Dawn of the Information Dark Age

“Nothing is random. Everything is connected.”

-Q

“I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma, a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth.”

― Umberto Eco, *Foucault's Pendulum*

In a remarkable document published in 1996, John Perry Barlow declared the independence of cyberspace for the unfettered expression of ideas. In what would now sound like advocacy for the “dark web,” Barlow decried governmental and regulatory attempts to manage “information infrastructures,” and he envisioned an almost utopian world of unregulated communications. Characterized as “an act of nature,” Barlow imagined cyberspace as a space of collective freedom in which everyone can democratically engage “our great and gathering conversation.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Nearly thirty years after Barlow’s breathless proclamation of independence, most citizens in the West indeed have access to unimaginable information resources through the internet, navigating vistas of data that put William Gibson’s vision of surfing cyberpunks to shame. Data is retrievable from all over the globe, and individuals can appeal directly to massive audiences through social-media platforms such as TikTok or YouTube. Students are able to find information on almost any topic through Google or Wikipedia, and it is not uncommon to find older generations frustrated by the fact that their fanciful stories or misremembered information are now fact-checked by younger generations. It would seem on the surface that we have entered the information utopia breathlessly predicted by the early prophets of cyberspace.

And yet, the utopian vision of information access and exchange has, in many ways, been transformed into a dystopian nightmare of bad-faith arguments, deepfakes and fake news, mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theorizing, and malignant deployments of data for increasingly extremist positions on social or cultural issues. While the internet has always been a “contested space,” which is, according to John Naughton in 2001, “in a state of constant disequilibrium,” our information ecosystems have become increasingly toxic since 2016.[[2]](#endnote-2) With the surprising election of the conspiracy theorist president, Donald Trump, the anarchic, ludic, masculinist, racist, and sexist energies of internet spaces like 4chan crystallized into a coherent ideological political force dedicated to far-right extremism and conspiracism while weaponizing the tactics of 4chan trolling and posting. At the same time, the internet became a space for right-wing conspiracy theorizing driven by crowd-sourced data gathering.[[3]](#endnote-3) Data itself has thus become a contested site for manipulation and control as evidenced in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which social-media companies illegally sold demographic data to the Trump campaign for targeted advertising.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Although questionable information behavior has always been coterminous with the internet, it is hard to deny that something new and terrifying has been unleashed in recent years. And while I don’t want to overstate the evolution of the internet in a teleological sense, I do want to analyze the political economy of post-2016 conspiracism as something emergent, which absorbed the toxic tendencies latent in the web and metastasized them with profound impact for the health and future of democratic norms. Two incidents bookend this period well and capture this emerging “spirit of the age.” The first occurred during a 2017 interview with Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press*, in which KellyAnne Conway, then Counselor to the President, claimed the administration was relying on “alternative facts” when pressed about distorted numbers given by White House press secretary Sean Spicer regarding Trump’s inauguration crowds.[[5]](#endnote-5) While initially laughable—how could a fact be “alternative”?—this moment in media history served as a warning sign that something was rotten in the state of our information behavior. The second incident occurred in 2022, when Trump attacked the “Kangaroo Court” of the January 6th Congressional Committee formed to investigate Trump’s role in the Capitol riot. “[I]t’s up to American patriots to arm themselves with the information,” Trump proclaimed.[[6]](#endnote-6) Denouncing the bipartisan, factual account of his involvement in encouraging the January 6th riot, Trump articulates the reality of the contemporary information ecosystem: that partisan extremism and echo chambers have established entirely separate information environments with entirely different beliefs about what constitutes the “truth.”

So, what happened in 2016? How did the possibility of limitless freedom through the internet so publicly transform into a runaway disinformation machine, driving ever more complex conspiracy theories, false information, and political paranoia? How did we get from Barlow’s vistas of freedom to a media hellscape of trolling, doxing, disinformation, and conspiracy? While the internet has always been a site for the social id, the particular informational dynamics of social media in the post-Trump years seem, looking backward through the January 6th riots and the subsequent fallout, to have marked a change in online experience, the sudden downpour from a storm that had been slowly forming on the horizon. In this book, I analyze the particular dynamics of this shift, tracing the political economy of online conspiracism over a brief period of time from Trump’s election to the January 6th Capitol riot to Trump’s reelection campaign in 2024. In essence, I describe the political economy of conspiracy theories during these eight years as the symptom of a burgeoning zone of information darkness, which continues to plague democracies to this day. If the globe has truly entered into a “post-truth” epoch in which truth is relative to an individual’s ideology and research, where does that leave the possibility of democratic pluralism and a shared political project predicated on the common good?

Although this project focuses largely on the years between Trump’s elections, these events cannot be separated from events that foreshadowed these informational dynamics nor events that come after. Indeed, the 2024 elections and the attempted assassination of Trump demonstrate forcefully the continued significance of these information dynamics for understanding our current political malaise. Angela Nagle describes the radical shift from leaderless, networked political struggles of the early 2000s—in which cyber-utopian principles seemed on the verge of realization through far-left or anarchist movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Anonymous—to the alt-right troll armies of social media and the chan imageboards, which have provided a space for organized and militant online ideologies like QAnon, Dark MAGA, Great Replacement, and other theories. “What we’ve since witnessed instead” Nagle concludes, “is that this leaderless formation can express just about any ideology even, strange as it may seem, that of the far right.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Her analysis demonstrates the slippery political terrain of the internet—especially on the nihilistic, ironic, shitposting chans—but such an analysis does not explain how conspiracy theories, in particular, have become such prominent aspects of online American life, enough to convince a wide swath of fairly normal, even intelligent Americans to not only believe patently untrue and often quite bizarre ideologies but to act on those beliefs with tragic results. In a world where everyday individuals have access to information readily available at their fingertips, how do conspiracy theories spread so rapidly across the internet, duping so many Americans who didn’t know one another into believing—and collectively crafting—bizarre, patently false narratives? While access to information has never been easier and Americans have never been more literate, we still see the rise of bizarre conspiracy theories and the viral spread of “toxic information,” exacerbated by the very information technologies that have made us so literate.

