a universal subject-position, introducing the importance of situated subjectivities and knowledges (Mann 2012) in what is known as standpoint theory. As subjects of knowledge, this theory goes, we can only learn, know, and interpret ideas through our own perspectives. In communication theory, this is explained in Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding theory (Hall 1993), which articulates how the producers and consumers of media are influenced by their own universe of understanding when engaged in producing (encoding) and interpreting (decoding) media, respectively. The postmodern notion that everyone can express their own truth was used at the time as a tool of empowerment for marginalised groups. In alternative media this was theorised as providing a “voice for the voiceless” (Atton 2002; Bailey et al. 2007).

At the same time, journalism began to call into question the possibility of every achieving “objectivity”, as they realised that editors and journalists brought their own perspectives to bear. Editors decided what was newsworthy, and journalists provided interpretive lenses for audiences through news framing devices (Chomsky and Herman 1988; Schudson and Anderson 2008). In this context, deconstructing the objectivity claims of the powerful, alternative media provided media spaces for voices from the margins who expressed their experiences and ideas from an acknowledged standpoint. These media makers proclaimed their own subjectivity as a strength rather than a failing with respect to objectivity.

However, when taken up by the alt-right, the postmodern valuation of speaking one’s truth has been reduced to the interpretive fog of cultural relativism, famously reproducing “alternative facts” to serve the powerful (Todd 2017). Presenting both sides of controversial issues (McIntyre 2018, 33) such as climate change, the alt-right has developed a form of “right-wing postmodernism” (McIntyre 2018, 133) that destabilises all truth claims, including those based in fact-checking.

This is a clear distinction between left alternative and alt-right media – transformative left media still fact checks and writes the confirmed truth. So, while objectivity is no longer believed to be possible, fact-checking is a commitment of transformative left media that alt-right media does not even pretend to make.

Where the creep comes in is that the alt-right combines postmodern relativism with a flexible relationship to the truth to produce media content that questions “accepted fact, revealing the myths and politics behind established certainties,” engaging in “a tactic straight out of the left-wing playbook” (Warner 2011, paragraph 5). However, in questioning accepted facts of the powerful, the alt-right has thrown the baby out with the bathwater – rejecting the facticity premise of news altogether.

Moreover, this does not uplift marginalised communities, but rather serves to re-entrench dominant voices, including corporate and state power and the status quo. Thus, they muddy the waters regarding the interesting philosophical questioning of what is ultimately knowable – expressed by novelists such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, among others – through an ideological appropriation of postmodernism that

lands on the claim “I know what I know”. The empowerment of positionality now re-empowers the already powerful. And there is no use attempting to disabuse them of their lies – when presented with actual facts, they will (somewhat paranoidly) say, “That’s just what they want you to believe”.

4.2. The Intellectual Dark Web: That Word Does not Mean What You Think it Means

This works not just at the level of ideas but also at the level of words themselves. We know that ideological appropriation has been modernised through social media sites proliferating algorithm-promoted political and emotional outrage (Hoechsmann and McKee 2023; Lim 2021). Many of these mobilisations, such as the Capitol Riots and the Ottawa Convoy, are overt alt-right mobilisations. Supported by this fraught cultural space, the intellectual dark web has emerged, consisting of those who declare themselves public intellectuals and then promote “self-conscious and self-declared transgressions” (Finlayson 2021). This includes figures such as anti-trans former psychology professor Jordan Peterson, who claims his transgressive speech originates from anti-authoritarian thinking, when it actually crosses into multi-phobic, intersectional hate-based discourse (Browne 2016) with little recourse to the truth. Led by pundits like Peterson, the intellectual dark web provides a conduit for more centrist and right-leaning liberals and even red-tory conservatives to engage with far-right extremism by bridging the “alt-lite” with the entrenched alt-right and right-wing populism.