This paradox, I argue, is not an accident of history but is instead immanent within the very structures of the twenty-first century information economy, and it remains unclear how to navigate this reality even as the danger has never been more real. And the stakes of such an information economy become higher each year. Information itself has become politicized to such an extent that entire communities of online commentators have become entirely Balkanized, seemingly beyond remedy, which allows conspiracy theories to fester.[[8]](#endnote-8) The internet, and in particular social media, have provided a space for every opinion and theory to be shared virally with thousands, even millions, of people around the world. And given the rise of an aggressive and toxic far-right conspiracist commentariat in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, online discourse has only become even more partisan, with political positions impacting and even generating data for every extreme position, theory, or belief. As Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis have shown, such toxic information environments have been produced, in some part, by dedicated far-right organizing and media manipulation online.[[9]](#endnote-9) Moreover, the infrastructural dynamics of social media have produced “echo chambers” in which ideologies can metastasize through feedback loops in which individuals may come to believe certain ideas through limited exposure to new information.[[10]](#endnote-10) And with widespread access to weapons of war, mentally ill individuals have been able to commit mass murders while spreading their manifestos across the internet, thereby inspiring other acts of terrorism.[[11]](#endnote-11) Such an informational dynamic seems to have now become the dominant mode of online—and offline—life in the United States.

**Dawn of the Information Dark Age**

I theorize contemporary information ecosystems as the “Information Dark Age,” which is a way of describing the specific confluence of ideological, material, and historical forces that have culminated in super-conspiracies, anti-democratic mobilizations, and election fraud paranoia.[[12]](#endnote-12) But unlike the medieval Dark Ages, which scholars have long questioned as a useful framework for describing history,[[13]](#endnote-13) the Information Dark Age is a theoretical and structural framework to explain American conspiracism, and the name signifies along two axes. First, the term references the “Information Age” as the descriptor used for the period corresponding to the rise of computational power as a governing principle for Western societies. With the exponential rise in microchip capacities to contain information, known as Moore’s Law, followed by the advent of affordable personal computers, the internet, and social media platforms, the Information Age represents an epistemological shift of incalculable significance. As Manuel Castells makes clear, the 20th-century revolution in information technology was accompanied by subsequent changes in human activity and knowledge production: “Because information is an integral part of all human activity, all processes of our individual and collective existence are directly shaped (although certainly not determined) by the new technological medium.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Human behavior and identity have been radically impacted by the ubiquity of information and the capacity to consume and share information freely via social-media platforms, which many scholars have theorized as the “information society.”[[15]](#endnote-15) These platforms, which allow individuals to promulgate their own theories and research into topics of political importance, have facilitated the spread of fake news, mis/disinformation, and conspiracy theories to such an extent that the “network society” might now be theorized, albeit in a still somewhat hyperbolic way, as the “conspiracy society.” The dominance of social media platforms and platform capitalism have produced an entire ecosystem primed for ever more extreme and outrageous content, which explains why extremist political ideologies and conspiracy theories have exploded across the internet.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Secondly, the Information Dark Age alludes to metaphors of “darkness” inherent in the ideological compositions and deformations of the Information Age, which have produced a broad commitment to “darkness” as an orientation in philosophy, politics, and culture over the past ten years. Such a political positionality is evident in the strange alliances of online subcultures such as Men’s Rights Activists, Neo-Nazis, internet trolls, the alt-Right, wellness influencers, and conspiracy theorists against Establishment politics following the 2016 elections.[[17]](#endnote-17) The central paradox of this book, that more access to information means a higher capacity for extremism and conspiracy theories, is emblematic of a longer trend in online political discourse, originating in the neo-reactionary philosophies of Nick Land and Mencius Moldbug’s blog posts theorizing the “Dark Enlightenment” and culminating, at the time of this writing, in the Dark MAGA movement on Twitter and Telegram. This recurrent metaphor of darkness suggests a broader transformation in American information ecosystems toward publicly shared delusions about a globalist Deep State. These emergent ideologies reflect a broader American fascination in some circles with extremist anti-Enlightenment, anti-democratic ideologies, which have found fertile ground to grow on the internet and infused some mainstream political commentary about Great Replacement conspiracy theories. The promise of networked liberatory politics, such as was in evidence with the Arab Spring or hacktivist group Anonymous,[[18]](#endnote-18) has given way to a networked politics of white supremacy, fascism, and neo-feudalism, which have crystallized after decades of mass-media fearmongering, race-baiting, and xenophobia through traditional media outlets and online communities.[[19]](#endnote-19) Committing to a coherent aesthetics and politics of “darkness” suggests a rejection of democratic consensus and liberalism in favor of a Hobbesian state of nature. Theories of the Dark Enlightenment fuel much of the broader reactionary turn on social media as far-right activists increasingly come to question or reject democratic norms, and such a turn has provided intellectual justification for conspiracy theories about American civic processes related to healthcare, immigration, and elections.