The mobilisation of specialised language and imagery on the intellectual dark web enables the formation of in-group codes and covert communications or dog-whistles. This obfuscates hateful rhetoric from the general public, because hate is encoded in messaging that can be invisible to some and clear to others. For example, as Mendelsohn explicates, when considering the sentence “‘we need to end the cosmopolitan experiment,’ the word ‘cosmopolitan’ likely means ‘worldly’ to many, but secretly means ‘Jewish’ to a select few” (Mendelsohn et al. 2023, para. 1). Thus, the word “cosmopolitan” becomes an ambiguous term, serving as an anti-Semitic dog-whistle. Dog-whistles are keywords or phrases used by the alt-right to express something unsocially acceptable through encoded terms to create plausible deniability. They are prolific in alt-right media on the intellectual dark web, rendering the alt-somewhat incoherent. However, this linguistic encoding enables hateful messaging to spread under the watchful eyes of authority, as dog-whistles communicate hate through the reproduction of subtle, untrue, repressive statements, opinions, and beliefs (Quaranto 2022).

This is clearly distinct from transformative media. While the alt-right encodes intersectional hate through code-worded dog-whistles to hide their social anger behind dishonest rhetoric, transformative left media uses intersectionality to represent the complexities of life, structures, infrastructures, and so on, with liberatory objectives.

4.3. Flipping (off) Intersectionality

In these mechanisms, intersectionality is flipped (off) by movements on the right who disparage intersectional activists as “woke social justice warriors” while at the same time remaining obviously single-issue. For example, in two recent alt-right political movements, the Capitol riots in the USA, and the Ottawa convoy in Canada, participants were mobilised by mis/disinformation encountered through social media. The Capitol rioters believed in an allegedly stolen election, a notion promoted on the alt-right social media platform Parler, in a paid ad posted by lawmaker Marjorie Taylor-

Greene (Jeppesen et al. 2022); whereas participants in the Convoy believed Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was responsible for provincial mask mandates and American cross-border vaccine regulations, neither of which he was involved in (Hoechsmann and McKee 2023). These single-issue alt-right movements focused on neither intersectional issues nor social justice nor the truth, but rather the converse – they focused on single issues (stolen election, COVID), their demands were not based in social justice, and their mobilisations were not grounded in the truth. The way intersectionality shows up in alt-right movements, can therefore be understood as flipping (off) or reversing liberatory frameworks through the kind of intersectional hate emerging under Trump’s first presidency (Browne 2016).

It is also interesting that the individualism of right-wing messaging is cloaked in distorted and self-contradictory illusions of collectivity. A salient example is the tradwives (traditional wives) trend, where right-wing women are promoting an off-grid back-to-basics lifestyle while dressed in glamorous, shockingly clean clothing, and high-end make-up. However, social media influencers promoting traditional female gender performances can serve as a gateway to white supremacy (Christou 2020). Sykes and Hopner (2024) argue that upholding old-fashioned values, tradwives remain rooted in misogyny and heteronormativity. Wide circulation of tradwife content on social media serves to amplify right-wing gender-and-race ideologies that confine (presumed cis-gender) women to the roles of mother and housewife (Sykes and Hopner 2024), regressively constructing women as innately inferior to men. Tradwife social media content, while claiming to provide avenues toward liberation (from the city, from paid workforce labour, and so on) become a contradictory form of alt-right anti-feminist white-supremacist repressive intersectional media.

Tradwives and similar alt-right adherents are posing as cool anti-establishment types, but rather than achieving a subversive anti-authoritarianism, their messaging serves to advance the very authoritarian values they claim to eschew, amplifying populist perspectives that retrench the status quo and support powerfully regressive figures such as Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, Donald Trump and others. As a result, these movements centre aims in opposition to their own anti-authoritarian ethos, as well as to the anti-authoritarian ethos of transformative media.

These forms of “radical media in the service of repression” (Downing 2001, 88) serve capital and other intersectional structures of oppression, occurring with “neither critical reflection nor any genuine increase in personal or collective freedom” (Downing 2001, 89). Repressive media thus depends on and constructs an uncritical dependence on the traditional intersectional power structures contested by meta-issue anti-authoritarian movements and the intersectional transformative media projects that work with and within them.