Americans are thus experiencing a new form of reactionary politics, predicated on the subsequent advances of our info-technological society under late capitalism and an inability to keep pace with such informational developments as a society. Americans are experiencing an epoch in which information literacy has never been higher, in which any individual can access and share data readily through an internet connection, but also an age in which the accessibility and shareability of information has become, itself, part of the problem.[[20]](#endnote-20) The Information Dark Age articulates a set of coordinates in which conspiracy theories are sparked, circulated, and remixed through the structural and economic affordances of information technology. Every American now has access to incredible amounts of data, in which massive technology companies such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have enabled informational sharing with ease across platforms, and yet users have not evolved the capacity to subject such information to thoughtful critique, turning instead to conspiracism as explanatory mechanism for current events. Furthermore, and perhaps more insidiously, this inability to parse new information is masked by the actual capacities of individuals to produce and share content. Thus, adherents to conspiracy theories such as QAnon anticipate efforts to debunk or discredit their theories because they see themselves as actually *more* literate than most.[[21]](#endnote-21) When combined with dark-web platforms that preserve users’ total anonymity and a pervasive and growing distrust of mainstream media and academic institutions, such alterations to our public sphere have become especially problematic and dangerous. As more Americans come to believe that the Deep State is working against their best interests, they become attracted to increasingly desperate and extremist ideologies openly espousing conspiracism as a response to economic austerity and global precarity.

Applying the Information Dark Age as a theoretical lens to look at our contemporary media ecosystem does little to prevent future QAnons from arising nor will it mitigate extremism or white supremacy, and efforts to promote information or media literacy seem unlikely to succeed beyond the halls of academia. As Barbara Fister succinctly puts it in the pages of the *Atlantic*, QUOTE. Theorizing the position in which we find ourselves offers a clear-eyed diagnosis of the problem. By analyzing the contours of our information ecosystems, we can at least identify the structural problems immanent within social media and the internet for spreading conspiracism while avoiding the pitfalls of reducing freedom of speech through deplatforming initiatives, which too often impact alternative voices on the left while ignoring the right, thereby targeting individuals with legitimate alternative views rather than conspiracy theorists. Deplatforming efforts such as Twitter’s initial banning of Trump, has only pushed such conspiratorial accounts to new platforms such as Truth Social thereby reducing our ability to study or engage them, and changes in leadership at Twitter and its subsequent transformation into the “free-speech” platform X have produced a resurgence in online conspiracism.[[22]](#endnote-22) Rather than deplatform individuals whose opinions we loathe or who promulgate conspiracies, we must recognize the inherent structural and material realities of online life and imagine new rules of engagement around these topics. Banning QAnon pages from YouTube or Twitter only drives those accounts to seek other avenues for organizing and does little to combat the underlying problems we face as a democratic society.

**Manufacturing the “Paranoid Style”**

Early accounts of mass media detail the ways in which such media impacted and manipulated public opinion. Analyzing the political economy of these information ecosystems attends to the infrastructural, material, and ideological dynamics by which the internet impacts the civil and political discourse in our contemporary societies. In their groundbreaking study of the impact of mass media dynamics on democracy, Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky describe the mechanisms by which mainstream media “manufacture consent.”[[23]](#endnote-23) That is, diverse media outlets define the horizon of ideology, shoring up what Antonio Gramsci theorized as “hegemony” in which political consent is given by the governed.[[24]](#endnote-24) Official media channels operate to shore up official accounts of current events or policy decisions through sanitized and homogenized narratives. The increasing centralization of mainstream media under the umbrella of one or two massive conglomerates has enabled the creation and dissemination of ideological messages to offline audiences. For example, Timothy Burke created a video showcasing how local news stations owned by Sinclair Broadcasting repeat the same scripted warning of biased and fake reporting while pushing pro-Trump ideologies about the media. Disguised as objective local reporting, such media messages reiterate Herman and Chomsky’s thesis.[[25]](#endnote-25) Another prominent example was the widespread liberal media blackout of Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaigns in 2016 and 2020. Anchors on CNN and MSNBC rarely discussed Sanders unless the coverage was negative, shoring up anti-Sanders sentiment while tamping down positive reporting.[[26]](#endnote-26) It is not conspiratorial to suggest that mainstream media has become sufficiently corporatized and centralized and therefore biased toward particular political narratives.

Little could Herman and Chomsky have realized, in 1988, the ways in which cable news and radio would be used not only to manufacture consent but also manufacture ever more extreme emotional responses of outrage, fear, and distrust; furthermore, such anger and fear have proven to be a profitable accelerant for conspiratorial, paranoid interpretations of current events. According to polling from the Kaiser Family Foundation, viewers of far-right networks such as One America News, Newsmax, and Fox News are more likely to embrace and spread conspiracy theories.[[27]](#endnote-27) Trafficking in outrage and fear, such media platforms promulgate a willingness to accept “alternative facts” over mainstream, vetted news reporting that may have a political slant.[[28]](#endnote-28) Far-right mass media have produced an atmosphere of rage and fear while exacerbating susceptibility for conspiracy beliefs, including fear of immigrants and antisemitic beliefs in global elites controlling the world.[[29]](#endnote-29) Media commentator Tucker Carlson, for example, spread Great Replacement conspiracy theories on Fox News, stoking anger toward immigrants and the Democratic Party.[[30]](#endnote-30) Viewers are inundated with such emotionally charged narratives and may come to adopt conspiracy theories about the political process that stoke outrage, fear, and hatred; moreover, such negative emotions then fuel further engagement with such content. Whitney Phillips has described this as the “cybernetic feedback loop” between mainstream media and online subcultures in which each camp fuels the other.[[31]](#endnote-31) When combined with the incredible research potential of the internet and the capacity to share information anonymously and virally online, such an information ecosystem is primed for disaster for a functional democratic public sphere.