5. Reverse Capture of Victimhood

A second form of appropriation the alt-right engages in is called reverse capture of victimhood. This mechanism was first codified by psychologist Jennifer Freyd (1997), which she called DARVO, which takes place when someone is called out for racist, gendered or other oppressive behaviours:

DARVO stands for “Deny, Attack, and Reverse Victim and Offender”. The perpetrator or offender may Deny the behaviour, Attack the individual doing the confronting, and Reverse the roles of Victim and Offender such that the perpetrator assumes the victim role and turns the true victim into an alleged offender. (Freyd 2003)

If someone is called out for racist comments, for example, DARVO enables the perpetrator to deny their racist behaviour, then attack the victim by policing their tone

or making counter-accusations, thereby assuming the victim position and often simultaneously revictimising the true victim by further being racist. In the reversal mechanisms of DARVO analysed below, it may be enacted on the personal level but is often politically and ideologically motivated toward regressive aims of elite capture.

5.1. Who's Complaining?

Sara Ahmed addresses the reversal used in addressing complaints in her book *On Complaint* (Ahmed 2021), describing how people who complain (about racism) are labelled as troublemakers by institutions that designate the complainant as the problem, rather than dealing with the problem (racism) that was rightly identified. This reverses the positions of victim and oppressor, where the racist (i.e. the oppressor) claims to be a victim of the person they are enacting racism against (i.e. the actual victim).

An avalanche of examples come to mind, but we will present just two. The first occurred during the run-up to the US Presidential election in 2024, when Donald Trump attended the National Black Journalism Conference. He was asked by moderator Rachel Scott why Black people should trust him, given the language he has used against them. Trump responded:

“Well, first of all, I don’t think I’ve ever been asked a question in such a horrible manner, the first question. You don’t even say, ‘Hello. How are you?’ Are you with ABC? Because I think they’re a fake news network, a terrible network” (Trump, as cited in Ramirez et al. 2024)

Using DARVO, Trump Denies the behaviour by not responding to the question, Attacks Scott, calling her “horrible”, and Reverses roles of Victim and Offender, positioning himself as the victim of a “terrible network”. In attacking Scott’s news network, he re-enacts the oppression he’s being accused of, denying his power by attempting to inhabit the victim position. The alt-right stratagem of DARVO re-asserts Trump’s power over a member of a marginalised group, while also denouncing their media. Innocuous on its own, the repeated use and institutionalisation of this strategy serves to re-entrench power.

A second example, from Canadian politics, further illustrates this. In 2020, New Democratic Party (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh, called out Bloc Québécois MP Alain Therrien for refusing to support a motion to look into systemic racism in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the federal police (Zimonjic 2020). Singh called Therrien a racist based on the fact that insisting racism is not a problem itself serves as a mechanism for enacting racism through denial (Jiwani, 2006). Refusing to retract his statement, Singh – the complainant – was thrown out of Parliament for “name calling”. Therrien’s racism, which was the matter of the complaint, was never addressed. Singh’s complaint resulted in the Parliamentary institution labelling Singh himself (rather than institutional racism) the problem, ejecting Singh rather than Therrien.

Although similar in mechanism, this example is distinct from that of Trump. Trump is a known alt-right or right-wing populist politician, and as such, his individual speaking style engages DARVO strategies fairly often. Whereas in the case of Singh, it was in fact Parliamentary procedures that weaponised DARVO against him. This bears some unpacking. First of all, in the decision that Singh was name-calling, there is an institutional acceptance of the fact that being racist is inappropriate and unacceptable, rendering the epithet of being called racist a form of name calling. At the same time,

Parliamentary procedure does not support the right of someone to say that something being said is racist, or that the person saying a racist thing is in that moment racist. Therefore, despite the acknowledgement that being racist is not acceptable, there is no structural mechanism to address racism. This is a quintessential example of structural racism, or what might be considered infrastructural racism, in that the procedures and policies of Parliament make up an infrastructure that, in this instance, protects the racist statement and speaker, ejecting the person calling out racism. This was not handled as a case of discrimination, because the claim made by Therrien was that there is no racism in the RCMP and was thus not a direct attack on Singh. However, we can understand this as a form of indirect racism, where a racist statement takes place by a speaker (Therrien) directed toward an organisation (the claim that the RCMP's proven structural racism doesn't exist) and experienced as a racist moment by a third party (Singh). Infrastructural racism protects instances of indirect racism which cannot be considered discrimination. Discrimination is against the law based on the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms – but indirect racism, however problematic, is not.

DARVO thus creates an impossible predicament for anti-racist discourse in Canada, where it becomes difficult to call out racism without encountering this mechanism and being denounced for it. Moreover, this mechanism has been exploited by the alt-right to shore up that very racism in a myriad of spaces, places, and institutions. Alt-right uses of reverse capture of victimhood are not minimal, nor are they liberatory or anti-authoritarian, but rather they serve to reinforce institutional authority of the powerful and of the state. The more crucial issue here is that this alt-right use of DARVO is institutionalised in parliamentary procedure, illustrating that in fact we have, as Homans (2024) has found, elements of intersectional authoritarianism, in this case in the form of racism, embedded within institutions and infrastructures in Western democracies.

These two examples illustrate how DARVO is used to re-entrench racism, converting anti-racist challenges to it into personal and institutional mechanisms of power over racialised groups for speaking out, deepening discourses of intersectional systemic oppression in alt-right media content.

5.2. Safe(r) Spaces - For Whom?

Related to the mechanism of – reverse capture of victimhood is the capture of safe space discourses and practices. Left movements have long supported creating spaces of emotional safety, where all participants may freely engage in dialogue without domination, bullying, oppression, invisibilisation, or silencing. Subsequently acknowledging that it is impossible to guarantee a safe space led to the adoption of the term “safe(r) space”. This practice draws attention to and attempts to undermine the matrix of domination (Collins 2000), including structures of intersectional oppression, through an ongoing attentiveness in everyday practice to deconstructing power dynamics and instead sharing a relational ethics of care. A third term now in use is “braver space” used to empower participants to deal with oppression when it arises by supporting the uncomfortable conversations needed to build stronger, transformative relationships. These commitments are also used in media activist spaces and collectives and are considered a key element of intersectional approaches to equity, diversity and inclusion – a practice that facilitates equality in everyday media activist spaces.

In recent years, however, the alt-right have coopted the term “safe space” to avoid these types of uncomfortable conversations, amplifying structural mechanisms of

oppression by capturing the safe(r) and braver spaces originally politicised by and for marginalised groups. In these spaces, alt-right participants insist on their “right” to remain “safe” from being called out for oppressive behaviours – in other words, the right to make oppressive statements. In the moment they are creating an unsafe space for marginalised others, they insist on a safe space which in the end is only safe for themselves to express hate.

This capture of safe space discourse takes place through DARVO, as alt-right participants Deny their oppressive actions, while accusing marginalised participants of being oppressive in calling them out – attempting to Reverse the roles of Victim and Oppressor. These attempts to capture safe spaces from marginalised groups elide, overlook, and trample on the collective ethics of care built into safe(r) and braver spaces. Moreover, they mobilise against the shared and often explicitly stated commitment to potentiating mutually beneficial, supportive, liberatory, and sustainable social relationships or equitability within these spaces. Further, it causes the people who are supporting safe(r) and braver spaces to engage in non-consensual affective labour, as they are required to confront and/or remove the people breaking with stated behavioural guidelines, which can be exhausting and lead to burnout.

As safety must be actively constructed among all safe(r) and braver space participants, when an alt-right-leaning person denies their own oppressive behaviour and claims the right to safety for the dominant, they erase the ideological relations of power. Insisting instead on empty forms of harmful individualism, these alt-right individuals are seemingly unaware of the disruptive violence of their own discursive regimes. These reverse capture moments have often occurred to the detriment of alternative left media spaces, sometimes even leading to their collapse, degrading the transformative intentions and practices of alternative media.