The conspiratorial phenomena that characterize online life in the 21st century both resists and implements the monopolization of media. Unlike leftist critiques of media monopolization as examples of corporate consolidation, conspiracy theorists respond from the reactionary right through paranoid fantasies about Deep State actors working to undermine and subvert America through narratives advancing “wokeness,” multiculturalism, and identity politics.[[32]](#endnote-32) Mainstream liberal-leaning mass media is accused of being the “enemy of the people” by the far right while right-wing mass media deploys “info-tainment” to promulgate increasingly extreme ideologies and conspiracy theories.[[33]](#endnote-33) In many ways, such theories do provide a response to the growing crises of capitalism, but they substitute sustained political critique of material dynamics and internal contradictions with Manichean narratives about good and evil operatives engaged in vast conspiracies. The mainstreaming or “normifiecation” of such reactionary ideologies reflect the extent to which the chan culture has permeated our offline political sphere.[[34]](#endnote-34) Primed by cable news outrage on channels such as Fox News, radio call-in shows hosted by Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck, and online platforms such as Breitbart, the offline, conservative media sphere has been infected by the extremely online alt-right, which has managed to inculcate paranoia and conspiracy, which has metastasized such that even Fox News can be considered too establishment by believers in these conspiracies.

With the rise of “fake news” and “alternative facts” as a political cudgel in 2016 came the manifestation of something that had long existed in the American consciousness, so much so that Richard Hofstadter predicted it in 1963, describing what he called the “paranoid style” of American politics. In a lecture at Oxford University, given the same month and year that President Kennedy was killed in Dallas—a confluence conspiracy theorists could appreciate—Hofstadter decried a growing tendency toward paranoia and conspiracism on the political right, which he called the “paranoid style”: “Behind such movements there is a style of mind, not always right-wing in its affiliations, that has a long and varied history. I call it the paranoid style because no other word adequately evokes the qualities of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind.”[[35]](#endnote-35) The target for such criticism was the Goldwater contingent of the Republican Party, but we might aptly apply such descriptions to the party of Trump, with its paranoia about enemies, aggressive attacks on journalists and critics, and general disdain for democratic norms. Hofstadter’s account, of a paranoid, conspiratorial American politics has spread, like a creeping shadow, darkening our democratic horizons after the election of Donald Trump, himself a symptom of the internet age.

However, what Hofstadter could not have conceived in 1963 was the exponential acceleration and spread of such toxic tendencies via global communication networks and information technologies to an American populace not capable of keeping up with information overload. While American liberals often point to Trumpism as something *sui generis*, it is clear that Trumpism is the symptom of something much larger and more capacious, something much more dangerous and fraught with complexities for American society. Indeed, we might say that Trumpism is the spirit of the Information Age, with Trump himself serving as the first 4chan president, with his origins visible in Hofstadter’s warnings about the “paranoid style” now creeping virally via global information networks. Cable news has paved the way for this “paranoid style” in programs hosted by showmen such as Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Bill O’Reilly, combined with online “news” publications such as Breitbart. Combined with a robust online public sphere that has emerged online through social-media platforms with little accountability for monitoring behavior or identity, such an aggressively conspiratorial atmosphere is rapidly becoming the defining character of the 21st century.

To assess the specific contours of the internet and social media which have facilitated our current information malaise, in which conspiracy theories run rampant, I describe the political economy of the Information Dark Age. As a mode of analysis of the internal contradictions and material dynamics of our contemporary information ecosystems, understanding the changing political economy of the internet since 2016 will reveal the economic base and cultural superstructure in which our paranoid public sphere forms and perpetuates itself.[[36]](#endnote-36) In his 1859 treatise, “A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy,” Marx describes the importance of understanding social relations within the broader framework of material conditions, drawing on Hegel’s philosophy of law: “My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life.”[[37]](#endnote-37) For Marx, the material conditions in which humans exist are the source for both legal and political relations rather than some notion of human evolution or development. Marx articulates a theory of social relations predicated on the particular mode of production under which people labor:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Marx thus understood political ideology and social dynamics as circumscribed or determined by the materials conditions in which we live, reversing the notion that human consciousness exists apart from those conditions. The totality of relations formed by material production are determinative of the ideological and political horizons under that mode of production.

 Within the Information Age, communications infrastructures play an outsized role in developing such ideological and political energies. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno famously linked media infrastructure with political ideology in their analysis of the “Culture Industry.” According to Christian Fuchs, communications and media not only serve to circulate commodities within capitalism but also craft and circulate ideologies.[[39]](#endnote-39) Moreover, conspiracy theory, in his formulation, corresponds to the ideology within capitalist societies because such theories are replacements for alienation and class identity:

Conspiracy theories are a form of false consciousness (ideology) that decodes alienation in a false manner, so that domination is personalised in the form of a conspirator who pulls the hidden strings of domination. Conspiracy theories overlook society's structure, namely that alienation operates as a structure that interacts dialectically with the conscious, unconscious, intended and unintended actions of humans in society. Conspiracy theories personalise domination.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Conspiracy theories provide a set of understandable coordinates to map one’s alienated position within society, explaining political instability, economic uncertainty, or personal setbacks through a comforting narrative in which global elites or Deep State actors are working to undermine and subvert one’s happiness and security. Conspiracy theories such as the Great Replacement, for example, envision a world in which immigration and multiculturalism can be blamed for social and economic problems rather than the particular economic conditions of late capitalism which ensure that politicians are susceptible to economic incentives to retain the status quo.