Thus, the alt-right intervenes to capture intersectional callouts, complaints, and safe(r) spaces originally designed by the left to empower marginalised social movement and media activist groups, particularly online, flipping them (off) to recapture power for the already powerful.

6. Commodity Cooptation

More specific to cultural spaces of production, we can consider commodity cooptation whereby the commodity is a cultural form and practice. In the commodity form of cooptation, Hebdige (1979) notes that the aesthetics of resistance are appropriated through mainstream commodities that copy underground aesthetics while erasing their politics, selling these apolitical products to mainstream consumers. In Hebdige’s example, when the aesthetically provocative punk style was appropriated by mainstream fashion, products from safety-pin earrings to trashed leather jackets appeared on fashion runways and were sold at astonishingly high prices in the exact form of elite consumerism punks rejected. Through this form of commodity cooptation, dominant groups superficially pose as marginalised to coopt coolness, by looking as if they were the underground cultural producers they copy. As such they gain economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993) without having to suffer the exploitation of actually being marginalised – indeed serving to perpetuate the very exploitation that is being challenged by the revolutionary aesthetic of the cultural products and content they are coopting.

6.1. Looking Underground: Coopting Alternative Aesthetics

On this political terrain, underground aesthetics are coopted by mimicking the look of new media forms, originally invented by marginalised groups for liberatory purposes.

One such instance is bedroom streaming, in which Millennials and GenZs are streaming and interacting with live audiences over Twitch or YouTube, often from the confines of their bedrooms. These livestreamed videos form a curated version of alternative and underground lifestyle talking heads creating content from reports of ordinary life in non-scripted narratives that create authenticity through the performance of intimacy (Ruberg & Lark 2021).

There are several risks involved in bedroom streaming for young women, girls, and non-binary streamers. They must carefully balance authenticity and discretion (Tran 2024), as online spaces have become increasingly hostile and dangerous for women and gender-diverse people. Age is also a risk factor, as increasingly younger audiences are being targeted by social media algorithms in ways that make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation (Raffoul et al. 2023). Further, the economic realities of marginalised youth often mean they remain unable to afford homes or workspaces, which is why they are often streaming from their childhood bedrooms. Thus, bedroom streaming occurs at the marginalised intersection of gender, age, and social class.

Recently we have seen alt-right media operations coopting bedroom streaming aesthetics, infiltrating intimate familial spaces and reproducing them for nefarious purposes. To take one example, The Daily Wire is a news organisation describing itself as “right-of-centre” (About, para. 3) and “counter-cultural” (About, para. 1). Founded by TruthRevolt coworkers Ben Shapiro and Jeremy Boering with seed funding from oil fracking magnate Farris Wilks, in 2022 Daily Wire began streaming The Comments Section with Brett Cooper. In the show, Cooper sits at a desk with a mounted microphone in a bedroom bathed in LEDs, offering political commentary on topical stories. In reality, however, Cooper is not streaming to a live audience; moreover, the space is not a bedroom, but a soundstage set built to mimic one. Content for the fake bedroom livestream was generated by The Daily Wire, echoing its typical messaging: anti-feminist, anti-trans, and pro-corporation. Thus, repressive, malevolent messaging emanating from the alt-right was dressed in a young and trendy left-wing guise. Moreover, the intersections of age, gender, and social class of authentic bedroom streamers are precisely what comes under attack by the alt-right in their fakestreams.

In this way, repressive media engages in commodity cooptation (Hebdige 1979) taking the aesthetics and forms of grassroots liberatory online youth media and inserting alt-right messages in content clearly aligned with the matrix of domination (Collins 2000). This crosses genres from talk-show political satire (Young 2020) to lifestyle influencers, mommy-bloggers, and make-up influencers sometimes referred to as pastel-QAnons (Argentino 2021). It also engages on both sides of the (contested) gender binary, evident in tradwife (Sykes and Hopner 2024) and manosphere content (Ging 2019) alike.

As alt-right commodity cooptation deepens, a shattered mirror is being held up to the aesthetics of alternative media. “Using everyday media, low-cost media, and simple forms of communication” (Downing 2001, 91), aesthetic forms of alternative left media – amateurish, inexpensive, self-produced by small groups – are being coopted by the alt-right and sold back to an unaware public in ways that undermine their original authenticity and politics, indeed attacking the very digital media activist groups they mimic. As platforms profit from extended user engagement with these alt-right sites, the reproduction of outrage has become the easiest affective economy to sustain – with an antiauthoritarian aesthetic (Ferrell 1993) coopted for authoritarian purposes.

6.2. Astroturfing: The Powerful Posing as Marginalised

Consistent with repressive media's commodity cooptation mechanism, astroturfing refers to top-down political or corporate Public Relations (PR) campaigns styled as grassroots movements (Keller et al. 2020). Astroturfing is used by powerful corporations and political parties to artificially generate grassroots activity by coopting alternative media aesthetics and methods to garner broad public support for their propaganda by looking as if it comes from the underground or the grassroots. For example, Marjorie Taylor Greene called for a "grassroots army" to "stop the steal", in an astroturfed top-down election-campaign promoted through a Parler post, leveraging disinformation from within the dominant status quo political party to mobilise the alt-right at the grassroots base, in essence pretending to be grassroots and marginalised when she is a powerful elected politician (Jeppesen et al. 2021).

While prominent on social media platforms, astroturfing is also seen at public rallies, protests, and political campaign trails, used to shape public opinion, promote disinformation, and encourage conformity, precisely counter to grassroots initiatives that challenge the status quo by speaking truth to power (Chan 2024). Astroturfed campaigns generate citizen action by coopting affective commitments and conditions, directing citizens toward inauthentic or disguised ends, while hiding those very ends from participants. Thus, the mythic restructuring of meaning under new technopolitical conditions allows for the reframing of subjective and objective points of reference, reorienting the populace to an astroturfed (often not just inauthentic but also disinformation based) frame.

This can also serve to promote micro-fascist (Bratich 2022) interpersonal dynamics that include micro-aggressions (unspoken, indirect often racist aggression in everyday speech), cold-playing (acting coldly toward, ignoring, or not including people in discussions and activities, often because they are from a demographic different than one's own), and other fraught interpersonal dynamics that become crystallised through the destructive infiltration of grassroots forms of mobilisation through astroturfing.

This can mean that gatherings as seemingly innocuous as women's potlucks are not what they seem (Warren 2024). Astroturfed as potlucks, alt-right meal-shares are recruitment grounds where alt-right extremist values can become covertly seeded in ways that appear to offer solidarity but instead coopt women's sincere feelings and actions for nefarious purposes. Mobilised to support their husbands or other male family members in undemocratic, collectively harmful, and repressive modes, women are encouraged, exploited and coerced into subverting their own agency. Alt-right media is astroturfing this power-inflected logic of binary gender in ways that enable right-wing anti-authoritarians and extremists to uphold coercive patriarchal, authoritarian power in their most intimate relationships in modes of digital media production that include tradwives and more. When alt-right media poses as radical left media aesthetically but reverts the content to problematic right-wing, populist, and extremist ends, these forms of digital mobilisation are no longer transformative media.

6.3. Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour: Faking Networked Virality

The inauthenticity of astroturfing has found opportunities for online amplification by bot farms and hacking mechanisms, a group of practices now known collectively as Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB). Coined by Facebook's head of Cybersecurity Nathaniel Gleicher (2018), CIB, also sometimes called Coordinated Inauthentic Activity, refers to a carefully orchestrated online virality developed through

the creation and sharing of thousands of ideologically motivated messages – by bots and fake social media avatars. This practice occurs at a distance, where “a centralized source disseminates colluded information on the internet pretending that such information comes from a large number of unconnected individuals” (Chan 2024, 510) that appear as a user’s friends and family. This mimics the left digital activism of technopolitics where media activists have created swarms to hijack the social media algorithm for transformative social change (Jeppesen 2022; Treré 2018).