 For the study of conspiracy theories within the Information Age, such a material analysis suggests causal mechanisms for the preponderance of increasingly extreme and seemingly bizarre political beliefs and social relations as a replacement for materialist critique of the bureaucratic and political forces that shape our civil societies. Fredric Jameson claims that conspiracy theories represent a mode of “cognitive mapping” of the social totality, which substitutes conspiracy theory for a critique of the capitalist mode of production. As Robert Hassan has described, we now live in what might be called the “information society” in which digital information is always already political and politicized, at play in a field of competing economic, social, political, and technological changes.[[41]](#endnote-41) Cognitive mapping necessarily requires attempting to contextualize sociopolitical events and material economic conditions within the digital space as well. If we agree with Jameson that conspiracy theory corresponds to an incomplete attempt at cognitive mapping then it should be no surprise that conspiracism seems to be the order of the day on social media and the internet. Slavoj Žižek argues that such cognitive mappings as suggested by Jameson are essential features of information-rich, highly complex environments in which simple explanations are elusive: “when individuals lack the elementary cognitive mapping capabilities and resources that would enable them to locate their place within a social totality, they invent conspiracy theories that provide an ersatz mapping, explaining all the complexities of social life as the result of a hidden conspiracy.”[[42]](#endnote-42) Conspiracy theorists replace an understanding of social ills as the product of various bureaucratic and capitalist state mechanisms with a belief in Manichean narratives about Deep State evildoers controlling global events. In essence, the internet has exacerbated such cognitive mapping, making it more highly visible and seductive as an explanation for material conditions.

 The political economy of online conspiracism reveals the various components that fuel the paranoia and delusion that has permeated so much of our political and cultural discourse in the past ten years. As we have now entered nearly thirty years of the “information society,” it seems clear that we are no closer to controlling or managing our media systems so that online conspiracism and mi/disinformation remain constrained. In his analysis of the “political economy of media,” Robert McChesney describes the project of political economy well: “Political economists of media do not believe the existing media system is natural or inevitable or impervious to change. They believe the media system is the result of policies made in the public’s name but often without the public’s informed consent.” In his analysis, political economists of media attempt to link media and communications to “ownership, market structures, commercial support, technologies, labor practices, and government policies.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Like media, we can and should assess the political economy of online conspiracism, the technological, social, ideological, and economic factors that facilitate the “paranoid style”: technologies such as social-media platforms, lack of regulation, dark-web systems, and recommendation algorithms; ideologies such as white supremacy and xenophobia, fears about loss of control or status, fears over worsening global instabilities, anxieties about changing social demographics; economic incentives for seeking attention, the profitability of fear and rage, the loss of public media and the conglomeration of mainstream news, and the capacity to financialize content. These factors comprise the political economy of online conspiracism.

**Darkness Falls: Conspiracy Theories in the Information Age**

In this book, I use the theoretical framework of the Information Dark Age to describe the confluence of three separate components, which comprise the political economy of conspiracy theories across the post-2016 internet. While some of these dynamics are coterminous with the rise of the internet, they have fueled a new online conspiracist atmosphere in post-2016 America. In other words, these three features are akin to distinct weather fronts, merging into a massive conspiracism storm with an incredible capacity for destructive energy. These three factors, I argue, are unique to the 21st-century internet environment and have resulted in the rise of QAnon, Great Replacement, electoral fraud, COVID-19, and other pernicious conspiracy theories, which rely on information access and dissemination. These three components work in concert to exacerbate the spread and scope of toxic information at the precise moment that the internet has become the predominant site for public political discourse.

The first section of the book focuses on one particularly damaging front in the so-called “Culture Wars,” which are marked by a growing dissatisfaction with the liberal Enlightenment status quo and a turn toward alternative, often toxic perspectives of our political lifeworld. Whereas philosopher Frances Fukayama predicted the “end of history” as the ascendancy of liberal democratic values in 1989, the election of Trump and the subsequent crystallization of an online alt-right ideology across the dark web and onto the mainstream internet has revealed growing interest in an “outsider” positionality violently opposed to Enlightenment principles of reason, the sanctity of a free press, and the expertise of academics and mainstream media in providing access to unbiased information.[[44]](#endnote-44) As online supporters of Trump began to coalesce around a coherent set of symbols and memes in opposition to liberal political orthodoxy, reactionary movements began to appear which leveraged darkness as a set of tactics and principles for opposing such orthodoxy. Moreover, geopolitical instabilities such as the War in Ukraine or the genocidal attacks on Palestinians in response to the trauma of October 7th, 2024 attacks by Hamas have only increased public interest in increasingly extreme political ideologies. With the appearance of Project 2025, which provides an extremist political roadmap for future conservative legislators, such reactionary political dynamics have become mainstream.[[45]](#endnote-45)

The first section of the book focuses on the ideological aspects of conspiracism as it developed out of a constellation of particular projects in the 2010s, which crystallized into QAnon and Great Replacement conspiracy theories. Darkness is a prevailing theoretical orientation in use by cadres of reactionary thinkers (and their followers) who oppose the liberal consensus as manifested in the election of Barack Obama and the subsequent America legislative investment in multiculturalism, gender equity, and LGBTQ activism. In this first section of the book, I discuss the rise in the early-to-mid 2000s of strange reactionary forms of “outsider philosophy” in the work of British philosopher Nick Land and technologist Mencius Moldbug (pseudonym for Curtis Yarvin) whose theories about contemporary politics were predicated on metaphors of darkness. As Land theorizes the neo-reactionary philosophy of the Dark Enlightenment:

Where the progressive enlightenment sees political ideals, the dark enlightenment sees appetites. It accepts that governments are made out of people, and that they will eat well. Setting its expectations as low as reasonably possible, it seeks only to spare civilization from frenzied, ruinous, gluttonous debauch ... It consistently finds democratic ‘solutions’ to this problem risible, at best.[[46]](#endnote-46)

This anti-Enlightenment, neo-fascist philosophy envisions a model of society based on pseudo-libertarian ideologies and Western supremacy in which nation-states are run as corporations with unlimited power given to leaders. And while the “Dark Enlightenment” may have appeared *before* Trumpism, its opposition to liberal multiculturalism has proven a consistent line of attack for subsequent far-right movements advocating authoritarianism and continue to inform white supremacist and neo-fascist movements as well as Great Replacement conspiracy theories.

Such an outsider, reactionary philosophy reappeared in 2016 with the rise of the so-called Intellectual Dark Web (IDW)—comprised of a disparate group of provocative media figures such as podcaster Joe Rogan, philosopher Jordan Peterson, and political commentator Ben Shapiro—who espoused various forms of intellectual “rebellion” against liberal orthodoxy in the first years of the Trump administration, which was itself emblematic of the same chaotic energies.[[47]](#endnote-47) Much like the “Dark Enlightenment,” the IDW represented a quasi-philosophical set of responses to liberal ideologies about gender, sexuality, and culture with an eye toward elevating dissident, “dark” voices. Such efforts have fueled far-right attacks on mainstream journalism and education as exemplars of liberal orthodoxy. I contextualize the ways in which such dynamics are a reaction, imagined by adherents as a transgressive and controversial renegade force in American intellectual life, to the centrist political liberalism and neoliberal economic policies of the Democratic Party under the Obama Administration. But I also trace the lineage between such ideologies and conspiracy theory, which is often deployed using the same rhetoric of darkness and apartness from mainstream narratives.

I argue that such sociopolitical forces are channeled with potent force into the political rise of Donald Trump and the rise of the alt-right movement after 2016. Such theoretical movements reflect the same social conditions that paved the way for phenomena like QAnon, Great Replacement, and COVID conspiracies. Both Land’s neo-reactionary philosophy and the IDW offered philosophical frameworks for refuting mainstream information and academia, which were also denigrated widely by far-right media platforms such as Breitbart. It is no mistake that reactionary media platforms became prominent around the same time and that such right-wing organizing outflanked the left in many areas, the full impact of which has yet to be seen. And while the IDW seems somewhat quaint alongside more controversial far-right provocateurs such as Milo Yiannopoulos, Richard Spencer, and Steve Bannon, I argue they are actually part of a longer reactionary trajectory, emblematic of the broader conspiracist dynamics within the Information Dark Age.

These “dark” energies have also been channeled into a new insurgent, increasingly violent evolution of the Make America Great Again movement known as “Dark MAGA.” Active on Telegram and Truth Social, Dark MAGA has weaponized memes with fantasies of violence and retribution against members of the Deep State who are believed to have stolen the 2020 election. Parroting Trump’s disinformation about a stolen election, Dark MAGA imagines a violent uprising which will restore Trump to power through a barbaric and brutal set of online tactics. In many of the narratives espoused by advocates for Dark MAGA, the January 6th insurrection was merely a trial run for a more organized revolution by armed patriots seeking revenge. While it remains unclear whether Dark MAGA is anything more than an online aesthetic, it is extremely disturbing to imagine the possibilities for political violence as we approach the 2024 presidential elections and in the wake of political violence in Trump’s assassination attempt, and the movement represents a possible new front in the darkness sweeping over the internet.[[48]](#endnote-48)

**Infrastructure of the Dark Web**

The second component of this Information Dark Age is infrastructural, and I discuss the material and structural dynamics by which conspiracy theories and extremist ideologies proliferate online in the second section of the book. This section will emphasize the role of platforms and algorithms in providing space for conspiracy theories to spread. Anonymized individuals congregate online through the use of imageboard platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, and 8kun, which provide unregulated sites for discussion of any topic. But these spaces also became ideal breeding grounds for organizing collectively, with dedicated imageboards for specific extremist and conspiracist groups. Originally designed in Japan for fan groups of anime, such spaces transformed into platforms for launching reactionary attacks against mainstream political movements and provided completely anonymized sites for developing conspiracy theories and spreading mis/disinformation. These spaces became so toxic in the post-2016 information economy that 8chan was shut down after a mass shooter used the platform to share video of his manifesto.[[49]](#endnote-49)

The primary driver for much of the unhinged information economy is the dark web. Locatable only through specific browsers which encrypt IP addresses, the dark web provides access to illicit content under the auspices of freedom of speech.[[50]](#endnote-50) But the dark web has also become a site for sharing information and coordinating strategy around conspiracy theories. Because the dark web provides an infrastructure whereby information can be shared anonymously, it became the primary site for QAnon’s organized research following the closure of 8chan after the Christchurch murderer published his manifesto there. As Robert Gehl has articulated, dark-web social networking sites are “engaged in experiments with anonymity and infrastructure.” In his account, the dark web is caught in a double bind as both a space for illicit activities and unhampered freedom of speech, which he argues is an “experiment in power/freedom, an attempt to simultaneously trace, deploy, and overcome the historical conditions in which it finds itself.”[[51]](#endnote-51) This attempt to overcome the historical conditions in which the dark web exists, in which social media platforms can remove and censor misinformation, makes it the perfect vehicle for collective information creation and dissemination. As I will show in this book, dark-web sites such as 8kun enabled the anonymous coordination of an organized set of tactics deployed by QAnon to wage “information warfare” in the post-Trump years.