Such an inauthentically constructed virality gives the mistaken impression that the content comes from the grassroots and moreover that it is already popular, causing social media users to share what they believe is broadly respected content, thus unwittingly participating in amplifying repressive media messages rife with disinformation intentionally created to shift public opinion in negative, anti-social, polarising ways.

Thus, non-aligned and unassuming users may be led to engage in promoting alt-right digital media activity through misled but earnest affective digital labour. The stakes are quite high, as researchers have found that CIB networks have influenced elections and persuaded millions of people to believe patent untruths. Cloaking the ulterior motives of these social media missives in digital secrecy enables foreign and alt-right CIB developers to simulate the guise of independence, autonomy, and authenticity in social media content, while scaffolding the power structures of capital and the state among millions of users. Thus, faking networked virality, the alt-right has co-opted the inventive and liberatory modes of technopolitics used by the Indignados, Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and many other authentic grassroots media activists.

7. Conclusion: Transformative Media

The foregoing mapping of forms of appropriation, capture, and cooptation of media activism with their corresponding mechanisms, we argue, make it clear that left antiauthoritarian radical alternative media, grounded in intersectional social justice meta-issue movements, are increasingly being encroached upon by the right. Among repressive alt-right media and their publics, the mythic and romanticised tropes of antiauthoritarianism are ironically enabling the inhabitation and spread of authoritarian power. This has the add-on effects of supporting repressive right-wing populist regimes and re-entrenching regressive social norms across race, gender, sex, non-binary gender, disability, and more.

Juxtaposed against manipulative alt-right politics and media, transformative media remains a power-interruptive form of grassroots intersectional autonomous media. Transformative media projects are generative of content and processes both equally imbued with transformative qualities and values. These values are shared across all forms of transformative media, where local variances mean that certain values may become emphasised over others, based on the material realities faced in any given geopolitical space and time.

Transformative alternative media, we argue, remains differentiated from alt-right repressive media through its propensity towards: (1) truth-seeking and fact-checking, (2) collaborative democratic decision-making practices and processes, (3) collective autonomy of ownership and control of media projects, (4) intersectional liberation in content and practice, and (5) an ethics of mutual care and healing justice.

In transformative media, a commitment to in-depth investigative reporting enables communities to learn and express the truth, based on multiple verifiable authentic facts. In transformative media, information comes “from an array of sources, channels, styles, and voices, including from multiple ideological perspectives”

(Rauch, 2023, p. 873). Horizontal, direct-democratic participatory decision-making processes that value intersectional differences and account for power dynamics, aiming for equitability, are key to realising transformative content, where relational practices of collaboration and cooperation facilitate decisions that are best for the media project, the individuals within it, and their linked communities and social movements.

Commitments to collective autonomy, including shared ownership of media, intersectional liberation, and an ethics of care, are shaped by multiple innovative practices of horizontality, social justice dynamics, reciprocity and sharing, and mutually respectful relationality. They reject white supremacy, patriarchy, colonisation, gender binaries, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism and more – comprising the matrix of domination (Collins 2000). These key commitments provide transformative mechanisms for intersectional communicative counter-publics – groups countering dominant discourses in public debate (Kidd et al. 2006). Further, they enable media makers to remain engaged in the mutually held vision of creating beneficial, grounded, real-world, actualised connective pathways toward justice for all as both an aspiration and an everyday practice.

When these commitments are engaged through intersectional grassroots media practices, transformative media, we suggest, may indeed exercise the power to subvert alt-right media toxicologies (toxic media and social ecologies) and reclaim the alternative media space for liberatory ends. These media practices are deeply community-based, authentic, somatically relevant, and relationally vital. Moreover, they potentiate collaboration and cooperation toward a just future, uniting human and ecological flows into a potential sustainable future for one and all. Nonetheless, as alt-right media and their toxicologies seem to be spreading, it is incumbent upon those who support transformative media to resist. Nothing less than the future of democracy and human life lies in the balance.

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