However, conspiracy theories do not remain confined to the dark web. Instead, they spread onto mainstream web platforms through mainstream social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter in a process Daniel de Zeeuw has called “normification.”[[52]](#endnote-52) Whereas sites like 8kun provided the cover of darkness for much of the coordination of movements like QAnon and the development of conspiracy theories like the Great Replacement, mainstream sites quickly became battlegrounds for conspiracy theories too. In its heyday, QAnon supporters dominated Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, infiltrating various groups and communities on the mainstream web such as the “Save the Children” non-profit.[[53]](#endnote-53) And while most of the major platforms have attempted to purge conspiracist and extremist content from their sites, Elon Musk’s purchase of Twitter, now X, has produced a resurgence of such content on the mainstream social media sites.[[54]](#endnote-54) The dark web thus provides an infrastructure for discourse freed from regulation and enforcement, which can spread onto mainstream platforms. And as they spread, they trigger infrastructural aspects of the mainstream web, ensuring the viral spread of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and disinformation.

Other infrastructural elements, such as algorithms, which recommend content to users based on their searches, likes, and watches online, have extended the reach and impact of conspiracy theories. Platforms such as YouTube and TikTok use such recommendation algorithms to suggest other content which the viewer might like. The use of algorithms by streaming and social-media platforms produces a form of feedback loop in which users who begin to research a topic such as COVID conspiracies will receive more content, which lends the illusion that the topic is more mainstream than it is, thus producing more plausibility—and more content—as new adherents are born. Recommendation algorithms can thus become engines for conspiracy theories, pushing ever more extreme ideologies.[[55]](#endnote-55)

In addition, the fact that our information resources are now so vastly networked facilitates new and unusual linkages between events. Noah Giansiracusa describes the ways in which such algorithms push conspiracies: “Even if a particular conspiracy theory seems blatantly implausible, as YouTube recommends a sequence of videos from different creators on the same topic mimicking each other, the viewer tends to feel that all signs are pointing to the same hidden truth.”[[56]](#endnote-56) Such linkages have always formed the basis for conspiracy theories (i.e. John F. Kennedy was assassinated because of coordination with the Mafia) and detecting patterns between disparate events, actors, or motivations is essential to foster a theory. However, when this is done by individuals who may be afraid of embarrassment or ridicule, theories don’t spread as far. When the linkages are actively solicited on 4chan or 8kun by a persona like Q, encouraging followers to “follow the pattern,” the likelihood of *apophenia*—the linking of unrelated events—increases exponentially and is exacerbated by a commitment to research and through sharing online. When thousands of anonymous individuals are exhorted to conduct research, to “build the map,” with absolutely no oversight of the data’s quality beyond vague affirmations, the possibility for sustained, spiraling theories is almost limitless.[[57]](#endnote-57)

**The Economics of Conspiracy Theory**

The third section of the book will focus on the particular economic factors that have facilitated and incentivized what I call the “conspiracy industry,” adapting the notion of the culture industry from Horkheimer and Adorno. If the culture industry describes a particular homogenization of cultural objects through capitalism, the conspiracy industry captures the ways in which conspiracy theories have become commodified and mainstreamed through particular markets, including podcasts, merchandise, and online content. Although there are many causes for the widespread conspiracism plaguing our democratic societies, there are also economic factors that incentivize the creation and spread of ever more extreme content. In this section, I analyze some of these economic incentives for conspiracy theory, focusing in particular on the notion of the attention economy and the subsequent grifter community, which tries to market conspiracy theory as content and product for an increasingly paranoid consumer. An essential driver of extremism and conspiracy theory, such economic factors ensure that the true beliefs of online commentators are extraordinarily difficult to assess. For every “true believer,” there is a grifter hoping to profit from ever more extreme (and thus entertaining) content. And because the information economy is so vast now, innovative content must appeal to viewers in ever more unhinged and extreme ways.

 The third section of the book will analyze the role of the “attention economy” in promulgating conspiracy theories. Just as recommendation algorithms are designed to push content to viewers, the economic incentive of viral content ensures a ready community of content creators willing to do whatever it takes to go viral. The attention economy is a concept developed by scholars of political economy to explain the particular demands on human attention that the Information Age makes. According to Claudio Celis Bueno, the attention economy is an essential aspect of post-industrial societies in which information has become an essential component of capitalism: “In a world in which information and knowledge become central to the valorization process of capital, human attention becomes a scarce and hence increasingly valuable commodity.”[[58]](#endnote-58) Human attention is thus impacted by the technological and communicative infrastructure, which dramatically change human capacities for accessing and processing information: “Inventions such as the Internet, e-​ mail, databases, digital television, social media, and so on, together with the radical informatization of the process of production of commodities have created both an abundance of information and a demand for new forms of organizing and allocating attention.”[[59]](#endnote-59) For McKenzie Wark, the dominance of media and information systems has radically challenged the capitalist class structure itself, transforming bourgeois—owners of the means of production—and proletarian class—possessors of human labor into new permutations based on the ownership and management of information.[[60]](#endnote-60) Understanding the economic motivations behind online conspiracism suggests particular challenges to preventing the spread of such content.

Securing human attention within such a rich media environment becomes ever more important for marketing, advertising, and entertainment industries but also suggests significant challenges for information literacy in an age of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. While many scholars have attended to the ideological aspects of conspiracism,[[61]](#endnote-61) the economic incentives for creating and promulgating such theories has been less emphasized, but it is an essential feature of conspiracism that ensures further content will be created. From the podcasts of Joe Rogan to the conspiracy theory merchandise, trafficking in speculation about Deep State operators, shadowy cabals, and mysterious coverups turns out to be profitable online. Such content can prove lucrative. Joe Rogan’s podcast discusses and perhaps promulgates conspiracy theories through interviews with figures such as Alex Jones, Elon Musk, and Jordan Peterson. According to financial reports, Rogan’s net worth in 2024 is about $200,000,000 due to a lucrative deal with Spotify.[[62]](#endnote-62) Before losing lawsuits relating to his spreading unfounded conspiracy theories about the Sandy Hook mass shooting, Alex Jones was worth around $270,000,000 from peddling his theories on Infowars.[[63]](#endnote-63) Conspiracy theory turns out to be big business, and many grifters and con artists, in addition to true believers, have tried to capitalize on the American appetite for conspiracies at the highest levels of power.

But the conspiracy industry is not limited to major entertainers such as Rogan and Jones. Rather, grifters from all walks of life have tried to leverage conspiracy content online. Merchandise is one popular mode of profiting from conspiracy theory, and many of the influential figures within conspiracy movements such as QAnon also tried to monetize the movement. In this section, I assess the impact of such conspiracy grifters as Dylan Louis Monroe, a former graphic designer most known for his “Great Awakening Maps” and other conspiracist content available for purchase at his website, the Deep State Mapping Project. Describing himself as an “intuitive artist and truth activist” who is an agent of “Ashtar Command” as part of a global spiritual awakening begun with QAnon, Monroe creates and sells art and merchandise through his website.[[64]](#endnote-64) While he may indeed believe the conspiracist content he creates, the combination of online merchandise and conspiracist activism is suspect and reveals the complexity of online subcultures within the digital economy. The third section of the book examines some of the predominant grifters within the online conspiracy theory communities.

Such economic motivations for online conspiracism complicate efforts to debunk conspiracy theories. As long as there are extrinsic rewards for participating in online conspiracy movements, either through the mechanisms of the attention economy on social media or through the grifter economy selling merchandise, conspiracy theorists will continue to produce and share content. Katja Valaskivi describes this particular fusion in terms of content production within the “attention factory.” “Always outrageous and shocking” she argues, “conspiracy theories evoke emotions, attract attention and extract reactions, and for these reasons, they make for particularly ‘useful’ content in the attention factory.”[[65]](#endnote-65) Producing new content for ready markets, conspiracy theorists have financialized paranoia, delusion, and distrust in mainstream media sources.

**Navigating in the Dark**

Each of these three factors is a discrete component of the Information Dark Age, in which access to information has outstripped our ability to assess its veracity. I conclude by addressing the political ramifications for such an age. As we have seen, the Information Dark Age has radicalized far too many normal Americans into far-right, extremist political ideologies and white supremacy. Following the Capitol riots in January 2021, many anonymous posters turned out to have been radicalized on YouTube, Parler, and Gab into adopting truly heinous ideologies. For example, the woman believed to have stolen Nancy Pelosi’s laptop during the riot, Riley Williams, filmed herself giving Nazi salutes and espousing white supremacy online, having been radicalized through far-right message boards.[[66]](#endnote-66) The Information Dark Age is thus emblematic of far more than simple ignorance but rather a willful sense of dark alterity, of being a militant outsider to mainstream “normie” culture. The far right’s online organizing has weaponized white supremacy and violent ideation, leading to several mass murders and acts of violence.

While this book will not offer solutions to the problem of the Information Dark Age, I will gesture toward existing efforts to combat misinformation, disinformation, and online conspiracies. In the conclusion to the book, I discuss some existing efforts to rethink information literacy efforts to respond to conspiracy theories. As librarian Barbara Fister argues in the *Atlantic*, classical literacy efforts are incapable of combating fake news and conspiracy theories: “the present moment demands serious inquiry into why decades of trying to make information literacy a universal educational outcome hasn’t prevented a significant portion of the population from embracing disinformation while rejecting credible journalistic institutions.” Fister claims that information literacy is not enough as it has been taught until now: “It may be difficult, even impossible, to overcome an epistemological rift among Americans . . . simply by changing how education approaches information-literacy instruction.”[[67]](#endnote-67) But there are developing efforts to diagnose and assess the informational infrastructure by which average Americans get pulled into conspiracies and we now have access to a growing community of individuals who fell down the rabbit hole of online conspiracies and can provide insight into prevention. Furthermore, we are seeing financial investment in further research into symptoms of the Information Dark Age by foundations and think tanks, which may help mitigate and diagnose current dynamics.

Combating the rise of such right-wing militancy, paranoia, and fear will require a substantial public campaign that goes beyond “cancel culture,” woke capitalism, and de-platforming to find a way to mitigate the shock tactics of right-wing media. This will become especially important with the creation of new platforms dedicated to “free speech” and political unorthodoxy, which may inflame existing right-wing communities caught up in QAnon and far-right politics.[[68]](#endnote-68) No matter who wins the 2024 elections, we will certainly face the rise of new QAnons and other forms of information crisis. And while it sometimes feels like 2016-2020 was an alternate universe, I believe the essential groundwork of QAnon and other misinformation is still building force on the horizon, waiting to unleash a storm of incredibly destructive potential. Because the infrastructure and ideologies that gave birth to Q are still dominant, we have likely not seen the last of the strange media world of 2016. Fake news and outrage politics will still be the order of the day, anonymity will still be the predominant mode of identity politics online, and internet users will still get sucked into conspiracies and fake news.

In this book, I analyze the informational dynamics which allow users to weaponize research in order to justify outsider positions on politics and culture. In his sweeping postmodern novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*, Umberto Eco predicts the dangers of seeking too much meaning beneath the everyday narratives of our world. In searching for a transcendental master narrative which will unlock historical conspiracy, Eco’s characters risk madness at trying to understand the connectedness of events. “I have come to believe that the whole world is an enigma,” Eco writes, “a harmless enigma that is made terrible by our own mad attempt to interpret it as though it had an underlying truth.”[[69]](#endnote-69) Such a quest for meaning is all the more fraught in an Information Age in which so much data is available and interpretations are supportable and sharable with a vast audience, which makes any number of outsider ideologies palatable and plausible. This is the darkness of our time, and it remains to be seen how far it will spread.

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